The Rise and Fall of 1960s University Chaplaincy:
William Sloane Coffin, Jr., “Heroic” White Guys,
and the Disestablishment of Public Religion in America

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Introduction

Because the authors have very different perspectives on chaplaincy, one as an academic historian and author of the only full-length biography of Coffin, the other as a United Church of Christ minister and university chaplain who worked for Coffin’s successor at Yale University, they gave separate presentations at the Luce Lecture on April 10, 2018. Consequently, we offer their papers sequentially; they may be considered in dialogue with each other (as they were intended in the lecture) or simply as very different perspectives on the same phenomenon.

Warren Goldstein

Only one of many important and influential college and university chaplains in the 1960s and 1970s, the Rev. William Sloane Coffin, Jr. (1924–2006), Yale University Chaplain from 1958 to 1975, nevertheless remains, even now, the best known and most influential chaplain of the era. *

* The following is based largely on the author’s William Sloane Coffin, Jr.: A Holy Impatience (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2004.)
In order to understand some of that influence, as well as its limitations, modern readers may find it helpful to imagine the world of Northeastern liberal Protestantism in the decades following World War II. It had a stature in the public sphere way out of proportion to its share of the population. New York City newspapers gave substantial coverage to sermons preached in eminent pulpits (especially Congregational, Baptist, Presbyterian, Reformed, and Episcopalian) the previous Sunday. Ministers in these pulpits, often hailing from well-connected families, had access to metropolitan and even national leadership circles, as they also frequently did through their universities, secret societies, and clubs.

While Coffin’s case may include more of these connections than most of his peers, he could be considered emblematic of a certain ministerial type in the liberal Protestant world from the 1950s through (at least) the 1970s. Born into the upper reaches of New York City society, Coffin grew up in a duplex penthouse apartment from which he watched construction of the Empire State Building. The family chauffeur drove him to the Buckley School for elementary grades (and taught him to box), the French nanny taught him the Lord’s Prayer in French before he learned it in English, and his philanthropically-minded parents—his father was serving as President of the Board of the Metropolitan Museum of Art on his untimely death in 1933—dressed for dinner, and often dined with the wealthiest New Yorkers. His uncle, Henry Sloane Coffin, pastored the Madison Avenue Presbyterian Church for decades before serving 20 years as President of Union Theological Seminary.

Coffin graduated from Phillips Academy (Andover) in 1942, enlisted in the Army in 1943, where he served first as an infantry instructor, then as an intelligence officer until 1947, when he left to attend Yale University, from which he graduated in 1949, a member
of the elite secret society Skull and Bones. He entered "the family business," ministry, by attending Union Seminary for a year, but when the Korean War broke out, he joined the CIA, which he served as a Russian-speaking case officer in Europe for three years before leaving for Yale Divinity School, from which he graduated in 1956. After serving briefly as Chaplain of Phillips Andover, he took the Chaplaincy at Williams College for a year (where he roiled the campus by questioning the value of fraternities, some of whose adherents responded by shooting out his living room picture window), leaving to assume the Yale Chaplaincy in 1958.

At Yale, Coffin was influenced by the powerful ecumenical spirit coursing through mainline Protestantism and Judaism (and later joined by Catholics during the Vatican II Council, 1962–1965). He brought a wide range of religious voices to the Yale pulpit at Battell Chapel (including its first Catholic and Jewish preachers). He also provided critical support to the Jewish chaplain's ultimately successful effort to eliminate quotas on Jewish undergraduates. He began transforming the Chaplaincy by preaching a vigorous, public, socially and ecumenically engaged Protestantism that meshed perfectly with the spirit of the political sphere represented by John F. Kennedy’s New Frontier.

Coffin cut a dashing figure as a New Frontiersman of the cloth: handsome, charismatic, well-spoken, athletic (squash and tennis), piano-playing, pipe-smoking, witty, urbane, fluent in French and Russian, equally charming to men and women—and above all relevant to liberalism’s new social, political, and cultural concerns. Invited to join President Kennedy’s Peace Corps Commission, Coffin seemed headed for a rich career in the uncontroversial halls of the liberal religious and political establishment.
Without realizing the import of his impulsive May 1961 decision to undertake a dangerous Freedom Ride in support of civil rights activists testing integrated interstate bus travel in the Deep South (who had been firebombed and badly beaten by segregationist mobs in Alabama), Coffin both pushed the envelope of acceptable liberal attitudes toward racial injustice, and made himself into the best known university chaplain in the country. The *New York Times* gave front-page coverage to his group’s efforts, dubbing him the “Bus-Riding Chaplain.”

When his *Life Magazine* account (“Why Christians Can’t Be Outsiders”) of his Freedom Ride, including his (first) arrest in Montgomery hit newsstands, Coffin’s new celebrity was assured. Yale students rallied to his support as his wife raised bail money, Coffin preached to an overflowing Battell Chapel (including many reporters) on his return, and he was never again out of the public eye.

He had paid careful attention to how the veteran movement activists responded to skeptical reporters, and taught himself to provide quick, epigrammatic, engaging copy for the press on the subject of civil rights, and how it connected to an engaged, activist Social Gospel Christianity. His speaking invitations multiplied tenfold, and he traveled the Northeast preaching the civil rights gospel, and, increasingly, appearing on television, to which he adapted quickly and smoothly; he was a frequently guest on the premier talk-show of the era, hosted by David Susskind.

Coffin also stirred up the Yale campus like no single figure before him. Before the Freedom Ride he had brought his brand of Christianity to new students, to graduation ceremonies, to building dedications, and to celebratory dinners. Afterwards, he brought civil rights to the forefront of Yale students’ political and social imaginations. Many dozens,
perhaps hundreds of Yale students attributed their civil rights activism to Coffin’s inspiration.

Far from universally admired, however, Coffin’s activism especially infuriated older alumni, who regularly wrote Yale presidents and the alumni magazine threatening to withhold their financial support until Coffin was fired. Modern readers accustomed to stories of Internet trolling and death threats may be surprised to learn of an earlier generation’s methods: hate mail by post and threatening phone calls. Coffin received a rifle target with the suggestion that it might as well be on his back, many crude, angry, scrawled accusations of being a “nigger lover,” and news clippings featuring black criminals and conservative columnists denouncing his actions. The family cat was killed under extremely suspicious circumstances. Still, Coffin thrived under the pressure, and joined protests all over the country during the early 1960s, all the while continuing his careful cultivation of his bosses, Yale presidents A. Whitney Griswold (1951–1963) and Kingman Brewster Jr. (1963–1977).

Initially hesitant to oppose the Vietnam War—he had, after all, worn his country’s uniform in World War II and (covertly) in the Cold War—Coffin by late 1965 and 1966 joined other liberal religious luminaries, including Union Seminary President John C. Bennett, Rabbi Balfour Brickner, Rabbi Abraham Joshua Heschel, Fr. Daniel Berrigan, and Rev. Robert McAfee Brown to found Clergy and Laymen (later Laity) Concerned about Vietnam (known first as CALCAV, later simply as CALC), to raise concerns about the U.S. involvement. By 1967, CALC had moved into full opposition, supporting young men who resisted the Selective Service System, known as the draft, and helped organize nationwide draft card turn-ins.
The federal government indicted Coffin and four others in 1968 for conspiracy to evade the draft laws, leading to the first draft resistance trial related to the war. Initially convicted, Coffin was eventually freed on appeal, and the government chose not to retry the case.

Between the Freedom Ride in 1961 and the Boston Five trial in 1968 (in which he was the only clergyperson), Coffin had become not only the nation’s best-known university chaplain; he had also become one of the handful of best-known white mainline Protestant ministers in the country: a national figure frequently in the press, and surely the most notorious. The deluge of hate mail he received for his antiwar activities far outweighed the previous flood—and for the first time Coffin stopped responding to every letter personally, if only with a dictated sentence or two.

Coffin’s national profile led observers then and since to assume that he must have used his chaplaincy simply as a base from which to engage in national politics around civil rights and the Vietnam War. As I discovered—admittedly, to my surprise--in researching my biography, this popular view represents a nearly complete misreading of his chaplaincy. For much of his 18 years at Yale, Coffin spent significant portions of the day, including most afternoons, pastoring students above all, but also university faculty and staff.

He regularly counseled students in his office and around campus: about relationships, about potential marriages, about vocational issues, and above all about the draft. When one divinity student accused him of being more interested in his choice to resist the draft as a public relations matter for the movement rather than an agonizing personal choice, Coffin immediately went to see him and apologized for giving that
impression. He recalled pastoral counseling warmly: it was, he felt, “a great privilege to be invited into the sanctuary of somebody’s soul, as it were—the secret garden of another person’s soul.”

Coffin dictated hundreds of letters of recommendation for students and created relationships that endured for decades after students’ graduations. Early in my biographical research I remember sitting on his porch in Vermont asking him for friends and former students I could contact and being amazed at the number of people he offered (with phone numbers—this was pre-cellphone days) whom he had known for more than 30 years.

Coffin’s reinvention of the University Chaplaincy combined prophetic, media-savvy social justice leadership (first on civil rights and then in the anti-war movement), commitment to pastoring students, a shrewd sense of how to cultivate Yale’s centers of power—especially its presidents, whom he flattered shamelessly—and his gift for making liberal Protestantism relevant to every aspect of university life, from ground-breakings and ribbon-cuttings to senior dinners and baccalaureate and commencement exercises.

He married an unquestioned, worldly faith in God to an exuberant, clearly masculine charisma that drew men and women of all ages more or less equally. Some criticized him as a “Pied Piper” of the young, but extremely well-educated, personally reserved adults found themselves following him into prayer-ins and paddy wagons all over the country. As Chaplain, he helped transform an otherwise staid, conservative, buttoned-down campus into a genuine hotbed of student moral and political activism. But by serving as a bridge between (and occasional spokesperson for) student activists and the Yale administration, Coffin helped President Kingman Brewster avoid the kinds of violent, frightening
confrontations between student radicals and university administrations that shook Harvard and Columbia, not to mention Cornell, Berkeley, the University of Wisconsin, and Kent State.

Nevertheless, Coffin and his ministry thrived on having evil opponents, so when the Vietnam War ended, and Yale joined the rest of the country in beginning to confront other issues, such as women’s liberation, for which he had little feel, Coffin lost his way. He left Yale—and his second marriage—in 1975 without another job, dispirited and at loose ends.

After a couple of years spent out of the public eye, fitfully writing his unfortunately-titled memoir *Once to Every Man*, Coffin was rescued by Riverside Church in New York City, which hired him as its Senior Minister in 1977. For the next decade, Coffin animated the most influential pulpit in American liberal Protestantism and brought a new vitality to that venerable institution around issues of war, peace, and nuclear disarmament. He retired from Riverside a decade later, spent several years as titular head of the anti-nuclear group SANE/Freeze, and then spent a little over a decade “flunking retirement,” as he put it, continuing to preach, speak, write, and travel until shortly before his death in 2006.

While Coffin created his own brand of chaplaincy, and occupied the position with vigor and joy, he did little to build the institution either nationally or at Yale. His was, after all, a difficult model to follow, and he had been blessed by his pedigree, looks, talents, and the times. His influence depended on his own extroverted charisma, and he had done nothing to nourish new leadership in the office.

That said, it remains useful to consider aspects of his ministry that can still serve as guides to today’s chaplains and clergy engaged in social justice. Coffin’s Christianity resonated with so many people because it combined well-expressed common sense,
personal security, knowledge of the secular world and its ways, biblical literacy, an
unabashed delight in the power of love, and extraordinary joy.

Because Coffin never doubted Christianity’s relevance to everyday life, he never felt
the need to “make” it relevant by watering down liturgy or doing folk music or rock and roll
services. Coffin knew the Bible (Hebrew and Christian), studied it, and could quote it as
well as any fundamentalist. His educated, thoughtful devotion to Scripture in an age of
widespread religious doubt made his Christianity compelling to his many publics, including
many liberal Jews.

He understood the advantage of a regular pulpit when it came time to preach the
uncomfortable gospel, so he quickly grasped that his freedom to take on large issues could
only be assured by making sure that the “day job” got done well. That meant spending
concentrated time on his sermons, meeting regularly with his deacons, taking his
ceremonial role seriously, visiting the ill in the hospital, and pastoring his large flock. He
demonstrated, day in and day out, that a successful prophetic ministry depended on a
committed pastoral ministry, and vice versa.

By his own example he addressed the widespread belief that clergy, particularly
male clergy, had their unrealistic “heads in the clouds.” Instead, Coffin displayed no “other-
worldliness;” he talked easily about movies, sports, politics, and current events,
demonstrating that he knew the “real world,” and appeared to understand his congregants’
daily lives. Coffin also worked on how he expressed himself, particularly to the media.
Known for his epigrams—“God doesn’t ask you to be your brother’s keeper—God asks you
to be your brother’s brother.” Coffin’s succinct aphorisms counteracted the image of clergy
as long-winded and beside the point.
Finally, for a variety of reasons, including low pay and frequent public disdain for their beliefs and their relevance, many white clergy give the impression of not enjoying themselves very much. They can display a petulant defensiveness, a weary resignation born of being ignored and disrespected. By contrast, Coffin always presented his Christianity as good news, and did so with exuberant joy. Whether he was debating, praying, baptizing, or preaching sermons on the most difficult topics, he nearly always seemed to be enjoying himself. No wonder people of very different faiths (and none at all) found themselves drawn to his religious discourse.

His successor, the eminent Lutheran preacher John Vannorsdall, though deeply committed to social justice issues, not coincidentally exuded quiet, thoughtful deliberation in comparison to the Coffin whirlwind. Still, Vannorsdall read the developing campus zeitgeist better than Coffin had (as well as the administrative backlash to Coffin’s freewheeling style) and brought a woman Associate Chaplain into the office—the author of the following article. Brewster’s successor, A. Bartlett Giamatti, had little interest in religion or the Chaplain’s Office, whose influence he downgraded, and even less in the independent gallivanting about that had characterized Coffin’s chaplaincy.

For how the Yale Chaplaincy changed, along with college and university chaplaincies across the country, keep reading,

**Donna Schaper**

Five major changes happened since the time I was Associate Chaplain at Yale in the 1970s, right after the infamous William Sloane Coffin, Jr. left and was replaced by John Vannorsdall, my college chaplain, who then hired me. The changes in the field weren’t all
about Coffin – although his towering figure, its successes and its failures, inform each one of them. Bill Coffin was my mentor and friend, a claim made by many. He was hardly the cause of the circumstances I mention here. Instead his illustrious career was emblematic of each of them.

I once heard that a good definition of privilege is that you care about the national and the international more than you do the local. There is no question that Bill had an impact on the national and the international scene. I’ll never forget that picture of him from Hanoi with Jane Fonda. Unfortunately, privilege and its capacity to have large, even enlarged views, leaves a lot of dishes in the sink at home.

One story of many is the way the year after Coffin left Yale, the chaplains’ luxurious office suite in Dwight Hall on the Old Campus (the freshman quad) was abruptly moved to a basement in a dorm called Durfee Hall. That would never have happened until weakness was spotted – and it was emblematic of Coffin being gone. He would not have been challenged that way. His successor was.

Coffin also had a way of flying above protocols with glamorous style. When Sidney Lovett, the much-loved Yale chaplain before Coffin, died in 1979, Bill just assumed he was presiding at the funeral. While he had been invited to speak, he was very much not in charge of the service. The new chaplain was. Still, Bill dropped in five minutes before the funeral and asked if anybody had put together a program and wanted to make sure everyone knew he wanted 20 minutes. Clergy manners actually prohibit such behavior, but Bill would not know that. Even if he did, he wouldn’t imagine such courtesies applied to him. Notoriously dismissive about denominational structures, he often quipped, “what do they do?” “Why do they matter at all?”
The first thing you have to notice about the Coffin period of college and university chaplaincy is how masculine it was. Indeed, it wrote a new chapter in the history of American masculinity. Teddy Roosevelt may have been one version of the heroic male; Coffin was surely another. Swaggering, saber rattling, loud, hard drinking, athletic – all of these clichés come through when people tell their Coffin stories.

Since the 60s and 70s, the field has definitely become more female. In Protestantism in general today, 53% of clergy are female. In campus ministries that number is even higher, if for no other reason than the number of part-time or bi-vocational jobs there are in colleges and universities. The women are also interested in war, peace, and the big pictures – but they are also much more likely to pay attention to the dishes in the sink and know their budgets, their staff members, and their students’ names. Bill, like Reinhold Niebuhr before him, kept his suitcase by the side of the pulpit in order to board a plane on a Sunday afternoon. His audience was national, not just Yale-based.

That being said, he also excelled as a pastor to students and faculty and staff. While not paying attention to what we today call administration, he paid a lot of attention to people. This combination of the pastoral and the prophetic is what made him so well-liked.

In addition to this masculinity and its forcefulness, the field has also lost significant status. Being a chaplain was a step above being a parish or denominational pastor in class, status and salary. Not to mention that you joined the academics in having summers “off.” The best and the brightest moved to the campuses, leaving others tending fields with much more diversity but considerably less promise. There was genuine status to be a chaplain, especially at an Ivy League university. That status was less significant the further down the rung you went in academia, with state colleges and universities either without chaplains at
all or housing them in offices with little distinction or access to the main campus. Often, like at the University of Arizona, the denominations and chaplains built their own offices, just to get onto the campus itself and be noticed.

Most of these changes happened administratively, which is a quieter but equally significant shift. Whereas in the Coffin era, chaplains reported directly to the presidents of the colleges, today they often report to an assistant dean in student affairs. That demotion has had significant impact on what chaplains were able to do to influence campus life. With direct access to authority and power, they were able to make arguments, gather conversations and be involved with large matters – like the admission to Yale of women in 1969 or the early development of sexual harassment policies, now a burgeoning industry on most campuses. When I served at Yale we developed a three-person committee in its first iteration. As Associate Chaplain, I was the highest ranking “administrative” woman they could find to sit on it. Without direct access to authority and power, chaplains and campus ministers turn into near beggars for a seat at the table. “Please” is their main message.

A fourth main change is how multifaith and multiracial and multi-gendered chaplaincy is today. At NYU today, there are 74 chaplains – and they only begin to represent the religious diversity on campus. One could argue that this diversity is a great success for the white male chaplains of yore. Surely, they would have been in favor of it, argued for it and made demands about it. Today no major college or university would consider having just one chaplain who was Christian. Multiple staffing is the norm with a Protestant, Jew, Buddhist or Hindu, and Muslim likely to be working closely together.
(Catholics always kept to themselves on campuses and participated well enough. Their real estate and “Newman Centers” allowed them to maintain a kind of culture that wove itself in and out of the campuses.)

Coincident with all these shifts, and fifth, denominational divestment in campus ministry also occurred at those colleges that were not wealthy enough to have their own (usually Christian) chaplain. For some self-defeating reason, while denominations were wringing their hands about losing youth, they also stopped assigning campus ministers to colleges and universities. That double whammy meant that the only places where colleges and universities had chaplains were places where the campus minister knew how to raise money from local churches. The loss of significant campus ministries accelerated the flight of youth from mainline churches – and ironically the denominations helped pay for their own demise.

Campuses remain the sites of much ferment and excitement. They are still great R&D for religious activity. I can’t say enough about the new NYU Spiritual Life Center. There the most popular program is meditation, second to free yoga – and the NYU students are over half “unaffiliated.” But they are quieter and much less masculine and more cooperative.