

The last lecture:

**Baccalaureate sermons at Princeton University,
1876-1969**

Until a student takes his diploma in hand and leaves town, I never give up hoping that Princeton will get to him!

Robert Goheen (1971)

Religion 505: Festival, Ritual and Celebration in American Religion
Professor Leigh Eric Schmidt
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Daniel Edward Sack

Rituals tell us about the communities that produce them. They embody the values, priorities, needs, and desires of the people who come together to enact them. Academic communities are no different. The growth of higher education and the rise of scientific positivism in the past century has challenged the idea of college as community, but for most institutions it remains a central part of their identity. These institutions reinforce their sense of community in part through ritual.

This paper looks at one particular ritual--the baccalaureate service--at one particular institution--Princeton University. This service, held to mark the end of the academic year and to celebrate the success of the graduating seniors, gives the university an opportunity to make explicit the values and ideals that underlay their education. The baccalaureate sermon is the last lecture of a Princeton student's college career.

After looking at the context for the baccalaureate sermons, this paper reads more closely a selection of sermons from 1876 to 1969.* It looks for common themes among these sermons, and proposes that these themes reflect the purposes of the Princeton

*Practicality defines the first date, and subject the last. Records of commencements before the last quarter of the nineteenth century are fairly slim in the university archives; 1876 is the first baccalaureate text readily available. During most of the university's history the president preached the baccalaureate sermon; in 1973 this duty shifted to guest preachers from outside the university. The next few pages will suggest the importance of this change.

community and reflect a "Princeton religion."

Before looking more closely at the content of the sermons, this paper needs to look at the context of the baccalaureate service. It is a religious service held at the end of the academic year specifically for the graduating class, the term baccalaureate referring to the bachelor's degree that the graduates receive. While at some schools the baccalaureate sermon was preached at commencement, at Princeton and most other schools the baccalaureate sermon is delivered at a ceremony or service devoted particularly to that purpose, part of graduation festivities but separate from the commencement ceremony itself.

The account of the College of New Jersey's first commencement in 1748 reports no baccalaureate sermon; the earliest discovered so far dates to 1760, preached by Samuel Davies.¹ By the middle of the nineteenth century the baccalaureate sermon had become a public activity; when moving it to a more convenient date and location caused some distress in the surrounding community. A local paper noted that the service

has been changed from the Sabbath before commencement, when the sermon used to be preached by the venerable President to the students, in the First Presbyterian Church, to the Sabbath after the final examination of the senior class, and is now preached in the college chapel. This change is much regretted by the crowds that were accustomed to hear, on these solemn occasions, the admonitory parting words of the venerated President to the young.²

This move put the baccalaureate sermon on the Sunday closest to Class Day, in May just after exams, and directed the baccalaur-

eate sermon more at the students and other members of the campus community. The service returned to the Sunday before commencement in 1870.³

By the 1870s the increasing size of the college moved the baccalaureate service back to the Presbyterian church, evidently replacing the regular service at 11 o'clock Sunday morning before commencement. One observer in 1876 noted what he called "the old-established custom" as the senior class "met the President at the Chapel and conducted him to the church."⁴ Eighteen eighty-two, however, saw the dedication of Marquand Chapel, and services were moved back onto campus.⁵ The service remained in the chapel until 1896 when, due to the pressure of numbers, the baccalaureate moved to Alexander Hall. There it remained until the current chapel was finished in 1928.

By the middle of the twentieth century the baccalaureate sermon occupied a important symbolic role in the weekend's events, as *the* morning religious service on campus and the kickoff to commencement proper. As a letter sent to the class of 1949 indicates,

the Baccalaureate Address by President Dodds on Sunday morning, June 12, at eleven o'clock, officially inaugurates graduation activities. An integral part of the last phase of undergraduate life, Baccalaureate has always been in many ways the most impressive ceremony in a Princeton career.⁶

Whatever else baccalaureate was, some members of the class considered it an important beginning to the commencement events.

Baccalaureate was impressive, but it is unclear how important this service was to the graduates. The chapel, which seats

almost two thousand, was always full for the service; the class of '49, for instance, was limited to two tickets each.⁷ And yet the report of the Class Day committee reflects concern about low attendance, noting optimistically that although attendance that year was "still below normal it was fifty per cent better than last year." The report continued,

Several members of the Class Day Committee were most enthusiastic about the Baccalaureate Service and regretted that more of their classmates had not availed themselves of the opportunity to participate.⁸

Unfortunately, the archives don't reflect what might have made some seniors unenthusiastic about attending baccalaureate. Some oral history here would be useful.

For almost all Princeton's history, the baccalaureate preacher was the college's president, even the laymen (after 1902). This central role of the president as preacher reflects the history of the early American college. In the eighteenth and early nineteenth century the American college existed not solely to teach students but also, as Frederick Rudolph puts it, to make "men out of boys." Rudolph notes the "impressive arsenal of weapons" for such a task, including "unrelenting revivals, unheated dormitories, and underpaid professors." The most important person in this work, however, was the college president. In the president's course for seniors, Rudolph writes,

known almost everywhere as moral and intellectual philosophy, the full force of a mature mind and personality was turned upon a variety of subjects considered essential to the formation of true character. Transplanted from the universities of eighteenth-century England and Scotland, the course in moral and intellectual philosophy embraced the tough problem of

how to reconcile man's newly emancipated reason and natural law with the old theology and Christian law.⁹

In the college's work of making Christian gentlemen, this senior course was the capstone; the character of each graduate was shaped by the character of the course and the man who taught it.

Witherspoon planted this tradition early at Princeton; as Wertenbaker notes, "to the seniors the Old Doctor [Witherspoon] was familiar enough, for they had to sit under him in several of their courses, finding him an excellent and clear teacher."¹⁰ To an alumnus who returned for his tenth year reunion in 1887, President McCosh was a model teacher.

No college in America has a teacher in mental phylo-
sophy [sic] and psichology [sic] who equals Dr. McCosh. He is recognized as the peer of any thinker or writer on such subjects in the century, as perhaps the most successful Christian gladiator in the combats with the Spencers, Huxleys, and Tyndalls of these latter days. It is a rare thing that a young man who has heard McCosh's lectures on ancient and modern philosophy is led captive by any of the German "isms" which are so attractive and insinuating.

This alumnus concludes that, thanks to McCosh, "Princeton seems to be the only remaining great seat of learning where sons can be sent with some certainty of their remaining Christians."¹¹ The president was personally responsible for the nurturing of the young men in the charge and for the preservation of their faith. That is why the baccalaureate address was so important--it was in effect the last lecture of the senior course. It was the president's last opportunity to shape *his* students.

The role of the president changed as the university changed, of course, and Robert Goheen is quick to disavow theological

pretensions. "I never thought of myself as a preacher," he says. "I was talking in a beautiful building of religious origin." Yet he does see his role as important.

I was trying to convey to the students the most important things the university had given them. When I looked back over the fifteen talks I had given, I saw a common theme: the importance of conjoining the life of the mind with moral concern, the relationship of mind and spirit and faith.¹²

Although Goheen never taught a senior course and never saw himself as a preacher, his "talks" did serve the same role as those of his predecessors--to sum up a Princeton education in some moral or spiritual way.

The president does speak at commencement, but informally. "The baccalaureate sermon has more of a moral tone than commencement," says Goheen. "The president makes no real address at commencement, but just some light remarks."¹³ In 1973 the newly inaugurated William Bowen decided to speak his piece at commencement and let someone else preach the baccalaureate sermon. Since then the baccalaureate preachers have included a variety of speakers, some alumni and some not, some clergy and some not. Although all have had some connection to Princeton, none have sought like the presidents to articulate an understanding of a Princeton education and the nature of the Princeton community.

The presidents had one last chance to share their wisdom with the senior class. While drawing on some common themes, each sermon reflects the style and concerns of each president and the challenges confronting each class. Each president talks about

religion, the duties of the graduating class, the challenges of the outside world, the importance of education, and personal character. The bulk of this paper looks at these common themes and how the presidents spoke to the particularities of their times.

By the late nineteenth century Princeton had secularized significantly in comparison to its evangelical roots, but religious language did play an important role in the baccalaureate sermon. Appropriately enough, the presidents use religious language most often to explain the purpose of the baccalaureate service itself, to explain, as Dodds put it in 1953, "why it is a service of worship and not an ordinary secular graduation ceremony." Such a service, he stated, "affirms that the ultimate, the great truths are spiritual; that man's respect for truth and his endless quest for it are in response to his eternal thirst for something that will not perish."¹⁴ In 1948, Dodds said that the service testifies to graduates leaving the campus "to face the hazards of a tougher and more exacting world, that life's deepest meanings are in the region of the spiritual and the supernatural."¹⁵ As we shall see, Dodds stresses the existential role of faith in his sermons.

Perhaps reflecting the secularization of the university and a certain sense of fragmentation on campus, Robert Goheen in 1959 stresses the community function of the baccalaureate service.

As we assemble and worship together in this place, rich in significant beauty, we are declaring our share in the intangible but very real life of the University that is set forth on the seal of Princeton: Dei sub

numine viget, Under the will of God she flourishes. It is a time of observance of common concern and common purpose.¹⁶

For Goheen the baccalaureate ritual serves to foster community, by celebrating an "academic religion" centered on the university and its motto.

Baccalaureate sermons from the early history of the college were more explicitly Christian in content. In 1876 President McCosh discussed the role of evil in the world. As a local newspaper summarized him, McCosh said that "amid all this sin and suffering, we can recognize the kind and merciful hand of an all-powerful God. We then recognize these two elements, good and evil, existing in the world."¹⁷ This is traditionally Calvinist, but not particularly evangelistic.

The only real evangelist in the lot was a guest. In 1892 President Patton was sick, and so the Rev. Dr. R.S. Storrs of Brooklyn preached the baccalaureate sermon. As summarized in the paper, Storrs preached that

we think of Christ's work as a work of love, and the reward of such a work is in itself; but He worked his work of love in account of a joy set before him. . . .
Dr. Storrs closed with an appropriate address to the graduating class, urging them to cultivate these elements of divine joy.¹⁸

While some of the preachers spoke highly of Christian belief, this is the only sermon where the preacher encouraged his audience to Christian behavior.

Other preachers encouraged the graduates to a more generic kind of religion, what President Dodds broadly defined as faith-- although clearly expecting this generic faith to be based on

Christianity. Faith, says Dodds, is an essential part of life. In 1941 he reminded his audience "most emphatically that those familiar doctrines which set our ideals of daily life are acts of faith... They still set the frame of reference for philosophy and social studies." Dodds keeps this daily faith from appearing totally generic by concluding that such doctrines "stem from the roots of the Christian faith."¹⁹

Dodds' administration began in the Depression and ended in the Cold War, and so he spoke to audiences in the midst of existential crisis. For Dodds faith is the answer to such a crisis. In his first sermon in 1934 he stated that faith took over at the limits of positivistic education, observing "that there is much that is true in life that will not go into a syllogism, that despite our boasted material progress, life is still a supreme test of faith."²⁰ He sounded almost Tillichian in 1951 when he said that "the basic cause of our anxiety today, the common psychosis of our age, stems from a conflict between man's need for the supernatural and his stubborn unwillingness to accept it."²¹ Dodds is not obscurantist, however; in the same sermon he noted that "to command one's allegiance a faith must be reasonable. No educated person will be willing to follow an unreasonable faith."²² A reliance on faith cannot be illogical; Dodds was, after all, a university president.

The life of the university and the life of faith, Dodds wanted to reassure his listeners, were not incompatible. Princeton's traditional religious self-understanding shows that, as he

said in 1951.

True, the University imposes no religious tests on students or faculty, as universities once did all over the world. It stands for freedom in a common search for truth, and individual members may, and do, differ and contend as to what is truth. But our institutional center of gravity, as a college and university more than two hundred years old, is the faith that the Christian religion is the ultimate organizing element that gives order and purpose to life²³

For Dodds the university was simultaneously a place of religious freedom and of faith. Baccalaureate preachers did not struggle with the difficulties of such a position until much later.

Although his was a less existential age, Hibben also stressed the important functions of religion. In 1927 he told the graduates that "it is the function of religion to fortify the spirit of man and to give to these ennobling ideas a fundamental principle of organization, unifying them, reinforcing them and giving them direction and effective manifestation." He contended "that the ultimate reality in life is not to be found in external things but within the spirit of man and that the essential function of religion is to fortify this inner spirit."²⁴

This stress on spirit and idealism over against the body and materialism forms an important religious theme in these baccalaureate sermons. Francis Patton perhaps alluded to higher education's civilizing function on adolescent males when he told the class of 1899 "to subjugate your own passions and appetites and hold them as vassals of your reason. This struggle will continue as long as you live."²⁵ Henry van Dyke, substituting for an ailing Woodrow Wilson in 1906, criticized materialists who

imperiled the country

by looking only downwards, never upwards. By bending high faculties to low ends. By corrupting the minds of youth with false standards of success and lying maxims of self-interest. By drawing the thoughts of men, by the glitter of riches and the glare of fashion, to rest on you, and the like of you, instead of on virtue and praise.²⁶

Van Dyke's criticism of materialism speaks a social gospel critique of the Gilded Age.

A far different conflict led John Grier Hibben to criticize materialism. He was concerned for national survival in the face of world war, a survival that would depend on spiritual strength, not military strength. "No community of material interests can hold us together as a people," he said in 1916. "It is the spirit of the nation which after all is our sure defence--our army and navy, our wealth and power are not sufficient to save us from ourselves."²⁷ Three years later he claimed the allied victory as a victory for spirituality over materialism. He said, "the conflict which was waged and won is after all an eternal conflict, the perpetual warfare of the human race, the struggle between the things of earth, and the things of the spirit"²⁸ For Hibben the War to End All Wars was also a war to end materialism.

Materialism rose again with a vengeance, and forty years later Robert Goheen felt moved to criticize the consumerism of the late 1950s.

Madison Avenue values surround us, in home and office, in never-ending currents of chrome and steel and plastic which engulf and infect us all. The air of materialism we breathe is as deadly as any fall-out and

reaches to every corner of the land.²⁹

As during World War I, materialism threatened the survival of America's spirit during the Cold War.

Not surprisingly, then, religious themes run through Princeton baccalaureate sermons from this period. The words from the pulpit in the last quarter of the nineteenth century and the first three-quarters of the twentieth fostered a Christian-appearing but somewhat generic religion, encouraging faith and criticizing materialism. The presidents present this religion as the answer to the problems of their age.

As common in baccalaureate sermons as religious themes are calls to duty. The presidents stress repeatedly the responsibilities of the graduates to make a difference in the world. "What a power for good the young men now before me might have, provided they set before them noble ends and pursue them faithfully," McCosh said in 1879. "A smaller number of men have produced the great revolutions, religious, political and social, which have had a marked effect on the world's history!" The president stressed the importance of life in the real world as compared to college life. "You should realize what a human life is--not a pleasure holiday, but a very serious matter; a work and a warfare."³⁰ McCosh called his listeners to enlist in the warfare.

Princeton graduates have heavy duties, the preachers conclude, simply because of the blessings of a Princeton education. Goheen reminded his students in 1960 how privileged

they are: "You have many advantages, many sources of potential strength: health, youth, intelligence, opportunities for future study, jobs in prospect, the very ability to ask thoughtful questions."³¹ As Dodds pointed out in 1949, being Princeton graduates makes his audience part of a very elite group, and thus gives them a special burden of responsibility.

The blame lies with the minority, not with the commonality--with the minority of educated leaders of opinion. You who will graduate Tuesday belong to this select majority. Whether you like or it not you are under, and will be under all the days of your life, the heavy responsibility of being qualified for membership in that creative minority which in fact decides the great issues of life.³²

And as Hibben noted in 1912, "one of the most significant results of your education is to give you a more vivid and real sense of that need, and at the same time to increase your powers of ministering to it."³³ Being a Princeton graduate, having an education, gives the young men listening to these sermons a significant duty to make a difference in the world.

It is not just being a college graduate, but being a Princeton graduate, as several baccalaureate preachers stress the public spirit that underlies the Princeton tradition. In the midst of war in 1942 Dodds notes that

from her founding nearly two hundred years ago Princeton has been dedicated to the cause of sound learning and through sound learning to service to the state. In times of crisis her devotion to the nation has always taken on added significance.³⁴

He then quotes from one of the earliest baccalaureate sermons, when in 1760 Samuel Davies called upon his students to serve their generation. "Live not for yourselves but for the public.

Be the servants of the church; the servants of your country; the servants of all. . . . Let your own ease, your own pleasure, your own private interests, yield to the common good."³⁵ This spirit of public service runs throughout the baccalaureate sermons, and the presidents use it to call the current generation to their duties.

In wartime, as Dodds noted above, these duties become more important; they become a call to sacrifice. Hibben was particularly fond of the idea of sacrifice, both national and personal. In 1917 he told the graduating class that "the times demand sacrifice, and sacrifice can no longer be free from suffering. Sacrifice has prepared in our presence its altar. To it we must bring our best gifts, even the offering of ourselves to its holy fire."³⁶ This sacrifice was to be personal as well as national. In that 1917 sermon Hibben told the graduates that "however urgent and persistent the egoistic impulse in human nature, it gives way before the superior command of the altruistic impulse."³⁷ Hibben called Princeton graduates to hear the call for national and personal altruism.

The responsibilities and duties of Princeton graduates during the war years reached such a level, Hibben felt, that the graduates were consecrated to the service of humanity. In 1917 he said that

this body of young men that I have seen day by day upon our campus during the last year and more, thus strangely touched and moved by the vision of the eternal verities, has seemed to me something consecrated, something set apart in fulfillment of the divine decrees for the destiny of mankind.³⁸

This consecration continued even after the war, when he set out the challenges of rebuilding the world after the war. "The new world needs men who are not seeking a career but who regard their work in life as a mission,"³⁹ he said in 1919.

The second theme running through these baccalaureate sermons, then, is a stress on the duties and responsibilities of the graduating class. They had these duties because they had an education, more particular a Princeton education. The responsibilities of educated men increased immensely during wartime, to the point of altruism and sacrifice.

As we have seen in discussions of war and duty, these baccalaureate preachers spoke directly to the issues of their day. Certain themes appear repeatedly as the presidents address the public affairs of their times; their words reflect a sense of crisis, praise or criticism of progress, and worries about cold and hot war.

Perhaps commencement speeches would be incomplete otherwise, but almost every graduation speaker points with alarm to some crisis confronting his or her culture. Princeton's preachers are no exception, since their speeches reflect the concerns of the larger society. Henry Van Dyke sounded like a muck-raker of the Gilded Age when he said in 1906 that "the air of our country today is heavily charged with electricity. The lightning of exposure has been striking into dark places and playing havoc with houses that were founded upon lies."⁴⁰ In 1959 Robert Goheen anticipated John Kennedy looking toward new frontiers,

"those of expanding knowledge, surging populations, and international tensions; and those frontiers within our national life, beset with materialism, conformity, and complacency."⁴¹ And Goheen's 1968 sermon alluded to the crisis engulfing colleges, including his own, when he stated that "in these puzzling, disconcerting times and with this uncomfortable and confusing future ahead, it is terribly easy simply to give way before complexity, to grasp at slogans and simple solutions."⁴² These preachers challenged their students to confront the crisis confronting the entire nation.

The wars of the twentieth century were the most important crises confronted by Princeton and its presidents. In 1916 Hibben saw war as giving the nation a great responsibility, but continued that "our country at the present time is in grave danger, danger that comes from the confirmed habit of indifference, and of inertia, the spirit of selfish indulgence, and of a complacent optimism."⁴³ In his Memorial Day speech of 1943, which replaced a baccalaureate address, Dodds chose to stress Princeton's contributions to the war effort. Princeton alumni were serving in the armed forces all over the world, he said; he continued with the belief "that they understand the issues of this war better; that they pursue with greater earnestness that which cannot stand in any stead for vital use, because they worked and played and lived on this campus."⁴⁴ The hot wars of the century challenged both the nation and the university.

So did the Cold War. Dodds was president during the depth

of that war, and several of his sermons reflect his concern. In 1948 he said that "the most ominous threat to Western civilization is wrapped up in the cosmic struggle now going on between two antagonistic and mutually exclusive views of the good life." Dodds urged his audience to "be on guard against some mischievous opinions regarding certain asserted weaknesses of democracy which misrepresent its character and tend to destroy confidence in it." His most significant point against communism reflects the ongoing concern with materialism.

Economic success must never be allowed top priority in the catalogue of tests of the right of a free society to survival. The day of a free society is over the moment it accepts material goods and enjoyments as the ultimate values in life.⁴⁵

Again striking Kennedy-like themes, in 1959 Goheen urged his audience to "recognize plainly also the menace posed by Soviet Russia, vigorous purveyor of an alien philosophy, taut in posture, potent in her weapons for war, with challenge in her every move."⁴⁶ The specific crisis of war, hot and cold, was an important theme for these presidents.

A recurring theme, similar to the concern with materialism, is the idea of progress. The shifts in how the baccalaureate preachers see progress reflect changes in the larger society. Sounding like a social gospel preacher, in 1899 Francis Patton told his students "to go out to war against evil in the world."⁴⁷ In a 1923 sermon stating his support for Harry Emerson Fosdick against the Fundamentalists, Hibben said that people fear progress "because of suspicion of the source whence

it emanates; fear of any new interpretation of truth, because they who fear regard themselves as sole possessors, trustees and defenders of truth."⁴⁸ Even as late as 1930 Hibben advocated "freeing ourselves from that reactionary spirit which has no dreams of a progressive future created by the forces of living, advancing, developing power."⁴⁹ Patton and Hibben reflected their roots in the liberalism of the late nineteenth century by their faith in progress.

The press of events shook the faith of their successors. In 1934 Dodds noted that "recently this comforting philosophy has received a rude jolt. . . . Whatever evolution may signify it does not guarantee continuous and automatic progress."⁵⁰ As war clouds gathered in 1941 he alluded to the previous generation's faith in human nature, but concluded "now all this has changed and once more we are conscious that evil still exists in the world."⁵¹ Combining an appreciation of Progressivism with and the anti-materialism discussed above, in 1959 Goheen lamented that

"Progress," which to the nineteenth century meant a better world with higher ideals, has come to mean higher horse power and TV westerns, in a society where we are urged to believe that a man's intelligence can be measured by the type of cigarettes he buys.⁵²

The value of progress rose and fell with the times in the eyes of these presidents.

The presidents in the speeches, then, reflected the national concerns of their time. They sought to challenge their students to pay attention to the world around them and stress the respon-

sibilities of educated men in a world facing various crises.

As one might expect, the presidents discuss the idea of education in their baccalaureate sermons. They discuss the nature of the university, the meaning of education and the duty of an educated man.

The 1960s saw the greatest challenges to the nature of the university, and so it is appropriate that Robert Goheen discusses at greatest length the nature of the institution. His conception of the university was traditional; in 1969 he told the graduates that "a university is a loose and peculiar association of persons, assembled for the pursuit of knowledge and understanding" ⁵³ Goheen saw the university playing an essential role in the preservation of western culture, calling them in 1968 "places for free inquiry and searching reflection, on which the balance and sanity of our civilization depend. It is the universities who are engaged in preserving and reexamining ideas and knowledge." ⁵⁴ Dodds said in 1953, perhaps in response to McCarthyism, that "academic freedom is necessary if [universities] are to function as society expects them to do" ⁵⁵ Both Dodds and Goheen presided over the university in days when rational western culture was threatened. In their eyes, to pursue truth and preserve the culture a university must be free.

Several baccalaureate sermons stress the value and meaning of education, reflecting the character formation model seen in the traditional American college. As Francis Patton said in 1902, "one large part of a university education is that it con-

sists in training the desires and educating the tastes, thus teaching men to scorn what is base and mean." He continued,

sooner or later a man must be set free, sooner or later he takes charge of his own conscience, and a university is one of the best training places for this I know no place where a man may be trusted so well to work out the best in him as in a Christian university.⁵⁶

Almost fifty years later Harold Dodds also stressed the idea of character formation, but with a less explicitly Christian flavor. A college education, he said in 1951, should culminate "in a fundamental philosophy of life which sets the way of life for a man as a rational human being."⁵⁷ These presidents used the same model of education, although with significantly different content.

The presidents pointed not only to the value of education but also to the duties of an educated man. In 1899 Patton urged his students to ask themselves, "What do I live for? One virtue in a large measure is about as much as most people can carry, but an educated man should seek peifection [sic] in all virtues."⁵⁸ Goheen told his audience in 1961 that "university men" were different from other men; "beyond the necessary activities of producing, trading, negotiating, and the like, there will always rise in your minds the great enduring questions of purpose, order, and direction."⁵⁹ Because of their education, society holds university graduates to higher moral and intellectual standards.

Princeton's history began with a particular understanding of the meaning of education. Although the curriculum moved toward

specialization and the campus climate became more secular, the idea of education as character formation remained an important part of the presidents' baccalaureate sermons.

Only in the twentieth century did the presidents stress individual character traits. In 1941 Dodds discussed such personal topics, despite the rumors of war. "Surely it is fitting and proper on an occasion such as this," he said, "that we should think about ourselves as individuals and plan how we may develop our individual potentialities to the full."⁶⁰ He, Hibben, and Goheen loaded their sermons with references to such traits as tolerance, courage, independence, and integrity.

In 1934 Dodds urged his students to "give important place to the virtue of tolerance. To love thy neighbor as thyself is still one of the two commandments on which hang all the law and the prophets." Perhaps fearing trends in Europe, he hoped that America could keep true to its tradition of tolerance.⁶¹ In his last sermon, in 1957, he stressed the importance of reasonableness and tolerance.⁶²

Hibben's favorite trait was independence. After looking at the pressures for conformity in modern American culture, he stated that

there is nothing that the individual prizes so highly as his own personal liberty of thought and of conduct, but if he falls into the habit of yielding to the pressure from without, he inevitably becomes less and less a free man

He concluded by noting that a Princeton education was specifically designed "to incite and assist you in acquiring the habit of

thinking for yourselves."⁶³ Goheen noted in 1965 that "we are not fond of the educational lock-step here. Princeton has, we hope, fostered in you some capacity for self-sustaining thought and independent judgment."⁶⁴

Hibben and Dodds both stressed the virtue of courage. Hibben said in 1923 that "one of the lessons which you have learned in your Princeton life has been that of courage. It is an essential characteristic of the spirit of the place."⁶⁵ Dodds' 1937 address sought to "point out the dangers of over-emphasis on security as the goal of life and to reaffirm the more heroic doctrine that life is an adventure with a higher purpose than insurance against risks" and concluded that "the message of Jesus is a call to adventures of the soul."⁶⁶ He told his 1941 audience that "when one can feel fear and not be afraid he has developed courage."⁶⁷

Speaking in a tumultuous age, Goheen put much of his stress on integrity. His theme in 1965 was "self-possession as personal integrity and the capacity to take much into account, without demanding of life either a bang or a whimper."⁶⁸ He recognized the tensions of trying to live a life of integrity in the modern world. In 1967 he reminded his audience that

we should not compromise principles at our own convenience; nor, on the other hand, can we justifiably demand that our views prevail absolutely. In the face of this dilemma, some may prefer to brood alone in the dark--or to play bongo drums in Tompkins Park. But these are hardly inviting options.⁶⁹

Goheen, like all the presidents, took this last opportunity to suggest character traits that would serve Princeton graduates

well in the "real world" beyond Nassau Street. As he said in 1971, "I address myself to all of you, without exception. Until a student takes his diploma in hand and leaves town, I never give up hoping that Princeton will get to him!"⁷⁰

It's the last Sunday of the academic year, and the Princeton chapel is filled to bursting with seniors, family and friends. The academic procession was grand, and the music as always is spectacular. Now it is up to the president to say something worthwhile to these newest sons (and they were all sons for almost all this period) of Princeton. In his last opportunity to shape their education, in his last lecture, he sounds the same themes of his predecessors: the importance of religion, the responsibilities and duties of educated men, the challenge of public events, the role of education, and the value of character. He asks them to stand as he speaks directly to them. This is where the president defines the meaning of a Princeton education.

One can legitimately argue that the preceding paragraph, like much of the preceding twenty-plus pages, makes overly strong assumptions about the spiritual status of the university and its students. The ninety years in question in this paper mark the greatest years of secularization of Princeton--the Presbyterian presence on the board decreases, the presidency shifts from clergymen to secular academics, curriculum and regulations show less religious influence. For many baccalaureate participants the religious ritual becomes increasingly *pro forma*.

Yet I would like to suggest in conclusion that while the Christian nature of the university declines, its rituals remain important. The history of higher education in the late nineteenth and twentieth centuries is a story of increasing specialization and fragmentation. Rituals like commencement and baccalaureate serve to overcome this fragmentation by creating common experiences and language that give an identity to Princeton as a community. Goheen finds "the baccalaureate service a kind of moving event--a mass of people, the ritual of the procession, the dignified soaring beauty of the Princeton chapel."⁷¹ The service is not moving because of any kind of Christian character, but because it is a ritual of what we might call a "Princeton religion"--a construction of ideas and words and places and people that sustains the Princeton community in an increasingly secular age.

Making this point more strongly requires further research; let me note a few areas for such work. The liturgy of the baccalaureate service changed considerably over the years, becoming much higher church in the 1930s (perhaps in response to an anti-modernist leaning toward ritual, per Jackson Lears, or simply because of the Gothic glory of the building) and much more pluralist in the 1980s. Understanding these shifts in ritual is important. We don't know how graduates, parents, and alumni heard these sermons; some oral history might help. Texts for the very earliest sermons do exist, although require considerable digging; looking at them would allow a better sense of change

over time. Baccalaureate sermons were for a long time major news items, published in major newspapers and for a few years in the 1930s carried live over NBC radio. Studying the public response might add to our understanding of the sermons' importance. Looking more closely at these areas would help us to further flesh out the meaning of the "Princeton religion."

The classic American college sought to make boys into men. These baccalaureate sermons reflect that tradition as the preaching presidents sought to put a capstone on a Princeton education. They recognized that Princeton is a special place, and their sermons show their response. Princeton is isolated, and so they challenged their students to look beyond its fences. Princeton is an elite place, and so the presidents encouraged the students to pay attention to the duty of educated men, in the manner of *noblesse oblige*. Most importantly, the sermons show how the presidents saw Princeton as a community, a place with traditions and rituals and ideals--a place with a religion.

My thanks to the staff of the Princeton University Archives at Seeley Mudd Library and to Robert Goheen.

NOTES

1. Quoted by Harold Dodds in "An Earnest of Greater Efforts," 13 June 1942, "1942" file, "Commencement" box 5, Princeton University Archives.
2. "Commencement of the College of New Jersey," [unknown newspaper], 30 June 1852; clipping in "1852" file, "Commencement" box 1, Princeton University Archives.
3. "1870" file, "Commencement" box 1, Princeton University Archives.
4. "The College of New Jersey, 129th Commencement," Princeton Press, 1 July 1876.
5. "1882" file, "Commencement" box 2, Princeton University Archives.
6. Letter from Class Day Committee to graduating seniors, 28 April 1949, "1949" file, "Commencement" box 6, Princeton University Archives; underlining in original.
7. Letter, 28 April 1949.
8. Internal report on 1949 commencement, "1949" file, "Commencement" box 6, Princeton University Archives.
9. Frederick Rudolph, The American College and University: A History (Athens: University of Georgia Press, 1990), 140.
10. Thomas Jefferson Wertenbaker, Princeton: 1746-1896 (Princeton: Princeton University Press), 72.
11. "Princeton: Something of a Commencement at a Northern College," Montgomery (Alabama) Advertiser, July 1887, clipping in "1887" file, "Commencement" box 2, Princeton University Archives.
12. Interview with Robert Goheen, 8 January 1993.
13. Interview, 8 January 1993.
14. Press release, 14 June 1953, "1953" file, "Commencement" box 7, Princeton University Archives.
15. "The Baccalaureate Address," "1948" file, "Commencement" box 6, Princeton University Archives.
16. "Frontiers All Around Us," "1959" file, "Commencement" box 7, Princeton University Archives.

17. "The College of New Jersey, 129th Commencement," Princeton Press, 1 July 1876.
18. "The 145th Commencement" Princeton Press, 18 June, 1892, p. 2.
19. "Courage: To Feel Fear and Not Be Afraid," "1941" file, "Commencement" box 5, Princeton University Archives.
20. "Baccalaureate Address," "1934" file, "Commencement" box 4, Princeton University Archives.
21. "The President's Baccalaureate Address," "1951" file, "Commencement" box 7, Princeton University Archives.
22. "The President's Baccalaureate Address," "1951" file, "Commencement" box 7, Princeton University Archives.
23. "The President's Baccalaureate Address," "1951" file, "Commencement" box 7, Princeton University Archives.
24. Baccalaureate sermon, "1927" file, "Commencement" box 4, Princeton University Archives.
25. "Baccalaureate Sermon," The Daily Princetonian, June 1899.
26. "Baccalaureate Service," The Daily Princetonian, 13 June 1906.
27. "Baccalaureate Address of President Hibben," 11 June 1916, "1916" file, "Commencement" box 3, Princeton University Archives.
28. "The Baccalaureate Address," Princeton Alumni Weekly, 18 June 1919, 751-752.
29. "Frontiers All Around Us," "1959" file, "Commencement" box 7, Princeton University Archives.
30. "Commencement," Princeton Press, 21 June 1879.
31. "The Unending Contest," 12 June 1960, "1960" file, "Commencement" box 8, Princeton University Archives.
32. "Text of Baccalaureate Address," The Princeton Herald, 15 June 1949.
33. Princeton Alumni Weekly, 12 June 1912, 595.
34. "An Earnest of Greater Efforts," Princeton Alumni Weekly, 3 July 1942.

35. Cited in "An Earnest of Greater Efforts," Princeton Alumni Weekly, 3 July 1942.
36. "The Baccalaureate Address," Princeton Alumni Weekly, 19 June 1918, 821.
37. "The Baccalaureate Address," Princeton Alumni Weekly, 19 June 1918, 822.
38. "The Baccalaureate Address," Princeton Alumni Weekly, 19 June 1918, 821.
39. "The Baccalaureate Address," Princeton Alumni Weekly, 18 June 1919, 752.
40. "Baccalaureate Service," The Daily Princetonian, 13 June 1906.
41. "Frontiers All Around Us," "1959" file, "Commencement" box 7, Princeton University Archives.
42. "To Make a Better World," "1968" file, "Commencement" box 9, Princeton University Archives.
43. "Baccalaureate Address of President Hibben," 11 June 1916, "1916" file, "Commencement" box 3, Princeton University Archives.
44. "Keeping Faith With Them," Princeton Alumni Weekly, 18 June 1943.
45. "The Baccalaureate Address," "1948" file, "Commencement" box 6, Princeton University Archives.
46. "Frontiers All Around Us," "1959" file, "Commencement" box 7, Princeton University Archives.
47. "Baccalaureate Sermon," The Daily Princetonian, June 1899.
48. "Baccalaureate Address...", "1923" file, "Commencement" box 4, Princeton University Archives.
49. "Baccalaureate Sermon," "1930" file, "Commencement" box 4, Princeton University Archives.
50. "Baccalaureate address," "1934" file, "Commencement" box 4, Princeton University Archives.
51. "Courage: To Feel Fear and Not Be Afraid," "1941" file, "Commencement" box 5, Princeton University Archives.
52. "Frontiers All Around Us," "1959" file, "Commencement" box 7, Princeton University Archives.

53. "The Human Nature of a University," "1969" file, "Commencement" box 9, Princeton University Archives.
54. "To Make a Better World," "1968" file, "Commencement" box 9, Princeton University Archives.
55. Press release, 14 June 1953, "1953" file, "Commencement" box 7, Princeton University Archives.
56. "Commencement Week at Princeton," Philadelphia Public Ledger, 9 June 1902.
57. "The President's Baccalaureate Address," "1951" file, "Commencement" box 7, Princeton University Archives.
58. "Baccalaureate Sermon," The Daily Princetonian, June 1899.
59. "The University Man," "1961" file, "Commencement" box 8, Princeton University Archives.
60. "Courage: To Feel Fear and Not Be Afraid," "1941" file, "Commencement" box 5, Princeton University Archives.
61. "Baccalaureate address," "1934" file, "Commencement" box 6, Princeton University Archives.
62. "Dr. Dodds' Last Baccalaureate Address," Princeton Alumni Weekly, 5 July 1957.
63. "Baccalaureate Sermon," "1930" file, "Commencement" box 4, Princeton University Archives.
64. "Self-Possession," 13 June 1965, "1965" file, "Commencement" box 9, Princeton University Archives.
65. "Baccalaureate Address...", "1923" file, "Commencement" box 4, Princeton University Archives.
66. "Baccalaureate Address," "1937" file, "Commencement" box 4, Princeton University Archives.
67. "Courage: To Feel Fear and Not Be Afraid," "1941" file, "Commencement" box 5, Princeton University Archives.
68. "Self-Possession," 13 June 1965, "1965" file, "Commencement" box 9, Princeton University Archives.
69. "To Strike a Line of Purpose," 11 June 1967, "1967" file, "Commencement" box 9, Princeton University Archives.
70. Robert F. Goheen, "A Demanding Destiny," 6 June 1971, "1971" file, "Commencement" box 10, Princeton University Archives.

List of Baccalaureate speakers at Princeton University:

Until 1972, the baccalaureate speaker was the current President of the University. Beginning in 1973, outside speakers were invited. A list of these outside speaker follows, with information about the occupation of the speaker in parentheses where known.

- 1973: Rev. Dr. John B Coburn '36 (Charter Trustee)
- 1974: Rev. Thomas P. Stewart '51
- 1975: Prof. Gregory Vlastos (P.U. Philosophy Dep't)
- 1976: James I. McCord
- 1977: Theodore M. Hesburgh
- 1978: Gerson D. Cohen
- 1979: Redmond C. S. Finney '51
- 1980: Michael M. Stewart
- 1981: Sissela Bok
- 1982: Hon. Charles B. Renfrew '52
- 1983: Rev. Homer U. Ashby '68
- 1984: Hon. Paul Sarbanes '54 P'84
- 1985: Ira D. Silverman
- 1986: Gov. Thomas H. Kean '57
- 1987: George E. Rupp '64
- 1988: Patricia Shroeder (congresswoman from Colorado)
- 1989: Andrew Young
- 1990: Johnnetta Cole (president of Spelman College)
- 1991: William Crowe, Jr. *65
- 1992: Cokie Roberts
- 1993: Gary Trudeau (cartoonist)
- 1994: Wynton Marsalis (jazz trumpeter, artistic director of Lincoln Center)
- 1995: Jane Alexander (chair of National Endowment for the Arts)
- 1996: Bill Bradley '65 (note that Bill Clinton spoke at Commencement this year)
- 1997: Sen. William Frist '74 (Tenn.)
- 1998: Sen. Tom Harkin P'98 (D -- Iowa) and Ruth Harkin P'98

In 1998, Tom and Ruth Harkin (his wife) both spoke to honor 25 years of coeducation at Princeton. This is the first time that there have been two Baccalaureate speakers.