

God and Man at Yale Turns 60

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By **Peter Berkowitz** - November 5, 2011

Yesterday the William F. Buckley Jr. Program, a fledgling student run organization at Yale University, held a one-day conference and gala dinner featuring distinguished conservatives—including a keynote address by William Kristol and remarks by Henry Kissinger, James Buckley, Priscilla Buckley, and Christopher Buckley—to celebrate the 60th anniversary of the publication of *God and Man at Yale*. This unusual happening suggests that much has changed at Yale since 1951 when the brash and brilliant twenty-five year old Buckley burst upon the national scene with his eloquent polemic against his alma mater's educational policy. It also reveals how little has changed.

Inspired by a residential college seminar (a class offered outside of regular departmental courses) on Buckley in the fall semester of 2010, Lauren Noble, who graduated in June, teamed up with a few friends to launch the Buckley Program in the spring semester of 2011. The mission was “to promote intellectual diversity at Yale University” by “providing a home for a diverse collection of serious conservative thought.” The program got off to a flying start, hosting six speakers in its first semester.

Half way into its second semester, the program has raised around \$80,000 from alumni and conservative foundations, sponsored summer internships, and is providing funding to support a regular course on Buckley's thought next semester in the political science department taught by a full time faculty member. In coming years the program is hoping to expand, hosting more speakers and supporting more courses.

Neither faculty nor administration have raised objections nor otherwise stood in the program's way. Indeed, professors from classics, political science, computer science, the law school, and the medical school sit on the Buckley Program's advisory board. And Yale President Richard Levin delivered opening remarks at yesterday's conference.

That students have felt the need and had the opportunity to increase exposure to conservative ideas on campus is a tribute to the intellectual and political movement Buckley launched.

At the same time, it is a measure of how far liberal education at Yale must still be reformed that the Buckley program is entirely a student organization, that if it weren't for Noble and a few other undergraduates, conservative voices would remain hard to hear on campus and conservative ideas would still be difficult to find in Yale's curriculum.

Like their predecessors in 1951, the Yale faculty and administration in 2011 have been derelict in their duty to present students a well-rounded view of economics, morals, politics, culture, and religion. “The problems raised by God and Man at Yale, “as Buckley wrote in 1976 in the Introduction to the Twenty-Fifth Anniversary edition, “are most definitely with us yet.”

Those problems, then as now, stem from Yale’s promulgation of an overweening but unacknowledged progressive orthodoxy. It is entrenched in the curriculum, promoted by unwritten but strictly enforced norms concerning what may and must not be said, and inscribed in the rules and regulations governing student life.

Much like Yale today, the young Buckley’s Yale was a place where it was easy to elicit outrage by proclaiming barely right-of-center conservative opinions, and difficult to raise eyebrows even by vociferously championing fringe left-wing claims and causes.

For contending that liberal education at Yale should be devoted to advancing the principles and practical foundations of liberty, Buckley was accused by his elders of fascism, compared with the Ku Klux Klan and Stalinists, and generally regarded as subversive by the Yale establishment. Inasmuch as he wished to overturn the established order at Yale, this last charge contained an element of accuracy.

Buckley’s critique of academic orthodoxy at Yale was all the more powerful—and all the more baffling to the zealous guardians of Yale’s academic orthodoxy—for his defense of freedom. How could one who condemned the relentless atheism of the curriculum, who lamented that “the University does not recognize religion as an indispensable field of study for an educated man,” and who wanted the university to sympathetically expound Christianity be anything but a religious reactionary?

And how could one who found in the Yale economics and political science departments a dogmatic commitment to collectivism or the centrally planned economy, who regarded the devotion to Keynes and the omission from the curriculum of Von Mises and Hayek as evidence of spectacular one-sidedness, and who believed that Yale had an obligation to teach appreciation of the achievements of capitalism and limited government be seen as other than an apologist for fat cats and an enemy of progress?

Nor did those exhaust Buckley’s sins against Yale’s academic orthodoxy. He deeply offended faculty sensibilities by insisting that alumni should play a major role in academic affairs, envisaging them as “ultimate overseers of Yale’s educational policy.” According to Buckley, Yale alumni—who, as they do today, footed a good deal of the cost of Yale—had the right, the power, and the duty to ensure that Yale lived up to liberal education’s proper goals.

Buckley knew that he would be accused of ignorance of or disdain for academic freedom. His powerful reply remains powerful today. A “laissez-faire education” that allowed professors to teach whatever they wished and students to study whatever they wanted, he declared,

represented an abdication of standards. And the inculcation of secular and progressive values under the guise of the openness to all ideas constituted educational fraud.

Academic freedom, according to Buckley, was not license to do as one pleased in the classroom but liberty in the pursuit of the truth and in the attainment of an education for freedom. The pillars of freedom in America, he believed, were the free market economy, which encouraged industriousness and self-reliance by protecting private property, and Christianity, which provided the only secure foundation for belief in the dignity of the individual. Of course, Buckley stressed, liberal education naturally included study of the limitations and defects of free peoples and free societies.

The young Buckley worried that if alumni in his time did not take action, then the next generation would be so thoroughly inculcated with illiberal and anti-religious attitudes that they would lose an understanding of the purposes of liberal education and therefore become blind to the urgent need to reform Yale. Certainly it is inconceivable today that a majority of Yale alumni place Christianity and a libertarian interpretation of capitalism at the heart of liberal education.

Yet all who believe, in opposition to the temper of the times, that the mission of liberal education is to pursue the truth and educate for freedom will find in God and Man at Yale, with which Buckley 60 years ago shocked and scandalized Yale and laid the foundations for modern conservatism, a bracing source of inspiration and an indispensable analysis of the issues.

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