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Unusual Mix of Prayer and Politics

Yale Divinity School students burned a copy of the Bill of Rights and the Ten Commandments at a recent Ash Wednesday service before marking their foreheads with the ashes – not as protest, they say, but to repent for their own complicity in “the ongoing injustice being perpetuated by our nation.”

“Ash Wednesday is the beginning of Lent where we remember our sins and the ways that we are complicit in evil in our society. As an American, the way that’s most clear today is through the War on Terror and the war on Iraq,” said Christopher Doucot, a first-year master’s student who came up with the idea for the service. About 40 to 45 students, faculty, administrators and local residents attended the service, intended to provide an opportunity for reflection on such topics as secret prisons, “indiscriminate bombings,” domestic spying and torture.

“We were reminding ourselves of our own complicity,” said Doucot. “We’re not pointing fingers at anyone but ourselves.”

A Tuesday *Yale Daily News* [account of the unusual Ash Wednesday service](#) indicated that the ritual burning has “sparked concern among the school’s alumni and some students.” But while it’s obvious that in a country that periodically debates banning flag-burning, such an approach to melding politics and prayer might not prove popular, Doucot said that he has not heard from anyone who was offended, “not a soul.” Rev. Dale Peterson, associate dean of students at Yale Divinity School, said that if there was any controversy, he wasn’t aware of it. It was just a small service, said Reverend Peterson, who was among the attendees, held on a day that at least two much larger services were occurring on campus.

Doucot did acknowledge however that organizers were hoping the action would draw attention to their concerns. “You don’t do things to be provocative,” he said of the service. “But one of the fears I have is being ignored.”

“I absolutely hope people have a visceral reaction ... if they have that strong of a reaction to how a symbol is treated, how it’s burned, then there’s hope that upon reflection, they will have as strong of a visceral reaction to that symbol being violated in practice, which is what searches without warrants do, which is what torture does.”

The service was conducted quietly, without signs or fanfare. Participants stood in a circle and read each commandment or constitutional amendment aloud. Each text was then burned, one by one.

“As the organizers of the service, we believe that the rights and responsibilities held up in those two documents have already been violated by this government, as well as by ourselves as citizens and Christians,” said Tamara Shantz, a third-year divinity student, via e-mail. “The burning was then symbolic of what has already been accomplished, not as a symbol of our lack of respect for the values upheld in the Bill of Rights and the 10 Commandments.”

“It wasn’t burning these documents as if they were not of importance,” explained Reverend Peterson. “It was the exact opposite. We were putting them on our foreheads, after asking God’s forgiveness for not living up to the ideals of them.”

But while Jessica Anschutz, a third-year divinity student who also helped organize the service, said that the first she heard of any controversy was from *The Yale Daily News* reporter, Tuesday’s article has succeeded in raising the profile of the small service. And not all Yalies, it turns out, are comfortable with the premise behind this particular approach to prayer.

“[Ash Wednesday] is a fully spiritual event; it’s not political in any sense. To pervert it like that is really inappropriate especially at a place like a divinity school,” said Stephen Schmalhofer, a Yale junior and author of the blog, ” [For God, For Country and For Yale.](#)“

“It seems that to put this in a political context completely removes this from the Christian tradition of the event, which is something that too often happens at the Yale Divinity School ... they have the tendency to manipulate these traditions for political statements, to really rip these traditional devotions from the Christian community in which they were conceived,” Schmalhofer said.

Jonathan Serrato, a sophomore at Yale and the student outreach chair for the [St. Thomas More Undergraduate Council](#), said that while he believes the organizers of the Ash Wednesday service had good intentions and were trying to make a good point, their approach was inappropriate.

“I do believe that there is a call for Christians of all denominations to ‘wake up’ and realize that we must live our faith and do everything in our power to correct what we see as wrong in society, even if the most we can do is try,” Serrato said in an e-mail. “However, I don’t feel that this event was appropriate for the time or the message that they were trying to convey. For me, Lent is a time of personal cleansing and preparation for life after death. Also for me, the ashes given on Ash Wednesday are sacred and come from the blessed palms from the previous year’s Palm Sunday, and I feel that this event could be considered unintentionally disrespectful.”

“It does seem like this is the kind of thing that you have to do very, very delicately, but it appears that this is something they did do delicately,” said William “Beau” Weston, a professor of sociology at Centre College in Kentucky and a Yale Divinity School alumnus.

“It’s actually a pretty classy act. It does raise one’s alarm to have students burning anything, but there are circumstances in which that’s an appropriate thing to do. Ash Wednesday names the context,” said Weston.

“The tradition of using worship as a time to engage the hearts of the people and engage in dramatic action is a rich one,” added Bill McKinney, president of the [Pacific School of Religion](#), a Berkeley seminary, and a professor of American religion. “If you think of liturgy as the work of the people, which is its original meaning, then for the people to express ritually their most powerful hurts and pains and needs, for those who feel that our country’s on the wrong track, it’s very much consistent with the way worship works.”

— [Elizabeth Redden](#)

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