

Baccalaureate Services and Pluralism

INTRODUCTION

In the last quarter of a century, the world of academia has been witness to a resurgence of baccalaureate services on college and university campuses around the United States. By definition, the term “baccalaureate” can be used either as a synonym for “bachelors’ degree,” or to refer to a “farewell address in the form of a sermon delivered to a graduating class.”¹ Many college and university websites give voice to the common belief that the origins of the baccalaureate service lie in a “1432 Oxford University statute, which required each bachelor to deliver a sermon in Latin as part of his academic exercise.”²

The somewhat recent revival of baccalaureates, however, does not necessarily imply that this established educational and religious service is always carried out in its more traditional forms. Recent years have also been marked by an increased interest in diversity and an awareness of the world’s religious traditions. Many college and university campuses around the country have approached this growing religious plurality in their communities by adapting traditional public displays of worship to represent more fully the range of cultures and beliefs reflected by their student bodies. The introduction of interfaith baccalaureates is a notable way in which some institutions of higher education are taking on issues of religious pluralism.

While it is possible to theorize as to whether or not a particular college or university will hold an interfaith baccalaureate, there is no one specific type of institution in which this form of worship is to be expected. Many public universities refrain from institutional displays of worship altogether. Some, though, have adopted interfaith baccalaureates and commencement exercises as a method of giving voice to the religious lives of their communities without endorsing one religion over another. A substantial amount of private, religiously affiliated colleges and universities have also adopted the practice. However, there remain a number of institutions with particularly strong religious affiliations which have chosen to continue the baccalaureate service in its historical, explicitly Christian form.

The move to interfaith baccalaureate services in some institutions of higher education has not been without disagreement. Some individuals claim that this relatively recent practice presents the graduating student body with a watered down religious service which, in attempting to please all, ends up serving none. Still, others claim that their particular schools are not doing enough to address the needs of the religiously diverse communities which they serve. For the most part, however, the type of service carried out by an institution is normally closely related to the makeup of the student and faculty body in that community, and controversy does not usually surround a college or university’s choice of baccalaureate service. On the other hand, much heated debate has

accompanied the issue of baccalaureate services in relation to public high schools in the United States, and some elements of this controversy will be examined later in this report.

THE FORMATION OF INTERFAITH BACCALAUREATES

As was said, there has been a growth not only in adapting some baccalaureate services to become interfaith, but also in the rejuvenation of the service itself. In a 1982 *Christian Century* article by Donald Shockley entitled “Back to Baccalaureate,” the author makes reference to several institutions in the process of reintroducing the baccalaureate service as an integral part of commencement exercises. Shockley states that in the spring of 1981, “after a lapse of some 15 years, a baccalaureate service was held at [Cornell University](#), and almost all 2,000 seats in Baily Hall were filled.”³ The author cites a restored interest in baccalaureate services in a number of other institutions as well, including [Emory](#), [Brown](#), [Yale](#), [Occidental](#) and [Howard](#), to name a few.⁴

Of particular interest is the matter of how these colleges and universities have gone about matching a renewed desire for baccalaureate services with studies bodies of increasingly diverse religious make-up. While some schools have decided to withhold the practice of a baccalaureate altogether, still others have maintained the service with a traditional Christian liturgy. On the other hand, the holding of interfaith baccalaureates has also been a popular method of addressing these concerns. Such interfaith services take on diverse forms themselves; the content of a particular baccalaureate will vary from institution to institution.

Within the realm of interfaith baccalaureates, there are a number of different ways in which services are carried out, ranging from basically secular celebrations which are baccalaureates in name only, to full blown ceremonies with hymns, readings, and prayers from various religious traditions. Donald Shockley describes one of the more secularized services at a particular college as such:

...the annual event has remained, but it has lost all the trappings of a religious ceremony. Gone are the hymns, prayers, litanies and anthems. The president of the Student Government Association serves as “master of ceremonies,” the president of the college makes comments, and there are two faculty speakers, who are as likely to offer reflections on the year just ending as to address themselves to questions of value and meaning.⁵

There are multiple colleges and universities whose baccalaureate services represent the three major monotheistic religious traditions at those schools. These services might incorporate non-specific prayers and hymns, or they might include contributions from different specific Jewish, Christian, and Muslim sources. Yale University is one institution which utilizes the latter approach. Martha C. Highsmith is the Deputy Secretary of Yale University as well as an ordained Presbyterian pastor and current associate University pastor. In an article titled, “Instituting Change in the

Spiritual Make-up of a University: The Case of Yale University,” Highsmith describes a plan by Yale’s administration over recent years to have the school “more ambitiously support the full range of religious beliefs on campus” as well as “[strengthen] Christian worship.”⁶ Highsmith describes the composition of Yale’s 2005 baccalaureate service as follows:

The approach we used for the most recent Baccalaureate services was to invite students who are leaders within the Christian, Jewish, and Muslim campus communities to read responsively from a shared sacred text. This year, three students read from Psalm 8, with accompanying notes about the designation of the text in each of the three faith traditions.⁷

In addition to soliciting contributions from the three major monotheistic traditions, many schools have begun to integrate into baccalaureate services prayers and readings from Hindu, Buddhist, Sikh, Earth-based, Humanist, and many other sources. For example, a non-exhaustive list of the elements present in Brown University’s 2005 baccalaureate service includes: dance, drums, a Muslim call to prayer, poems, Christian hymns, a Hindu blessing, a Zen teaching, a reading from Hebrew Scripture, and an address from actress Phylicia Rashad.⁸

The most prominent reason given for the move to such an interfaith baccalaureate ceremony is the desire to give voice to the large number of religious traditions which inform the spiritual lives of the students at a given college or university. In May of 2002 [Indiana University’s Bloomington](#) campus shifted to an interfaith baccalaureate service which includes elements of Buddhism, Christianity, Islam, Hinduism, and Judaism. A statement released by the Media Relations office at Indiana University quotes Kenneth A. Beckley as stating, “The president felt that our previous ceremony, although quite moving, didn’t always meet the expectations of the audience in attendance.”⁹ Beckley, who is the CEO of the Indiana University Alumni Association and chair of the University Commencement Committee, had to say this about the religious community at IU:

Indiana University’s students, faculty and staff are from different backgrounds and places, and celebrate different rites. Yet we come together in harmony and mutual respect, united by a quest for knowledge and learning. We are a community that strives to maintain its sense of solidarity, caring and compassion. That spirit of compassion, along with love, tolerance and forgiveness, infuses all of the great religions.”¹⁰

PRIVATE VS PUBLIC

In the previously cited article by Donald Shockley, the author states that the survey which he conducted on interest in baccalaureate services was extended to chaplains from “institutions large and small – mostly private, but not necessarily church-related.”¹¹ This description could be used also to outline those colleges and universities which are most likely to participate in interfaith baccalaureate services. However, while general trends can be used to speculate about which schools will participate, there are no

hard and fast rules. For example, while it is true that most public institutions of higher education do not sponsor baccalaureate services, some do sanction interfaith services for their graduates. Indiana University Bloomington, the [University of Massachusetts Boston](#) and [Virginia Commonwealth University](#) (all public institutions) each offered an interfaith baccalaureate service as part of their respective 2005 commencement exercises.

The same exceptions apply to independent and religiously affiliated private schools. Many schools with strong religious ties carry out each year's baccalaureate in its more traditional liturgical form. Some others with similar religious associations, however, have moved toward interfaith services. [Georgetown University](#), the nation's oldest Roman Catholic and Jesuit university holds an interfaith baccalaureate, and the school has devoted a section of its website to a discussion of diversity at the institution.¹² [Brandeis University](#), the "only nonsectarian Jewish-sponsored college or university in the country" has also incorporated an interfaith service as part of its commencement activities.¹³

DEBATE WITHIN INSTITUTIONS

No matter what the particular make-up of an institution might be, how a specific school approaches issues of cultural and religious diversity in its baccalaureate service can be an issue of debate among students and faculty. Many times, there is a fine line between a service that accommodates the spiritual needs of the student body and a service that becomes generalized to the point that it serves none. Diana Akiyama, Director of the Office for Religious and Spiritual Life at Occidental College states that some previous attempts at interfaith services at the school were described by some as being "performances" more than worship.¹⁴ Before her tenure at the school, baccalaureate had been held in the largest performance hall on campus to facilitate dancing as a part of the service. Some complained that the service's length (well over an hour at that point) was a problem, making the ceremony "very uncomfortable for families/grandparents in particular, and complicating the sequence of events during commencement weekend."¹⁵ A number of changes were made to the service, however, drawing compliments from students, their families, and the administration. Attendance at Occidental's baccalaureate services has increased over the two years since changes were made. The service, now limited to under an hour, has been moved back to the school's chapel. The basic content includes music, readings from the world's religions, a student speaker "chosen in a competitive selection process," an outside speaker, hymns, an invocation and a benediction.¹⁶ At this point, Ms. Akiyama has stated that feedback has been positive, and that the current approach to baccalaureate services at Occidental College is one that works well for the community.

What works for one institution may not function for another, however. The handling of [Harvard Divinity School's](#) 2005 baccalaureate service was met with a certain amount of debate. Some students raised complaints and offered suggestions for changes, some noticeably different from those mentioned above at Occidental College. Michelle Goldhaber, 2004-2005 Director of Spiritual Life to the Student Association Executive Council, stated that one of the biggest concerns of this group of students was the location

of the Divinity School's baccalaureate service. Traditionally the service is held in Harvard Yard's [Memorial Church](#). This particular group of students felt that with Harvard Divinity's identity as a non-sectarian theological school, the choice to hold baccalaureate services in Memorial Church did little to address the diversity of religious and cultural backgrounds represented at the school. They also expressed the notion that the school's service took on a particularly Protestant form of worship, allowing minimal contributions from students of other faith traditions.

Nevertheless, those in charge of planning the ceremony decided to maintain its traditional location in Memorial Church for a few reasons. First of all, it was said that suggestions for alternative locations were made too late in the year to allow for substitutions. In addition, a number of faculty and staff members felt that the service's placement in Harvard Yard connected Harvard Divinity School's commencement exercises more closely to those of the larger university community. Some alterations to the planned service were made, though. Opening and closing prayers from the school's different faith traditions were added, and the processional of students was led by a large banner representing a variety of religious traditions. Other elements of the service (labeled a "Commencement Worship Service" rather than a baccalaureate) included hymns, music performed by students, a faculty speaker, and an address by the school's dean.

As for suggestions for the school's future services, Goldhaber stated that the students with whom she spoke desired a diverse committee to plan the service. This would ideally place power in the hands of the student body in order to rethink what a baccalaureate or commencement worship service might entail. Finally, the idea of a more religiously neutral location for the ceremony was strongly advanced. As can be seen from a comparison of these recommendations to the changes made at Occidental College, the type of baccalaureate service which works best varies from institution to institution and is dependent upon the students, faculty, and staff of that particular school.

BACCALAUREATES IN PUBLIC HIGH SCHOOLS

Some internal debate might exist in any institution of higher education over the most appropriate way to handle its commencement activities. However, there has not been any notable amount of public outcry or controversy related to baccalaureate services in colleges and universities, interfaith or not. Not too surprisingly, though, a certain amount of controversy has surrounded the issue of baccalaureate services in United States public high schools. Much like current debates over prayer in schools, the teaching of evolution, or the word "God" in the Pledge of Allegiance, disagreement over the role of baccalaureates in public school graduations has been at the heart of recent evaluations of the role of religion in the public sphere.

Currently, public schools in the United States are not allowed to sponsor or mandate religious services, including baccalaureates. However, school property may be rented out to private groups who sponsor such religious services, as long as one particular religious group is not preferred over another for the ability to rent space. In order to

avoid any discrepancies over the appropriateness of a given service, many students, parents, and community members have opted to hold religious ceremonies for graduates in private institutions such as churches and community centers. Many of these independent baccalaureate services take on the character of the specific group hosting the event, although many of these services are being held in interfaith contexts.

There have been some challenges in attempting to provide interfaith baccalaureate services for high school students outside of the school itself. For example, many members of private religious communities do not feel comfortable hosting an interfaith service. The reasons for this may range from an individual desiring to fully participate in their own religious rite to the belief that a particular service or worship space is compromised by the presence of another faith community. One case that received particular attention from the media was a 2001 story in which Rabbi Steven Lebow was not allowed to present the baccalaureate address for Walton High School in Cobb County, Georgia. In years past, the service had been held at Mount Bethel United Methodist Church because of its large seating capacity. However, Mount Bethel's minister, Rev. Randell Mickler, denied Lebow the opportunity to present that year's address. The *Atlanta Journal-Constitution* quoted Mickler as stating, "He can speak, he just cannot be the sermon giver... To have a person who is a nonbeliever of Christ is, in a sense, dishonoring Christ."¹⁷ Ultimately, Lebow delivered his address at the local civic center, and while the event caused some turmoil in the community and local media, peace was reached between the two individuals when Mickler attended Lebow's speech.

An additional case which garnered media attention was another 2001 event, in which the board of a local chapel denied its services to the graduating seniors of Potomac and Brentsville District high schools in Prince William County, Virginia. The directors of the chapel made the decision after learning that a rabbi and a Muslim would take part in the interfaith service. Rev. Shelby Boldt, director of the chapel, was quoted by the *Washington Post* as saying, "It is our opinion that allowing individuals that are not of Christian faith to participate in the Baccalaureate service held at Hylton Memorial Chapel would violate the charter that governs the use and purpose of this facility."¹⁸ Issues such as these, as well as the continual deliberation over the roles of church and state have caused high school baccalaureate services to be at the center of much public disagreement. On the whole, however, institutions of higher education have not been subject to the same level of controversy over these services.

CLOSING

Overall, the renewal of baccalaureate services in colleges and universities across the country has been met with increasingly diverse student populations. The manners in which schools approach this growing plurality of religious faiths are as diverse as the institutions themselves. Some schools no longer include a baccalaureate service as part of their commencement activities, some maintain their traditional Christian form, and some provide an interfaith service of one type or another. Public and private institutions alike host interfaith baccalaureate ceremonies, as well as both religiously affiliated and independent schools. The main indicator of whether or not an institution will hold such a

ceremony seems most tied to the make-up of that particular school's student body, faculty, and administration. While not all institutions find that an interfaith service is most suitable for them, a rising number of colleges and universities are discovering that interfaith baccalaureates, in all their varieties, provide their particular student body with a setting for religious reflection that meets their community's needs in an environment of ever-increasing religious pluralism.

¹ www.dictionary.com

² <http://www.smith.edu/chapel/Baccalaureate/history.html>; similar descriptions can be found at: <http://www.dartmouth.edu/~tucker/rsl/baccalaureate.html> and <http://www.reinhardt.edu/News/4.28.03Graduation.htm>

³ Donald Shockley, "Back to Baccalaureate," *Christian Century* (June 2 1982): 666. Referenced from Religion Online at <http://www.religion-online.org/showarticle.asp?title=1323>

⁴ Ibid

⁵ Ibid

⁶ Martha C. Highsmith, "Instituting Change in the Spiritual Make-up of a University: The Case of Yale University," *Spirituality in Higher Education Newsletter* (July 2005): V2 Issue 3, 1.

⁷ Ibid

⁸ Order of Service, Brown University 237th Commencement Baccalaureate Service. Taken from <http://www.brown.edu/Administration/Chaplains/bacc2005/service.html>

⁹ Indiana University Media Relations, "New Baccalaureate ceremony to be held May 3," April 17, 2002, <http://newsinfo.iu.edu/news/page/normal/340.html>

¹⁰ Ibid

¹¹ Shockley, "Back to Baccalaureate," <http://www.religion-online.org/showarticle.asp?title=1323>

¹² <http://explore.georgetown.edu/documents/?DocumentID=739&PageTemplateID=52>

¹³ <http://www.brandeis.edu/overview/>

¹⁴ Diana Akiyama, e-mail message to author, August 25, 2005.

¹⁵ Ibid

¹⁶ Ibid

¹⁷ Don Fernandez, "Rabbi 'Flabbergasted' as Church Bars Baccalaureate Speech," *Atlanta Journal Constitution*, April 20, 2001.

¹⁸ Christina A. Samuels, "Va. Chapel Rejects Schools Ceremony; Plans for Multi-Faith Baccalaureate Force Move in Prince William County," *Washington Post*, April 3, 2001.