

Tony Blair at Yale: A former P.M. reflects: Ten lessons

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To the chapters of the life of a onetime prime minister and now freelance diplomat, add one more: Mr. Blair Goes to Yale.

Fresh off his first year as a guest lecturer on faith and globalization at Yale University, former British prime minister Tony Blair got something rarely accorded to most academics: a public forum in which to reflect on what he had learned as a teacher.

At a public address at Yale's Battell Chapel, Blair said he had drawn ten lessons from the seminar he cotaught this semester and expects to repeat during the fall terms of 2009 and 2010.

Among the lessons Blair culled from his teaching: "faith matters," "religious faith is not in decline" and "globalization requires values to succeed."

In a world being "pushed closer together" while religious differences are often used to pull people apart, he said: "If religious faith can, at least, not be a hindrance of coming together, that would be a great thing."

Blair had earlier tested out the lessons on a group of students who had attended a semester-long seminar cotaught by Blair and Miroslav Volf, a Croatian-born Christian theologian and the director of Yale's Center for Faith and Culture (as well as a Century editor at large).

"Globalization shrinks the world and creates a more global community," the former prime minister told the students. As a result, "religious faith and globalization have to find ways to be at peace with each other so that globalization can be more peaceful and run better and more efficiently."

Blair has been a relatively quiet presence at Yale this semester, visiting the New Haven campus only every few weeks. Yet in an end-of-semester flourish, Blair spoke

about the importance of faith in the public sphere with a speech December 11, a public question-and-answer session with Yale president Richard Levin and a round of media interviews.

Even so, Blair did not address his 2007 conversion to Catholicism from Anglicanism after he stepped down as prime minister. He did, however, tell reporters that the current debate over the importance and dangers of religion is old hat; he said he had long had similar arguments with his atheist father.

Indeed, Blair's public stance on the importance of religious faith in the public realm mirrored his acknowledgment, made since he left public life, that his own religious faith was "hugely important" to him during his decade as leader of the British government.

Blair's rare public embrace of private faith—an aide once famously said that "We don't do God" at No. 10 Downing Street—has fueled speculation as to whether religious faith was something that bound Blair to President George W. Bush. Asked to comment on Bush's views of religion and politics, Blair demurred, saying, "That's not for me to say."

Blair's presence at Yale, scheduled to last for at least two more years, is intended in part to strengthen relations between Yale and Blair's London-based Tony Blair Faith Foundation, which has been established to promote interfaith dialogue.

The Yale seminar was a joint offering of Yale Divinity School and the Yale School of Management, and Blair said it might be spun off as a course that could be taught at other universities.

Asked whether the subject of Iraq had emerged as a major topic during the semester-long seminar, Blair said it had come up sporadically but had not emerged as a major topic. However, a video hookup of the last day of the seminar, shown to reporters, found several students peppering the former prime minister with critical questions on Iraq and the view of the war through Muslim eyes.

Looking like a veteran academic—biting at the tips of his reading glasses and contemplating his response to a question—Blair held his own, saying he respected the views of the war's opponents and was fully aware of the many missteps made since the U.S. and British invasion of Iraq in 2003.

Nonetheless, he said he still believed that the Middle East is better off without Saddam Hussein in power, in part because an old-style dictator like Saddam was an impediment to the positive effects of globalization.

In any case, Blair told students that he is ready to accept history's judgments on the decision to topple Saddam. "It's something I'll live with the rest of my life," he said.

At Battell Chapel—which a Yale Divinity School graduate pointed out was the site of the late Yale chaplain William Sloane Coffin's fiery antiwar sermons of the 1960s and 1970s—Blair sounded a more conciliatory note. He said that for countries like the United States and Great Britain, it would ultimately be "force of argument, and not of arms, that will cause us to succeed" against those supporting terrorism. -Chris Herlinger, *Religion News Service*