

Reassessing Yale's Cathedral Orgy

The Ecclesiastical Metaphor and the Sterling Memorial Library

Margaret M. Grubiak

The Sterling Memorial Library (1927–31) at Yale University employed the ecclesiastical metaphor to imagine a new place for religion in the modern university, where secular and scientific concerns increasingly overshadowed religion. Architect James Gamble Rogers patterned the neo-Gothic library after a cathedral, complete with an entrance nave, an Alma Mater altar piece, and a Gutenberg Bible relic. Yet the range of the building's interpretations, from religion as an omnipresent background to modern inquiry to a mockery of religion, reveals religion's transitional role in higher education in the twentieth century.

IN 1931, LESS THAN three weeks after the dedication of the Sterling Memorial Library at Yale University, Yale senior and future journalist William Harlan Hale gave a vivid and scathing account of the library's religious image in an article descriptively titled "Yale's Cathedral Orgy" (figs. 1 and 2):

A library? You would never recognize it when you saw it. Enter it—pass through a bastard version of the west portal of an abbey. Continue down the main hall, which is a precise copy of a nave with five bays. Observe the massive and unnecessary piers, the inconvenient but orthodox side aisles, the lofty transepts bristling with sanctity above and serial catalogues below. Advance to the high altar—a \$25,000 book-delivery desk; overhead, admire the rood screen, of utmost complexity and facility at catching dust, which has been cleverly placed to hide the important library clock from view. . . . Turn about and gaze at the triforium gallery above the vast nave; scan the splendid clerestory windows, heavy with

tracery and mullions, highly effective in minimizing the light, and sealed hermetically shut. Pass down the corridors, and cry out in rapt adoration of more color, more carving, more corbels, more plaques, balconies, chandeliers, wall brackets (electric, in the style of ancient torch-holders), more sacred splendors! And, while at last laboring to find a book, bow your head in holy ecstasy!¹

To Hale, the Sterling Memorial Library was an affront to modern life. Its architecture was not even a neutral background but an active negative agent subverting the very aims of the library. Playing off Yale's own motto, *Lux et veritas* (Light and truth), Hale famously remarked elsewhere, "There is not one suggestion of *Veritas* in the Sterling Library;—and for that matter there is precious little of *Lux*."² Moreover, the building seemingly denied the modern knowledge produced and consumed

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¹ William Harlan Hale, "Yale's Cathedral Orgy," *Nation*, April 29, 1931, 472. Hale, who later became a journalist and the voice of America during World War II, originally expressed his disdain for Yale's newfound Gothicism in the *Harkness Hoot*, an undergraduate magazine that he cofounded and that took its name in parody of James Gamble Rogers's neo-Gothic Harkness Memorial Quadrangle. For Hale's first lengthy commentary on Yale's Gothic turn, see his "Art vs. Yale University," *Harkness Hoot*, November 15, 1930, 17–32. See also Aaron Betsky, *James Gamble Rogers and the Architecture of Pragmatism*, American Monograph Series (New York: Architectural History Foundation, 1994), 58–60; and Vincent Scully, "Modern Architecture at Yale: A Memoir," in *Yale in New Haven: Architecture and Urbanism*, ed. Vincent Scully, Catherine Lynn, Erik Vogt, and Paul Goldberger (New Haven, CT: Yale University, 2004), 295.

² Hale, "Art vs. Yale University," 21.

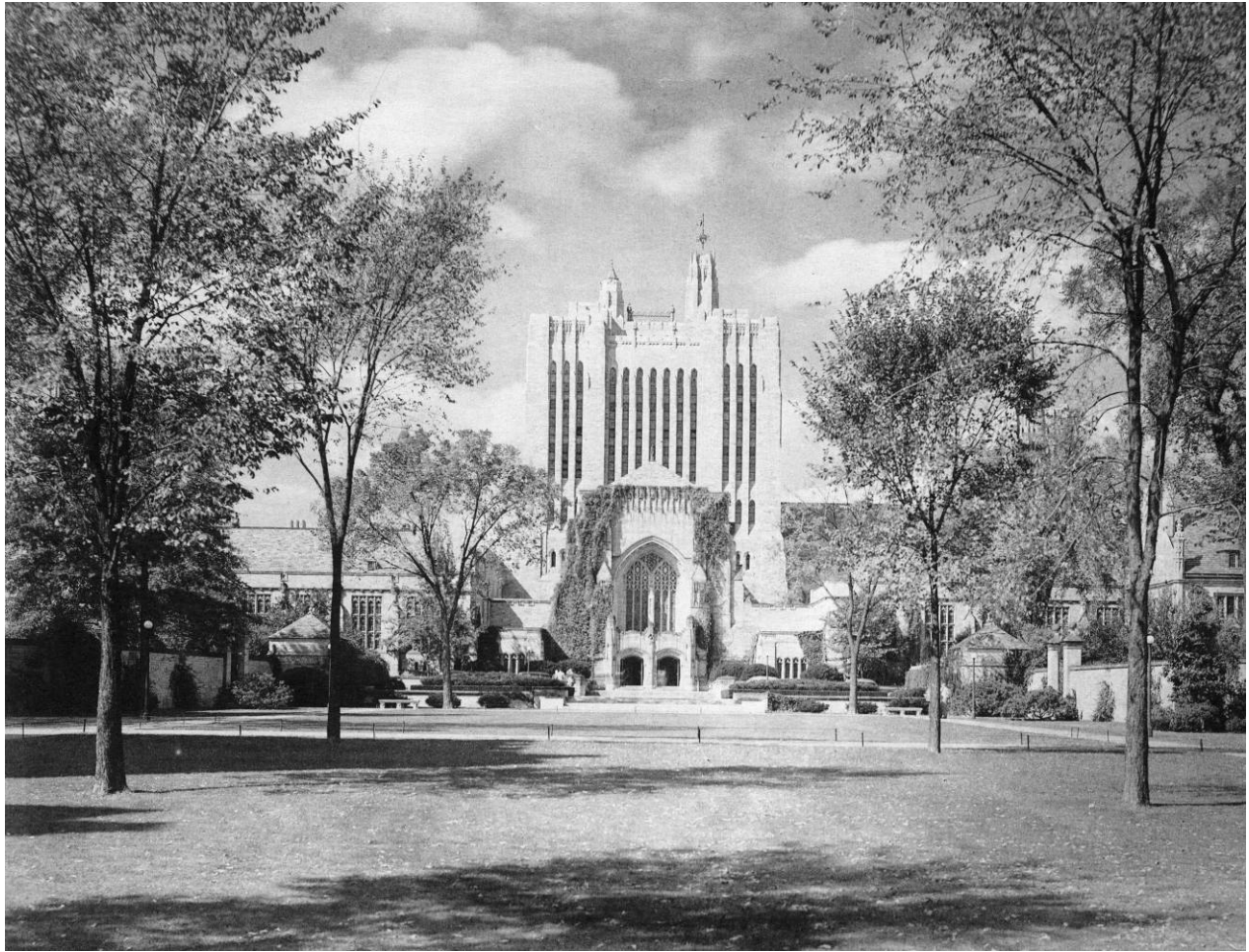


Fig. 1. James Gamble Rogers, architect, Sterling Memorial Library, Yale University, built 1927–31, photo late 1930s. (RU 696, Manuscripts and Archives, Yale University Library.)

within its walls. “A modern building constructed for purely modern needs,” he scolded, “has no excuse for going off in an orgy of meretricious medievalism and stale iconography.”³

Hale condemned the library’s architectural revivalism in the interest of promoting modern architecture, a movement that would gain widespread attention in the Museum of Modern Art’s 1932 “Modern Architecture” exhibition just one year after Hale’s biting review. But for Yale’s leaders and the library’s architect, James Gamble Rogers, the significance of constructing a library in the image of a Gothic cathedral overrode any desire to employ avant-garde architecture. At the library’s dedication, Yale President James Rowland Angell articulated the building’s ecclesiastical metaphor as a “temple of the mind” to protect the eternal

“sacred lamp of learning” and “holy torch of truth.” Most powerfully, Angell proclaimed, “Here is incarnate the intellectual and spiritual life of Yale.”⁴ These carefully chosen words, combined with the library’s neo-Gothic imagery, asserted that learning and truth possessed an everlasting connection to the divine, even for those library patrons whose subject was scientific, whose research approach was empirical, or whose work otherwise appeared to have little connection to religious concerns.

This attempt to preserve religion on campus was a carefully orchestrated response to the changing role of religion in the modern American university. As historians George Marsden, James Burtchaell, Julie Reuben, and others have explored,

³ Hale, “Yale’s Cathedral Orgy,” 472.

⁴ James Rowland Angell, “Response for the University,” in *Addresses at the Dedication of the Sterling Memorial Library at Yale University on 11 April 1931* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1931), 20.



Fig. 2. Entrance hall, Sterling Memorial Library, photo ca. 1931. (RU 620, Manuscripts and Archives, Yale University Library.)

the distancing of religion from higher education quickened in the twentieth century as science and empirical ways of knowing dominated intellectual pursuits.⁵ Although many universities had been supported by specific religious dominations—Harvard was originally Unitarian; Yale, Congregationalist; and King's College (later Columbia University), Anglican—by the nineteenth century these formal allegiances ended. The disestablishment of colleges

⁵ A number of scholars have examined the historical events that changed the position of religion within higher education. See James Tunstead Burtchaell, *The Dying of the Light: The Disengagement of Colleges and Universities from Their Christian Churches* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1998); George Marsden and Bradley J. Longfield, eds., *The Secularization of the Academy* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1992); George Marsden, *The Soul of the American University: From Protestant Establishment to Established Nonbelief* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1994); Julie A. Reuben, *The Making of the Modern University: Intellectual Transformation and the Marginalization of Morality* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1996); Jon H. Roberts and James Turner, *The Sacred and the Secular University* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2000); and Douglas Sloan, *Faith and Knowledge* (Louisville, KY: Knox, 1994). For an examination of the changes of religion within one institution, see esp. P. C. Kemeny, *Princeton in the Nation's Service: Religious Ideals and Educational Practice, 1868–1928* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1998).

from their founding denominations coincided with the drive toward modernity and secularization, as colleges assigned to train ministers transformed into universities devoted to the production of knowledge. By the interwar years in the twentieth century, religion faced an uncertain future on campus: no longer a dominant focus of academic inquiry, challenged by the emerging religious plurality of the student body, and yet still a desired component in students' moral formation. The Sterling Memorial Library emerged at this crossroad in the making of the modern Yale. If religion could no longer be the central aim of higher education, it nevertheless could form the backdrop to all university work, a reminder of the ultimate aim of all human inquiry. In casting the pursuit of knowledge in a religious image, the Sterling Memorial Library became library and cathedral.

Yet, however genuinely the Yale administration and James Gamble Rogers believed that the cathedral library successfully preserved a place for religion in the modern university, the library's ecclesiastical metaphor, embodied in the library's cathedral organization, Virgin Mary-like "altarpiece," and Gutenberg Bible relic, allowed multiple interpretations. For some, it reaffirmed religion's role amid great change in higher education. For others, it mocked religion, confirming that religion belonged to a past no longer relevant to modern life. William Harlan Hale's irreverent marrying of "cathedral" and "orgy" attests to the growing ascendancy of secular over religious life. These divergent views of the Sterling Memorial Library reflect religion's tenuous position in higher education in the twentieth century.

Architecture and Education in the Modern American University

Driven by generous donations, great increases in student admissions, and the desire to express a modern identity, American universities engaged in a large-scale building boom in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. Yale was no exception. Between the world wars, the Yale campus witnessed the construction of the Sterling Memorial Library, divinity school, graduate school, law school, gymnasium, scientific laboratories, hospital facilities, and a large system of residential colleges, among other projects. Bequests from the estate of John W. Sterling, the Yale alumnus after whom eight Yale buildings are named and to whom the library stands as a memorial, alone infused nearly \$23 million



Fig. 3. John Russell Pope, architect, Payne-Whitney Gymnasium, Yale University, 1932. (RU 612, Manuscripts and Archives, Yale University Library, © Yale University.)

into this building campaign between 1922 and 1932.⁶ The most expensive building on Yale's campus and the most expensive university library of the interwar period, the \$7.5 million Sterling Memorial Library was the crown jewel of the new Yale.⁷

Although Yale College had announced its name change to Yale University in 1886, the idea of the university would come to maturity through this early twentieth-century building program.⁸ The modern Yale was a fusion of neocolonial and neo-Gothic forms. Alongside the Sterling Memorial Library arose colonial and Gothic dormitories and the great Gothic Payne-Whitney Gymnasium, which earned the moniker "Cathedral of Sweat" (fig. 3).

⁶ Brooks Mather Kelly, *Yale: A History*, The Yale Scene: University Series 3 (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1974), 372–73.

⁷ Thomas Frederick O'Connor, "The Yale University Library, 1865–1931" (PhD diss., Columbia University, 1984), 493.

⁸ Patrick L. Pinnell, *The Campus Guide: Yale University* (New York: Princeton Architectural Press, 1999), 77.

For some such as William Harlan Hale, that the university employed a palette of revivalist architecture to announce its modern university status was more than anachronistic—it was criminal. But for the Yale administration, like those of Harvard, Princeton, the University of Chicago, and numerous other institutions building in the interwar years, modern architecture had not yet been tested, nor did it carry the necessary academic associations. These administrators and campus planners such as Ralph Adams Cram, John Russell Pope, and James Gamble Rogers instead turned to the Oxford and Cambridge universities' model to convey, as Paul Turner has argued, an aura of an intimate academic community focused on the development of character and shared values.⁹ Neo-Gothic and neocolonial architecture appealed to a sense of

⁹ Paul Venable Turner, *Campus: An American Planning Tradition*, rev. ed. (New York: Architectural History Foundation, 1990), 215.

tradition and stability that the modern American university eagerly sought, and, for many, such architecture did not undermine the very modern work occurring on campus.

Variations on Gothic architecture particularly had been a mainstay of collegiate architecture since the nineteenth century. Architects employed the Gothic for any number of buildings, not just religious spaces. Both Harvard's library Gore Hall (1838–41) and Yale's old library (1846), now called Dwight Memorial Hall, followed in the image of King's College Chapel at Cambridge University, a favorite model for American collegiate buildings, in what has been termed the "castellated" Gothic. The exuberant, polychromatic Victorian Gothic buildings of the post-Civil War years, such as Ware and Van Brunt's Memorial Hall (1878) at Harvard, gave way to a more staid and measured version of the Gothic. This modern Gothic or neo-Gothic architecture—spurred by the example of English émigré architect Henry Vaughan, the propaganda of Ralph Adams Cram, and the work of Walter Cope and John Stewardson at Bryn Mawr College, the University of Pennsylvania, and Princeton—dominated the American university well into the twentieth century.¹⁰ Yale's turn to this neo-Gothic came with full vigor in James Gamble Rogers's Harkness Memorial Quadrangle (1916–21). By the 1930s, the Sterling Memorial Library was only one of a number of neo-Gothic buildings that represented the new Yale.

Although constructing Gothic forms at first appears contradictory for institutions with a Protestant heritage, more important than historic religious associations was the fact that imitating Gothic architecture, particularly the Gothic architecture of Oxford and Cambridge universities, signaled an important correction to the German model of higher education. The German model, which Johns Hopkins University embodied at its founding in 1867, was the revolutionizing force in the creation of the modern American university. In the second half of the nineteenth century, Americans studying at German universities returned to the United States with the German ideal of pure research—the search for knowledge simply for knowledge's sake—as well as increased standards for scientific research, a focus on faculty scholarship, the importance of graduate education and professional schools, and a model of academic

freedom, including the elective system. Although American universities transformed these ideals for their own ends, the German model formed the basis for the modern American university, which privileged the unfettered pursuit of verifiable truth over all other aspects of education.¹¹

By contrast, the English model of educating the "whole man" focused squarely on the comprehensive formation of the undergraduate. American educators found at Oxford and Cambridge a system of education that cultivated students' entire development—intellectual, social, and spiritual—rather than emphasizing only intellectual specialization, as in the German model. The Oxbridge manner of education seemingly produced the ideal gentlemen student, possessed of a sound liberal education, widely read, and well mannered. This was the kind of student many American presidents such as Princeton's Woodrow Wilson and Yale's James Rowland Angell desired to create, even as the American university held strongly to the production of knowledge. Yale's colleges and Harvard's houses constructed in the 1920s and 1930s purposefully imitated the Oxbridge quadrangle to recreate an integrated intellectual and social life. Accompanying university chapels were to strengthen the spiritual life.¹² The Sterling Memorial Library, positioned at the head of Yale's Cross Campus, must be viewed as part of this Oxbridge movement. The library embodied the whole man theory of education and attempted to maintain religion within academic pursuits.

Proposing a Library and Chapel for Modern Yale

The remaking of Yale to conform to the Oxbridge pedagogical and architectural identity began in

¹¹ For the influence of the German model on American universities, see Laurence R. Veysey, *The Emergence of the American University* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1965), 125–33; and Marsden, *Soul of the American University*, 104, 153–54, 183–84. In addition to Veysey's work, the primary surveys of the development of the university ideal in the United States are Richard Hofstadter and Walter P. Metzger, *The Development of Academic Freedom in the United States* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1955); Frederick Rudolph, *The American College and University: A History* (New York: Knopf, 1962); and John R. Thelin, *A History of American Higher Education* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2004).

¹² Alex Duke, "The Whole Man and the Gentleman Scholar," in *Importing Oxbridge: English Residential Colleges and American Universities* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1996), 39–64. Duke is careful to point out that what American educators perceived to be the educational system at Oxford and Cambridge was actually different from the reality, a difference between what Duke terms the perceived and the noumenal past.

¹⁰ For the development of this modern Gothic, see esp. Paul Venable Turner, "The Monastic Quadrangle and Collegiate Ideals," chap. 5, in *ibid.*, 215–47.

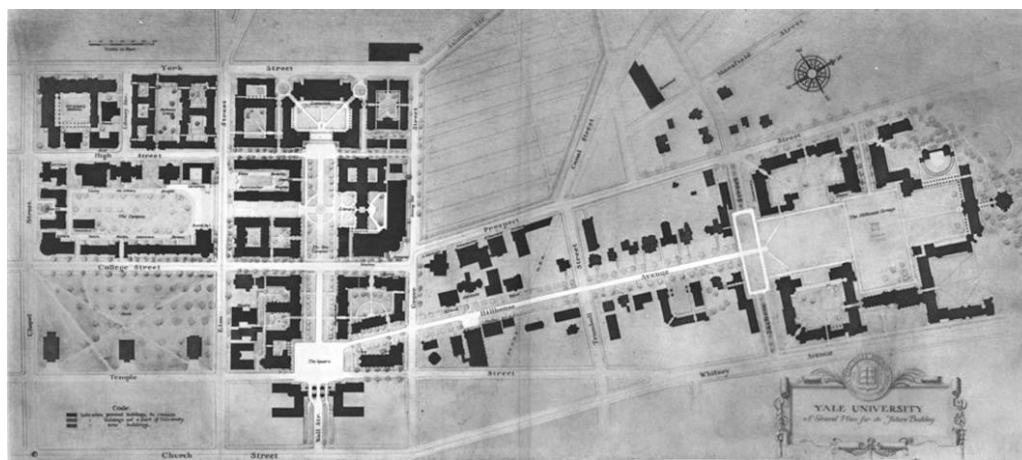


Fig. 4. John Russell Pope, 1919 campus plan for Yale University (Cross Campus at center left). From John Russell Pope, *Yale University: A Plan for Its Future Building* (New York: Cheltenham, 1919). (RU 703, Manuscripts and Archives, Yale University Library.)

earnest with the university's first master plan, created by John Russell Pope in 1919 and published in a folio extravagantly illustrated by Otto Eggers.¹³ Pope's quintessentially Beaux-Arts plan hinged on a broad new east-west axis called Cross Campus, the new center of Yale (fig. 4). Here Pope positioned two prominent buildings: a new gymnasium and a new library. Not included on this campus center was a new chapel. (Pope instead suggested that Yale's old library be renovated as a small chapel space—a proposal later carried out.) Yet Pope had, in effect, positioned religion at the new Yale center in the architecture of his proposed library. Continuing the long association of Yale libraries with religious structures, Pope modeled his new Yale library on King's College Chapel at Cambridge University (fig. 5).¹⁴ Eggers's render-

ing of the library so focused on the churchly effect of the fan vaults, even to the exclusion of any representation of books, that the drawing's label was the only indication that the building was not a church but a library (fig. 6). This design foreshadowed the ecclesiastical metaphor that Sterling Memorial Library was to employ.

An advisory committee appointed by the Yale Corporation to review Pope's master plan suggested a clearer articulation of priorities for the new Yale center. In 1920, architects Paul Philippe Cret, William Adams Delano, and Bertram Grosvenor Goodhue, the latter of whom was chosen as the initial architect of the Sterling Memorial Library, recommended that a new chapel and library positioned across from one another should occupy the center of Yale (fig. 7).¹⁵ The juxtaposition of the chapel and library communicated the university's values. As the Yale Corporation Architectural Plan Committee stated simply, "The buildings which represent most clearly and strongly the educational ideals of Yale are the new Chapel and the Library. For that reason, they should be placed in very prominent positions on the new Campus."¹⁶ The pairing of the chapel and the library became a common campus planning pattern in the late

¹³ John Russell Pope, *Yale University: A Plan for Its Future Building* (New York: Cheltenham, 1919). For a discussion of this plan, see Elizabeth Riorden, "The Campus Plans of John Russell Pope," *Precis* 3 (1991): 78–79; Steven McLeod Bedford, *John Russell Pope: Architect of Empire* (New York: Rizzoli, 1998), 160–63; Pinnell, *Campus Guide*, 77–79; and Erik Vogt, "A New Yale: The Pope Plan of 1919," in Scully et al., *Yale in New Haven*, 248–61.

¹⁴ Since the early eighteenth century, Yale's library continuously occupied a building that had ties to a chapel, whether literally or by association. From 1717 to 1843, the library occupied space over the chapel in Yale's first college building, on the second floor of the First Chapel, on the third floor of the chapel-like Connecticut Lyceum, and finally in the attic of the Second Chapel. In 1843, the library moved to its own structure, originally named the Yale College Library and designed by architect Henry Austin, complete with central nave, cluster columns, clerestory lighting, and book stacks with the collection of two of Yale's religious societies tucked into the side aisles. It was this library that Charles Z. Klauder easily remodeled into a chapel with the insertion of stained glass windows and a raised altar in 1931. See Susan Ryan, "The Architecture of James Gamble Rogers at Yale University," *Perspecta* 18 (1982): 33.

¹⁵ Bertram G. Goodhue, William Adams Delano, and Paul P. Cret, memorandum to the Yale Corporation's Committee on Architectural Plan, February 7, 1920, RU 30, YRG 1-B, Yale Corporation Committee on Architectural Plan, accession (acc.) no. 1932-A-007, box 2, folder 23, Manuscripts and Archives, Yale University Library. See also Vogt, "New Yale," 257–58.

¹⁶ Report of Architectural Plan Committee, n.d. [ca. 1920], RU 30, YRG 1-B, Yale Corporation Committee on Architecture Plan, acc. no. 1932-A-007, box 1, folder 4, Manuscripts and Archives, Yale University Library.



Fig. 5. Otto Eggers, drawing of John Russell Pope's proposed new Yale University library. From *The Architecture of John Russell Pope*, vol. 1 (New York: Helburn, 1925), pl. 39.

nineteenth and early twentieth centuries precisely because of its articulation of the university mission, one that cared for both the intellectual and the spiritual life. In 1925, the Harvard Board of Overseers noted that the siting of the new Harvard Memorial Church (1931) directly across from Widener Library at the heart of Harvard Yard

“expresses admirably the ideal fundamental to the University, with the chapel and the library facing each other.”¹⁷ The placement of the chapels at

¹⁷ “Report of the Committee to Visit Appleton Chapel and Phillips Brooks House,” February 24, 1925, 32, UAI. 5.160 Office of the President, Records of Abbott Lawrence Lowell, series 1922–25, folder 192, Harvard University Archives, Harvard Library.

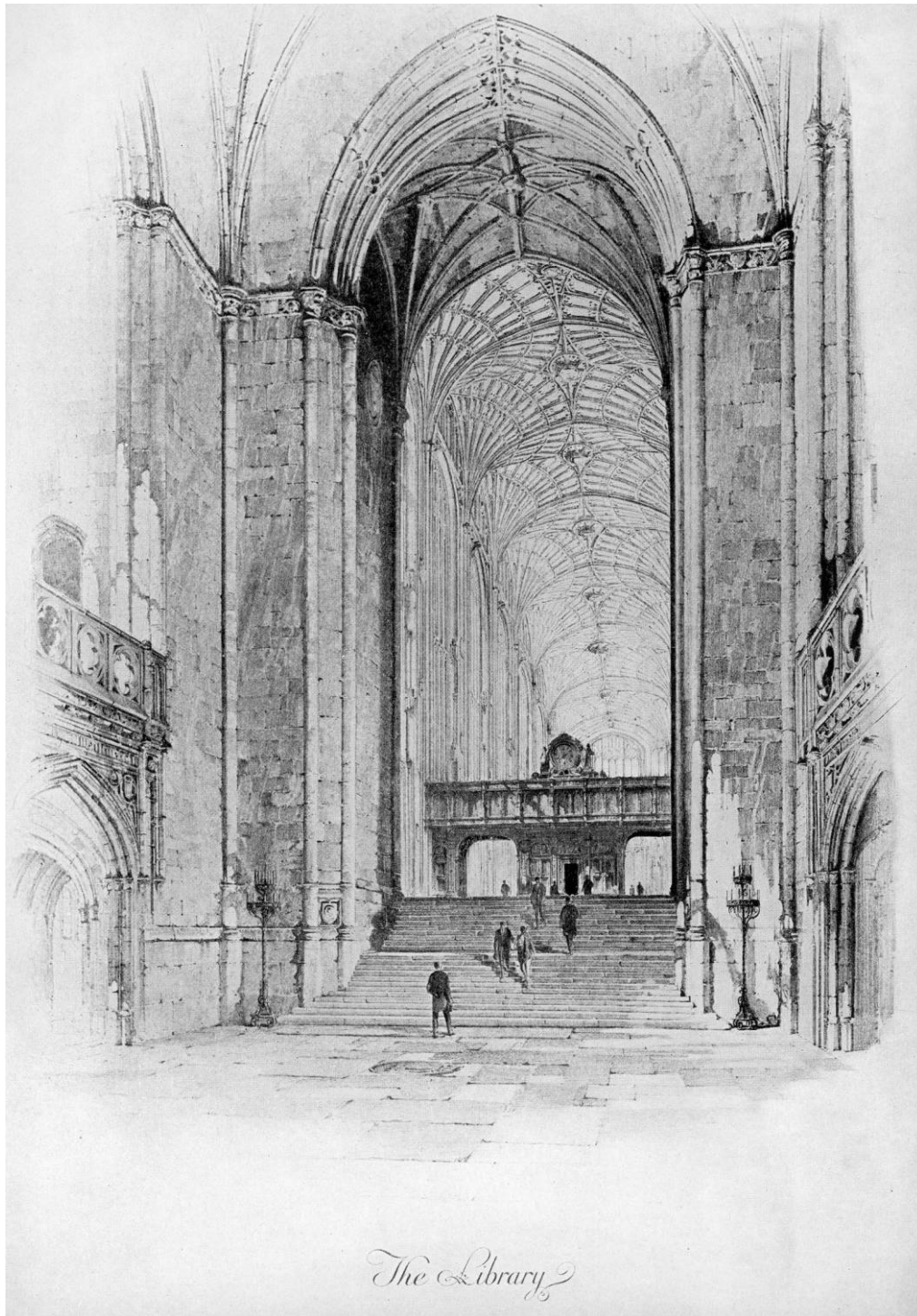


Fig. 6. Interior view of Pope's proposed library. From *The Architecture of John Russell Pope*, vol. 1 (New York: Helburn, 1925), pl. 40.

Princeton University and the University of Chicago, both dedicated in 1928, also purposefully took into account the close proximity to the library.

The redesign and implementation of Yale's master plan fell to architect James Gamble Rogers, who

assumed the mantle of consulting architect to Yale's general plan in November 1920. Over the next three years, the same years in which Goodhue was working on his plans for the Sterling Memorial Library, Rogers produced a series of university

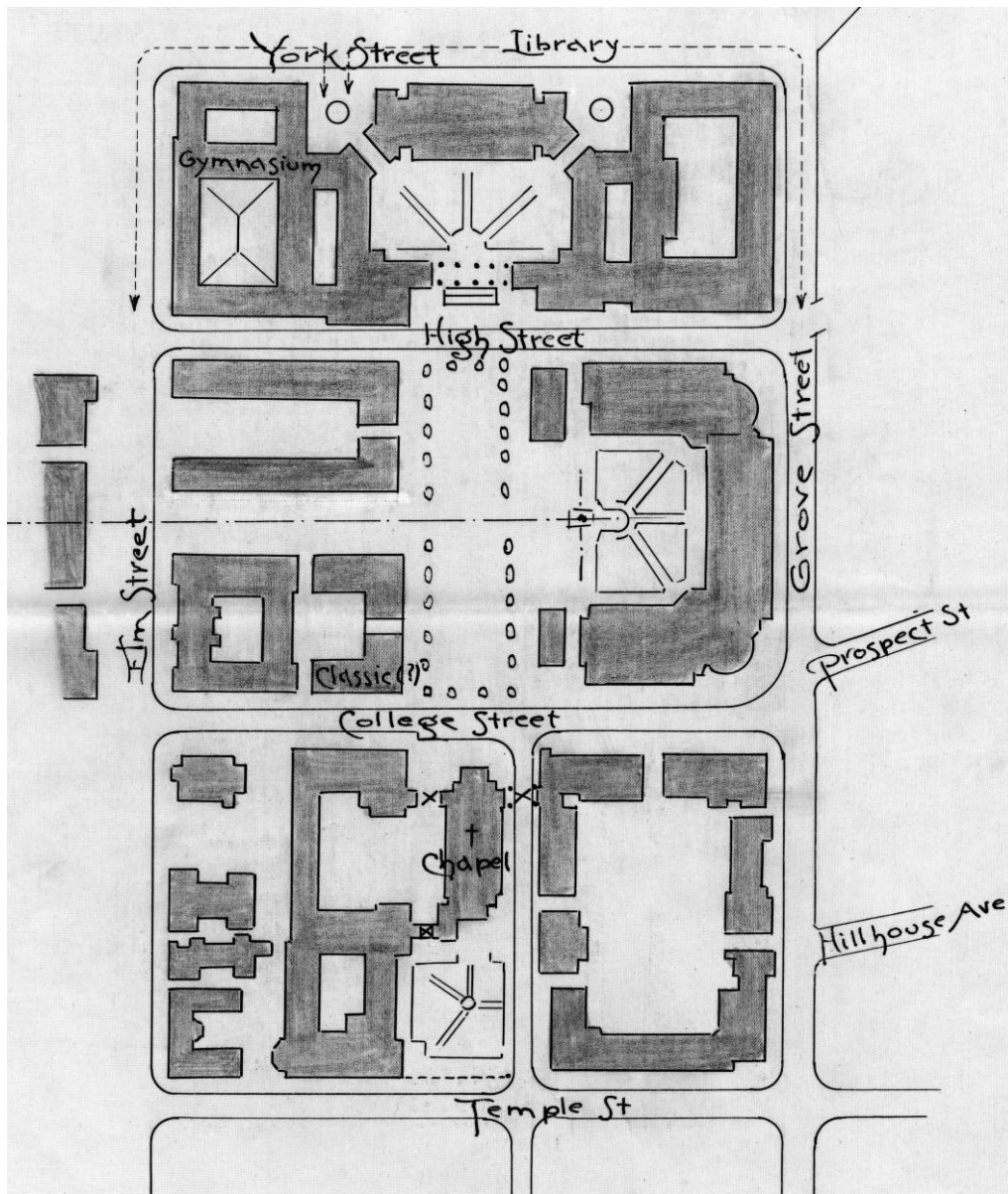


Fig. 7. Paul Cret, Bertram Grosvenor Goodhue, and William Adams Delano, architects, revised plan for Cross Campus, 1920. (RU 49, Manuscripts and Archives, Yale University Library.)

schemes that closely followed the recommendations of the advisory committee for the new Cross Campus.¹⁸ At the western end of the Cross Campus axis along High Street, Rogers positioned the Sterling Memorial Library at the head of a rectangular green lined with dormitories and classrooms. Balancing the library at the eastern end of

the quadrangle was to be a chapel of dizzying dimensions (fig. 8). Rogers sketched a length of 351 feet and a width of 90 feet, far surpassing the 290-by-40 foot outline of Cambridge University's King's College Chapel. The chapel's proposed 5,000-seat capacity, considerably larger than the 2,000-seat chapels at Princeton and the University of Chicago completed in 1928, would have placed it among the largest university chapels in the world.¹⁹

¹⁸ For a discussion on James Gamble Rogers and his role in the development of the Yale campus, see esp. Betsy, *James Gamble Rogers and the Architecture of Pragmatism*, 115–18. For Rogers's series of campus plan drawings, see RU 1, YRG 46-A, Yale Architectural Archives, film nos. 2140–44, 3532, and 9748, Manuscripts and Archives, Yale University Library.

¹⁹ According to President Angell, the 5,000-seat capacity was preferred by James Gamble Rogers, although another committee suggested that the new chapel not seat more than 2,500. See

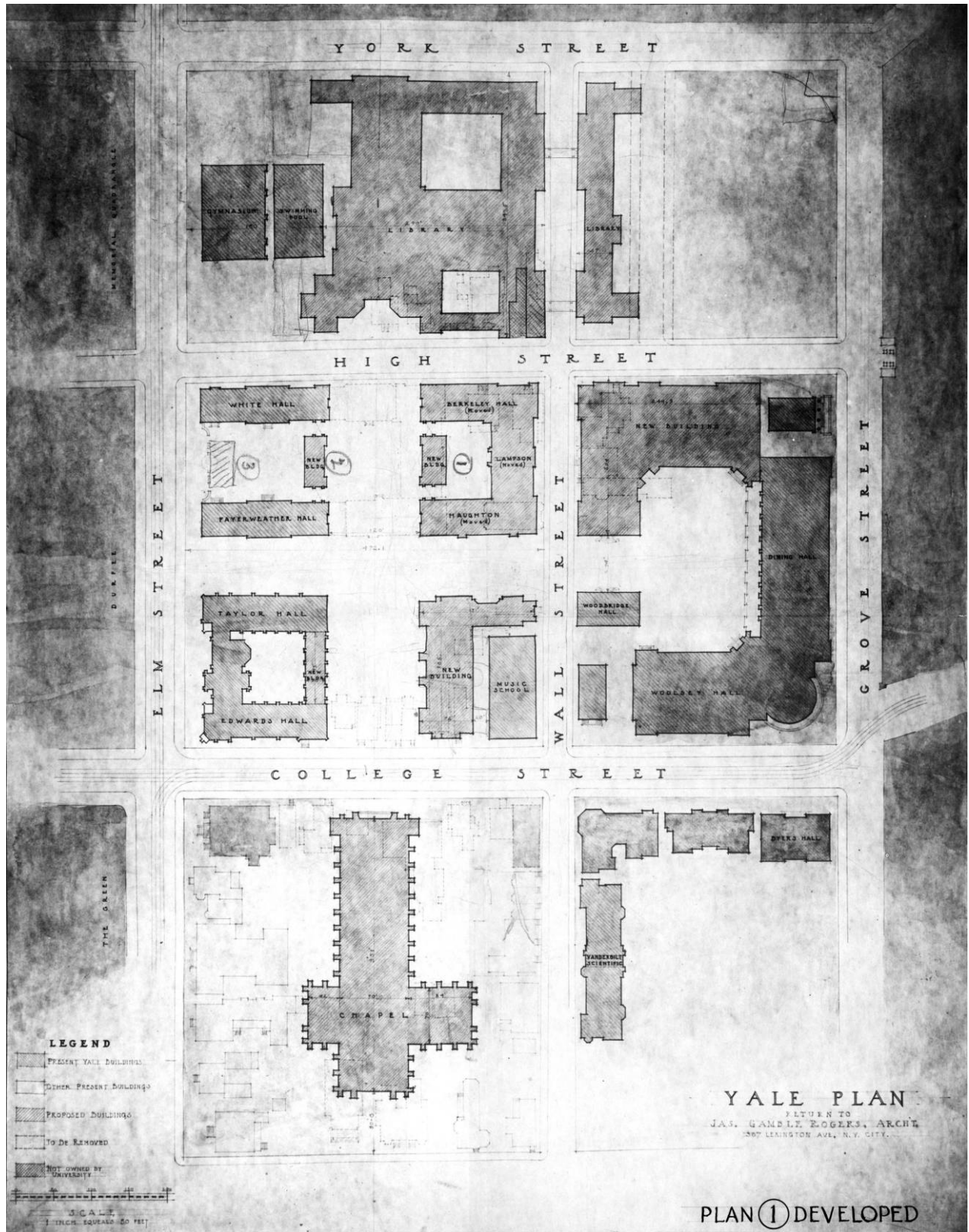


Fig. 8. James Gamble Rogers, revised plan for Cross Campus showing a chapel (bottom) across from the Sterling Memorial Library (top), ca. 1924. (RU 1, Manuscripts and Archives, Yale University Library.)

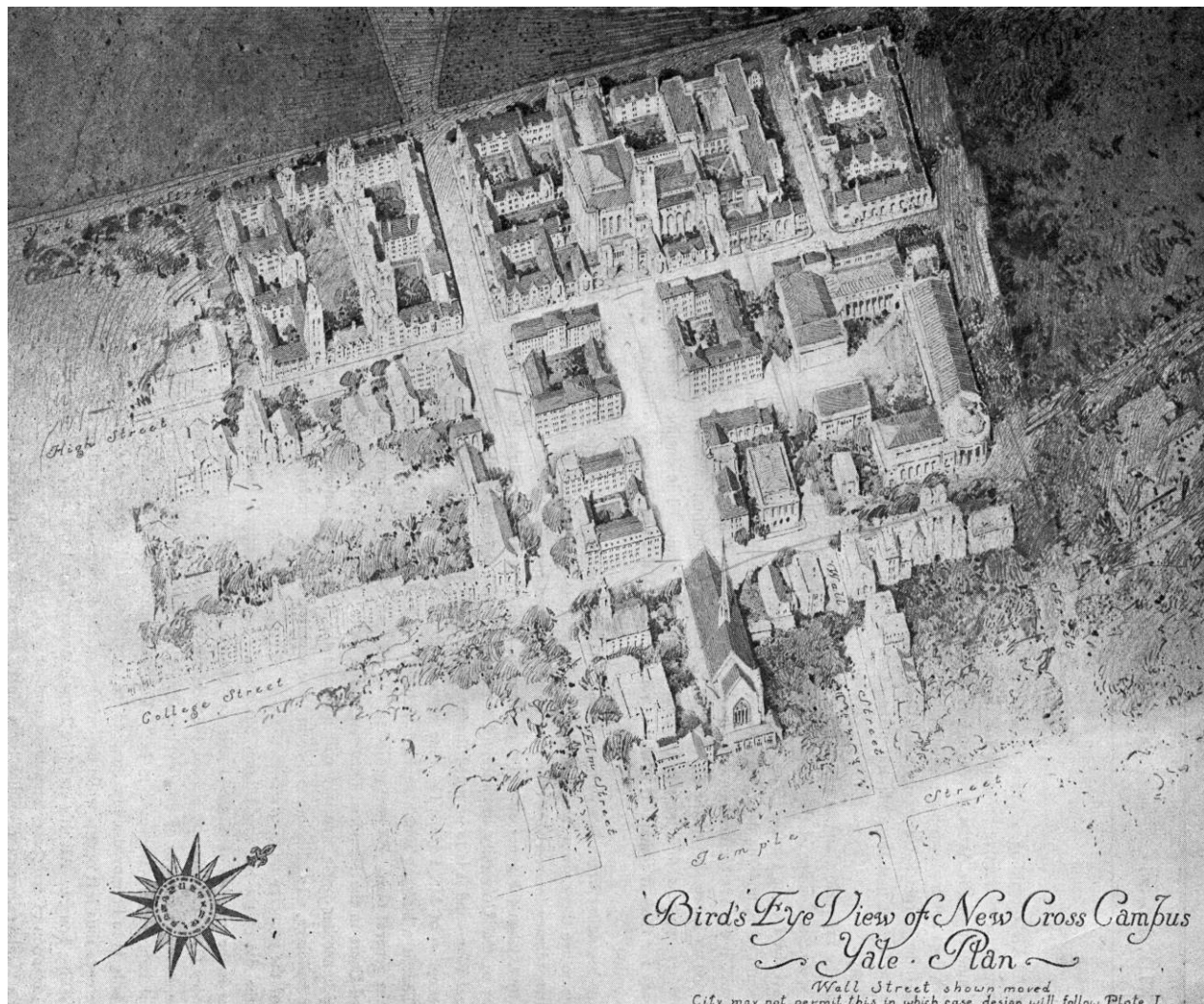


Fig. 9. James Gamble Rogers, "Bird's Eye View of New Cross Campus," perspective view of proposed chapel on Cross Campus, 1924. From "The Plan for the Physical Development of Yale University," *Yale Alumni Weekly*, February 1, 1924, 524. (Manuscripts and Archives, Yale University Library.)

The Latin-cross form, ten-bay nave, and neo-Gothic image assured that the chapel was to be in keeping with the other buildings of Cross Campus (fig. 9). A perspective view published in the *Yale Alumni Weekly* illustrates that the chapel was conceived as a central element of Cross Campus, a foil to Sterling Memorial Library and the representation of religion at the university center (fig. 10).

Although construction of the Sterling Memorial Library was assured by a large donation from the estate of John W. Sterling, the future of a new Yale chapel rested on the outcome of the debate over the

mandatory chapel attendance policy, which by the 1920s had reached a breaking point. Compulsory chapel attendance had been a long-standing Yale tradition since the college's founding in 1701, but by the early twentieth century the services had become, by many accounts, dismal events. Students arrived at chapel ten to fifteen minutes late, some only half dressed with overcoats over their pajamas. Some read the newspaper and completed their homework during the service.²⁰ Battell Chapel, a Victorian Gothic structure and Yale's largest chapel space, could no longer hold all of Yale's undergraduates at once, forcing a divided worship schedule that undermined the communal intention of

James Rowland Angell to Henry Sloane Coffin, February 7, 1928, RU 24, YRG 2-A, President's Office, James Rowland Angell Presidential Records, 1921-37, acc. no. 1937-A-004, box 42, folder 449, Manuscripts and Archives, Yale University Library.

²⁰ George Wilson Pierson, *Yale College: An Educational History, 1871-1921* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1952), 12-13.



Fig. 10. James Gamble Rogers, proposed chapel with steeple opposite Sterling Memorial Library, 1924. From "The Plan for the Physical Development of Yale University," *Yale Alumni Weekly*, February 1, 1924, 526. (Manuscripts and Archives, Yale University Library.)

compulsory worship.²¹ The increasing religious plurality of the student body further diminished the significant religious content of the services; the former chairman of the *Yale Daily News* claimed that the services had become meaningless in the attempt to offend no one religion.²²

Yale alumnus and football hero Frank Butterworth wrote in a petition to end Yale's compulsory chapel, "The system of compulsory chapel is tending to do more harm to religion than good. Our chapel is more a mockery of a religious atmosphere and

service than a reality, and so hurts."²³ By abolishing mandatory worship and instituting a voluntary policy, many believed that an authenticity would be returned to the worship services. With a voluntary worship policy, one *Yale Daily News* editorial proclaimed, "Instead of being the worse than failures they now are, our services will be real, sincere gatherings, with an entirely new quality about them—a religious quality."²⁴

In May 1926, the Yale Corporation, with the support of many alumni, faculty, and students, ended compulsory chapel attendance wholesale. This announcement, made forty years after Harvard first abolished mandatory chapel in 1886, buoyed efforts at other universities such as Princeton and

²¹ See Carl Lohmann to Judge Makepeace, April 15, 1926, RU 164, Records of the Yale Corporation, group 1-F, series 1, box 6, folder 85, Manuscripts and Archives, Yale University Library.

²² Former *Yale Daily News* Chairman Carlos F. Stoddard said in 1926, "On Sundays the gathering loses whatever religious significance it might hold since the service must not offend any number of faiths. The natural and inevitable result is that while it doesn't offend any faith, neither can it appeal to any faith" (as quoted in Ralph Henry Gabriel, *Religion and Learning at Yale: The Church of Christ in the College and University, 1757-1957* [New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1958], 227).

²³ As quoted in "Assails Yale's Chapel," *New York Times*, January 4, 1926, 7.

²⁴ As quoted in Bradley J. Longfield, "For God, for Country, and for Yale': Yale, Religion, and Higher Education between the World Wars," in Marsden and Longfield, *Secularization of the Academy*, 152.

the University of Chicago to also diminish the practice. Yet President James Rowland Angell and the Yale Corporation cast the abolishment of mandatory chapel in terms of saving religion, not abandoning it. Angell acknowledged that the ending of compulsory chapel suggested “the final secularizing of the college, its flouting of the clear words of its charter, its desertion of the old loyalties, and its definite commitment to the mammon of unrighteousness.” Still, he argued that “the true interests of religion would be more effectively promoted if . . . men were left to decide for themselves in what way they would express their religious interests.”²⁵

To indicate Yale's commitment to religion and to improving religious life on the campus, President Angell reaffirmed the university's commitment to developing the undergraduate department of religion, maintaining Yale's Church of Christ, and supporting student religious organizations. In an effort to gain funding for a new chapel, Angell also called “to the attention of the friends of the University the desirability of a suitable chapel building where voluntary services may be held.”²⁶ Angell intimated that the university still needed a new chapel, even with the compulsory requirement gone, saying “voluntary services, particularly if a beautiful chapel can be secured for them” along with the other measures to support religion “will promote a finer religious attitude on the part of the undergraduates, and more than compensate them for the loss of the ancient tradition of compulsory worship.”²⁷

Yet ultimately no donor came forward to fund a new Yale chapel. University benefactors such as the Sterling estate, Edward Harkness, and John D. Rockefeller directed their money to other building projects and memorials. With the ending of compulsory chapel, the pressing need for a new chapel vanished and made James Gamble Rogers's 5,000-seat chapel proposal seem foolish. A 1928 renovation of Battell Chapel addressed some of the complaints about the architecturally poor worship space. Architect Charles Z. Klauder's 1931 conversion of the old Yale Library into Dwight Hall, which included a small chapel and offices for the University Christian Association, accommodated smaller voluntary worship services.

James Gamble Rogers, however, strongly resisted the idea that religion would have no architectural

representation at Yale's center. With no donor for a new chapel, Rogers turned toward the possibility of placing the new Yale Divinity School quadrangle opposite the library on Cross Campus as one last attempt to place a religious building at the heart of Yale. Rogers agreed with John Farwell, the chairman of Yale's Architectural Plan Committee, that positioning the new Divinity School quadrangle opposite the Sterling Memorial Library would “indicate the spiritual center of the university in balance with the library, at the other end of the Cross campus, expressing the intellectual center.” Rogers asserted, “Of course, I never have given up the belief that a chapel should be in the center of our university,” but he felt that “the divinity school very prominently located would express at least in a minor way that there existed in our university a little, anyhow, even if not enough of the spiritual side of our life.”²⁸

Yet with the Divinity School's final placement on a hilltop nearly a mile from Cross Campus, the result of optimistic visions of the school's future growth, no traditionally religious structure would find its way onto Yale's center. The Sterling Memorial Library would remain the principle monumental building on Cross Campus.²⁹ For Rogers, then immersed in the designs for the library following the death of Bertram Grosvenor Goodhue, the desire to have a religious presence at the heart of Yale persisted. Rogers preserved religion, or at least a version of it, at the Yale center by creating a new kind of sacred space for the modern American university—a cathedral library laden with quasi-religious iconography.

²⁸ James Gamble Rogers to John Farwell, August 2, 1928, RU 30, RG 1-B, Yale Corporation Records of Committee on Architectural Plan 1913–31, acc. no. 1932-A-007, box 2, folder 19, Manuscripts and Archives, Yale University Library. Rogers reasoned that the construction of the Divinity School quadrangle across from the library “would emphasize the idea of religion, just as we intended to do in case the Chapel was put there.”

²⁹ One other proposal for a building across from the Sterling Memorial Library also never came to fruition. In the 1950s, Eero Saarinen, along with the Office of Douglas Orr and Paul Schweikher, Architects, undertook another long-range campus plan study for Yale. For Cross Campus, they suggested that “a tall building . . . perhaps in the form of a tower containing faculty offices” surrounded by lower rectilinear buildings be constructed on the axis opposite Sterling Memorial Library. See “Yale University, Long-Range Planning,” typescript, n.d. [marked received November 14, 1957], RU 22, RG 2-A, President's Office, Records of A. Whitney Griswold, acc. no. 1963-A-002, box 65, folder 628, Manuscripts and Archives, Yale University Library. A drawing of this tower is published in Eeva-Liisa Pelkonen and Donald Albrecht, eds., *Eero Saarinen: Shaping the Future* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2006), 167.

²⁵ As quoted in “Testing Voluntary Chapel at Yale,” *Literary Digest*, October 30, 1926, 31.

²⁶ As quoted in Gabriel, *Religion and Learning at Yale*, 228.

²⁷ As quoted in “Ending Compulsory Chapel at Yale,” *Literary Digest*, May 29, 1926, 32.

Library as Skyscraper and Cathedral

The Sterling Memorial Library's *parti* (French architectural term meaning the organization of the building's plan and how it unfolds) reveals Rogers's attempt to meld multiple identities within one structure. The library's organization acknowledged the tensions at work in the modern university: revealed and empirical, old and new, traditional and modern, conservative and progressive, divine and human. Yale University Librarian Andrew Keogh identified such tensions when he described the building "as efficient as an up-to-date factory and as beautiful as a cathedral."³⁰ Wilhelm Munthe, a Norwegian librarian commenting in the 1930s, called the library "a combination of skyscraper, cathedral, and cloister."³¹ These descriptions focused on the two outstanding features of the large library complex: the modern book stack tower and the ecclesiastical entrance sequence. These distinctive spaces both mirrored the tensions of the modern university and attempted to reconcile them.

The library's book stack tower, first proposed by Goodhue in his original designs and retained by Rogers, celebrated the stacks, rather than hiding them (see fig. 1). At sixteen stories and 150 feet tall, the tower was a "book skyscraper," the library's most modern element.³² Goodhue and Rogers drew on other architectural precedents to create this skyscraper library. The vertical organization of the tower's windows recalled Goodhue's entry in the 1922 Chicago Tribune tower competition, which Rogers had also entered, as well as Goodhue's design for the Nebraska state capitol.³³ In addition to capturing the modern zeitgeist typified by the American skyscraper, the library tower became a leitmotif in collegiate architecture as universities struggled to house increasing numbers of books and collections. Charles Z. Klauder's Cathedral of Learning (1924–37) at the University of Pitts-

³⁰ As quoted in Betsky, *James Gamble Rogers and the Architecture of Pragmatism*, 121.

³¹ Wilhelm Munthe, "A Norwegian Impression of the Building," *Yale University Library Gazette* 6 (January 1932): 56, as quoted in O'Connor, "Yale University Library, 1865–1931," 552.

³² Munthe, "Norwegian Impression of the Building," 58. Hugh Ferriss's rendering of Goodhue's early library design highlighted the stack tower literally, depicting a white mass rising out of the darkness of its earthy anchor. For a reproduction of Ferriss's drawing, see Scully et al., *Yale in New Haven*, 274.

³³ For Goodhue's entry to the Chicago Tribune Tower competition, see Katherine Solomonson, *The Chicago Tribune Tower Competition: Skyscraper Design and Cultural Change in the 1920s* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2001), 219–20.



Fig. 11. Henry van de Velde, architect, book tower (*Boekentoren*), Ghent University, Ghent, Belgium, 1933. (Photo, Margaret M. Grubiak.)

burgh, G. G. Scott's Cambridge University Library (1931–34), Henry van de Velde's book tower (1933) at Ghent University, and Paul Cret's University of Texas tower (1937) also employed the skyscraper model, although with different stylistic effects, as an innovative solution to accommodating the products of modern knowledge (fig. 11).³⁴

The Sterling Memorial Library's medieval stone cladding and picturesque roofline belied the rational, modern structure underneath. William Harlan Hale relayed the story of a "well-known modern Swedish architect," presumably Le Corbusier, who was crestfallen while visiting the university when he learned that the tower of steel girders, which he proclaimed as "something really modern at Yale," was to be covered with stone instead of glass.³⁵ Hale

³⁴ For a discussion on the development of university libraries in this "golden age," see Dale Allen Gyure, "The Heart of the University: A History of the Library as an Architectural Symbol of American Higher Education," *Winterthur Portfolio* 42 (Summer/Autumn 2008): 118–23.

³⁵ Hale, "Art vs. Yale University," 20.

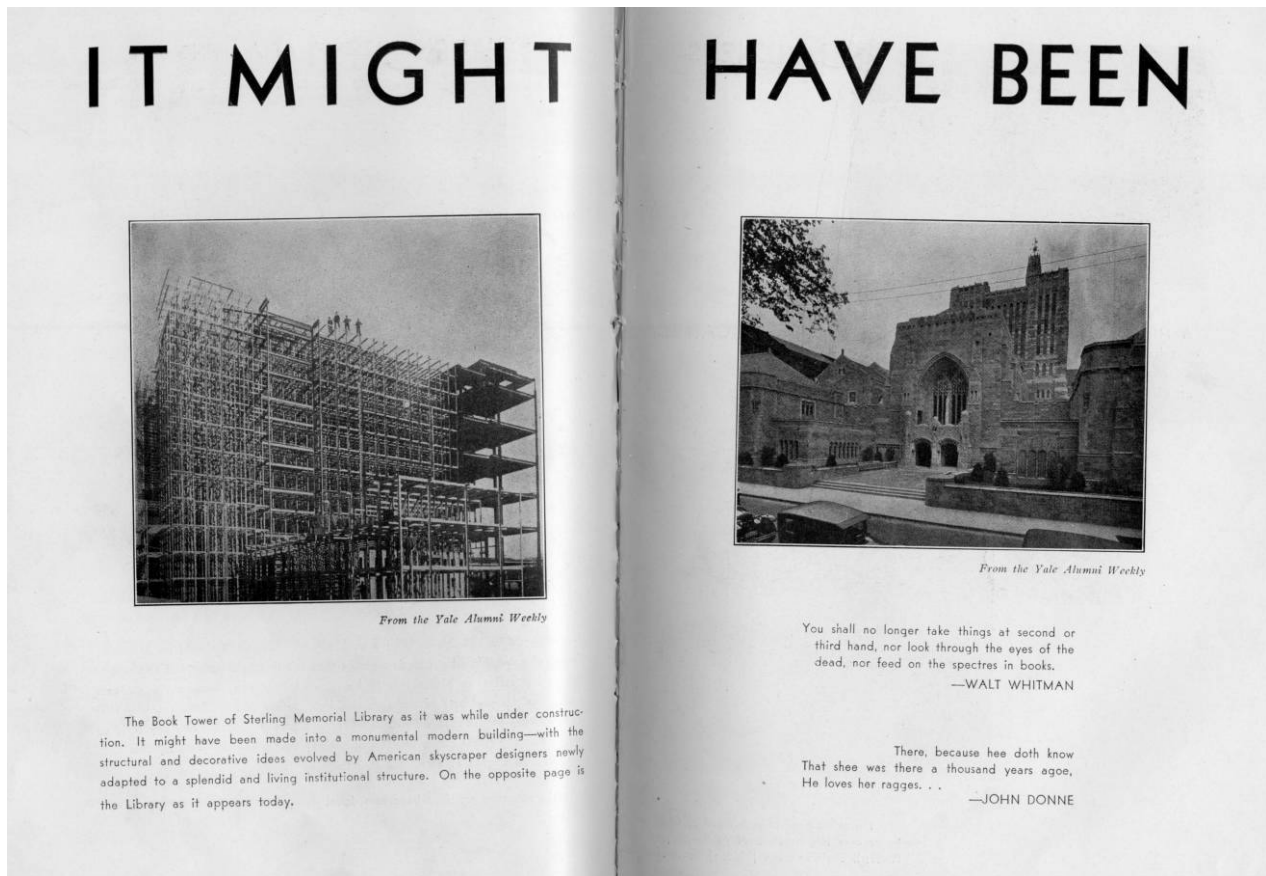


Fig. 12. William Harlan Hale, "IT MIGHT HAVE BEEN." From the *Harkness Hoot*, November 15, 1930, 26–27. (Manuscripts and Archives, Yale University Library.)

published a photograph of the book stack tower under construction in the *Harkness Hoot* as an example of what modern architecture at Yale could be: structure frankly expressed, with little ornamentation, and certainly no historicizing cladding (fig. 12). Above his juxtaposition of this photograph with an image of the completed library was the mournful header, "IT MIGHT HAVE BEEN."³⁶

The book stack tower further symbolized the ascendancy of the laboratory in the modern university. As one description stated, "The library is a working laboratory in the true sense of the word, and the bookstack tower is the heart of the structure, bringing readers and books quickly and easily together."³⁷ The tower included 300 study carrels as well as seminar rooms for students to discover, analyze, and invent in close proximity to their research subjects, while elevators and pneumatic

tubes carried materials from the tower to the delivery desk. The tower epitomized the production of new knowledge the modern university had come to embody.

From this perspective, the symbolism the stacks carried was not of ages past but rather of knowledge's relation to modern life. Munthe asserted that the tower "overlooks the town as a symbol that the book is a power-factor in modern society."³⁸ The book skyscraper challenges the steeples of the churches on the New Haven Green for dominance in the skyline, visually asserting human endeavors within a landscape of godly aspirations. At the center of Cross Campus, elevated for all to see, the vast store of human knowledge was celebrated. For British librarian and sometimes-playwright Louis Stanley Jast, the stacks rose above the messiness of modern life to proclaim humanity's collective knowledge: "Then hail! / Thou mighty pile of books, thou glorious thrust / Of learning above

³⁶ Ibid., 26–27.

³⁷ "The Bookstack Tower," *Yale University Library Gazette* 5, no. 4 (April 1931): 77.

³⁸ Munthe, "Norwegian Impression of the Building," 58.

moil and rage and dust, / Wisdom's uplifted finger, soul of Yale!"³⁹

For all its external expressiveness, the book stack tower finds little acknowledgment in the library's interior; students reach the book stacks by a rather inconspicuous elevator behind the delivery desk. Rather, the overwhelming experience of the interior is the sensory experience of library-cum-cathedral that William Harlan Hale's description so vividly recreates. Rogers cunningly adapted the organization of a cathedral to the purposes of the library. The book stack tower visually recedes as the library patron approaches what Hale termed the "bastard" abbey portal within the library's smaller entrance tower on the Cross Campus lawn. From this dim, compressed entrance defined by arches and heavy carvings, students, faculty, and visitors are released into the Gothic glory of the library's entrance hall. The walls of the soaring, five-bay nave, formed by robust stone columns supporting pointed arches, follow the customary cathedral division of arcade, triforium, and clerestory (see fig. 2). The crossing and transepts complete the familiar ecclesiastical pattern, and the nearby cloister and courtyard suggest a monastic compound (fig. 13). Although hushed voices within a library are common, here the reason for a reverential demeanor has another dimension—a religious one. As *Scientific American* described in its account of the building, "The Gothic architecture adapted to library needs gives a feeling of spaciousness and calm which has an excellent psychological effect."⁴⁰

Although the Sterling Memorial Library first appears as a cathedral, closer inspection reveals curious substitutions. In the narthex, telephone booths are disguised as confessionals. Card catalogs nestled underneath the side aisles stand in place of pews (fig. 14). At the head of the entrance nave under fan vaulting, an elaborately carved oak delivery desk is in place of the altar. The reading room off the transept is in the image of a refectory, and the rare book room emulates a lady chapel.⁴¹ The Librarian's Courtyard (now Selin Courtyard) recalls a monastic courtyard, complete with its own central fountain in the manner of the monastic washing basin (fig. 15). Rogers had, in effect,

³⁹ Louis Stanley Jast, "The Yale Book Tower," *Library Journal*, June 15, 1931, 541.

⁴⁰ "A Modernized University Library," *Scientific American* 145 (November 1931): 328.

⁴¹ Other scholars also have interpreted these spaces to have ecclesiastical connotations. See Ryan, "Architecture of James Gamble Rogers," 33.

placed the functions of a modern library within the shell of a neo-Gothic cathedral.

Descriptions of the library in the *Yale University Library Gazette* asserted that attempts were made to mitigate such ecclesiastical overtones: "[The library] avoids too churchlike a character through the introduction of leaded glass in which colour is largely supplanted by intricate patterning in lead-work," and "a painted wood ceiling of rather simple design helps to preserve a secular character."⁴² Evidence to the contrary, however, overwhelmed this claim. Contemporary accounts, such as the one in the *Harvard Crimson* describing the library as having a "magnificent cathedral-like edifice," immediately picked up on the religious allusion.⁴³ William Harlan Hale's fury underscored that the library enthusiastically embraced the ecclesiastical metaphor to the point of sacrificing practicality.

Alma Mater as Virgin Mary

The climax of the Sterling Memorial Library's cathedral orgy is the *Alma Mater* mural at the culmination of the entrance nave (fig. 16). Painted by Eugene Francis Savage, a Yale professor of fine arts, and installed in 1932, one year after the library's dedication, the mural is a religious allusion so strong it would have added considerably more fuel to Hale's fire had it been finished before the publication of his "Yale's Cathedral Orgy."⁴⁴

⁴² "The Sterling Memorial Library," *Yale University Library Gazette* 5, no. 4 (April 1931): 61. In descriptions of the library's design, the reason given for such an overt ecclesiastical reference was the fact that the library was a memorial to John W. Sterling. Further quotes from this page note that the entrance hall, "constructed in the form of a great nave with vaulted aisles and clerestoried lighting," "leaves no doubt as to the memorial purpose of the building."

⁴³ "Yale's New Memorial Library Will Rival Harkness' Towers by 1928," *Harvard Crimson*, March 11, 1926.

⁴⁴ Eugene Francis Savage (1883–1978), who received a BFA in 1915 from the American Academy in Rome and a Master of Arts degree from Yale in 1926, was a member of the National Society of Mural Painters, founded by fellow painter Edwin Howland Blashfield in 1895. Also called academic muralists, these artists, who commonly trained in Paris and studied in Rome, included complex allegories in their works, which often depicted images of imperial America and imbued institutions with spiritual meaning. Another notable mural, ca. 1934, by Savage also depicts *Alma Mater* in Columbia University's Butler Library, also designed by James Gamble Rogers. This *Alma Mater*, however, more closely resembles Athena, a classical style more appropriate to the library's Beaux-Arts architecture. For the context of the American mural movement between the 1893 World's Columbian Exposition and World War I, see Leonard N. Amico, *The Mural Decorations of Edwin Howland Blashfield, 1848–1936* (Williamstown, MA: Sterling and Francine Clark Art Institute, 1978). For a biography of Savage, see Peter Hastings Falk, ed., *Who Was Who in American Art: 400 Years of*

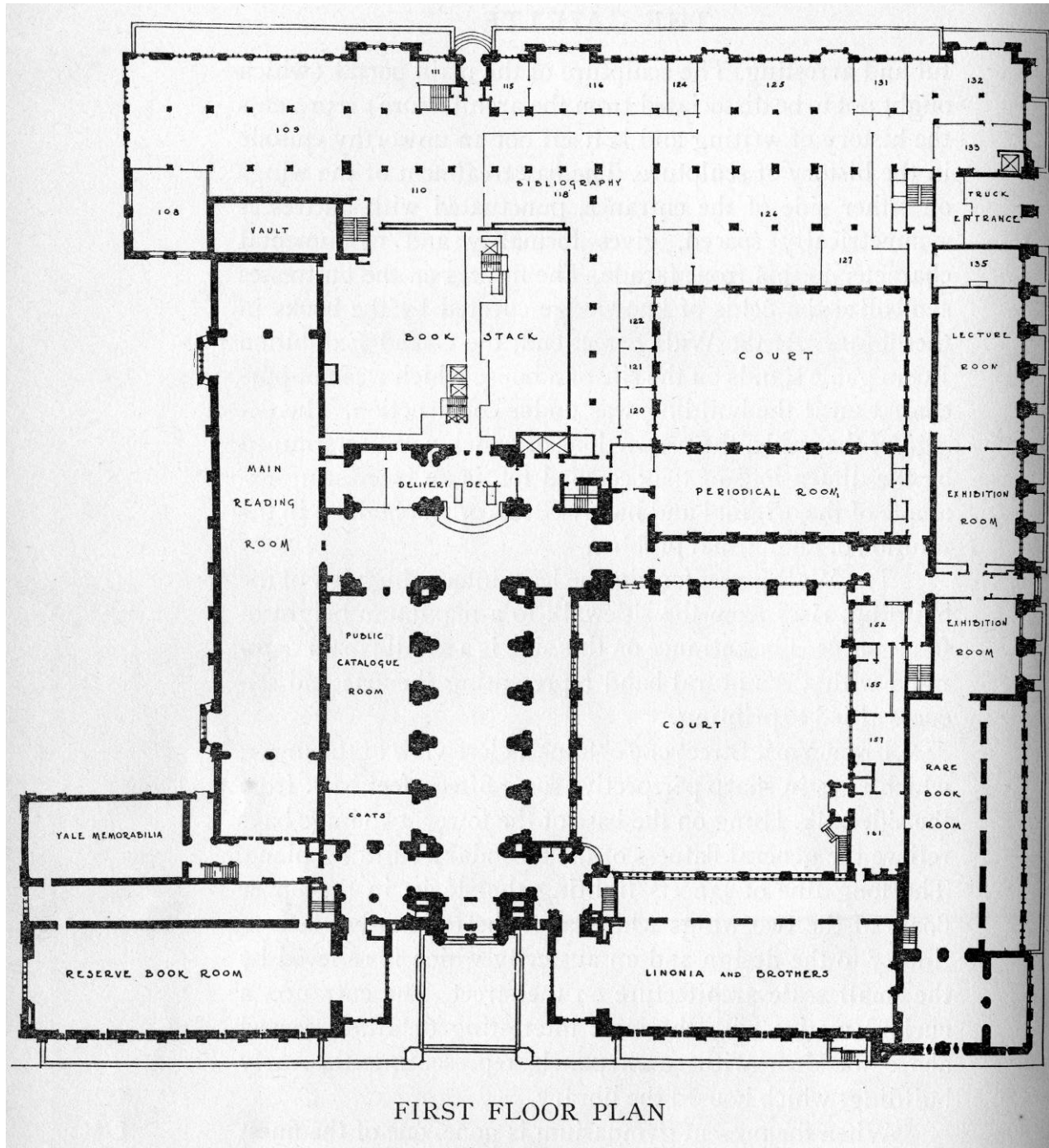


Fig. 13. First floor plan, Sterling Memorial Library. From *Yale University Library Gazette* 5, no. 4 (April 1931), opposite 11. (Manuscripts and Archives, Yale University Library.)

Echoing President James Rowland Angell's assertion that the library embodied "the intellectual and spiritual life of Yale," Savage envisioned his mural as

symbolizing "the inspiration that directs the University's spiritual and intellectual efforts."⁴⁵ The *Alma*

Artists in America, vol. 111, pt. 2 (Madison, CT: Soundview, 1999), 2901; and *Historical Register of Yale University* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1939), 465.

⁴⁵ Angell, "Response for the University," 20. Savage is quoted in "The Mural Decoration by Professor Savage," *Yale University Library Gazette* 7, no. 3 (January 1933): 75. As architectural historian Aaron Betsky argues, while the library's "storage of knowledge is thus



Fig. 14. Detail, entrance hall of Sterling Memorial Library near the crossing, showing card catalogs in the side aisles and several bosses from the *Speculum humanae salvationis* inscribed on the arch at upper right. (RU 696, Manuscripts and Archives, Yale University Library.)

Mater mural, which the *Harkness Hoot* derisively deemed “the ideal altar-piece for a building which is in every respect also an absurd travesty of the Gothic style,” plays with its overt religious ico-

controlled by functional concerns ... its use is defined by a choreography of acculturation dominated by religious, moral, and social models and decoration” (Betsky, *James Gamble Rogers and the Architecture of Pragmatism*, 124).

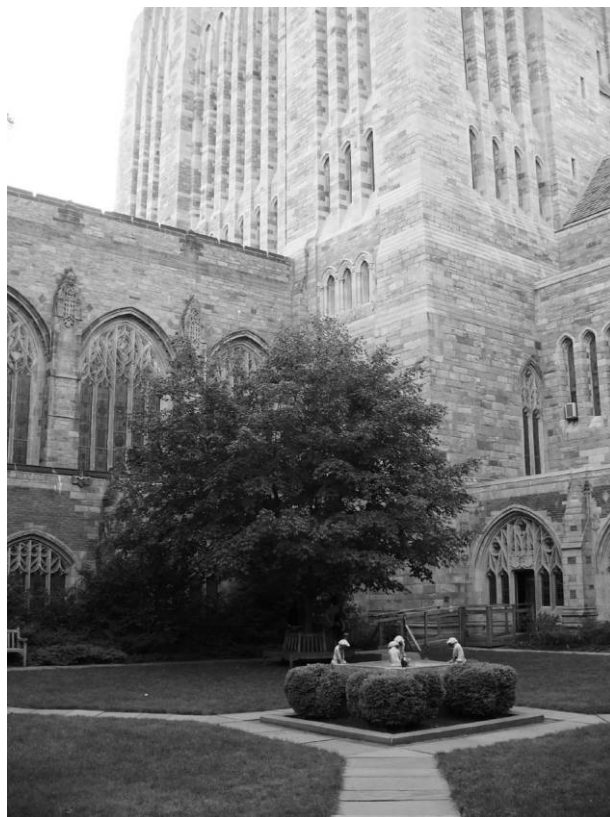


Fig. 15. Beatrix Jones Farrand, the Librarian’s Courtyard (now Selin Courtyard), Sterling Memorial Library. (Photo, Margaret M. Grubiak.)

nography, fusing together ecclesiastical forms and secular content to allow a double-coded meaning.⁴⁶

In the mural, positioned above the library’s delivery desk, pulled curtains reveal the female figure of Yale’s *Alma Mater* standing frontally. A blue-and-white mantel covers her white, Grecian garment, and a laurel wreath crowns her head. Engaging the viewer with her direct stare, she stands in front of the Tree of Knowledge under a trilobed arch, supported by Corinthian columns and adorned with the towers of a vaguely medieval city. She holds a book inscribed with Yale’s motto, *Lux et veritas*, in Hebrew letters in her right hand and the sphere of learning in her left.

Eugene Savage gave physical form to Yale’s motto in two female figures at the left of the mural. Light, bearing a torch and adorned with a crown of

⁴⁶ “The Last Straw,” *Harkness Hoot* 3, no. 2 (December 1932): 3. The *Alma Mater* mural was not without precedent. In Yale’s previous library, Chittenden Hall, a Louis Comfort Tiffany stained glass window (1889–90) also included allegorical representations of the sciences and of religion gathered around the personification of Education.



Fig. 16. Eugene F. Savage, *Alma Mater* mural, Sterling Memorial Library, 1932. (Photo, Margaret M. Grubiak.)

light rays, and Truth, naked, holding a mirror, and crowned with a halo, bring the six male figures of Music, Divinity, Fine Arts, Literature, Science, and Labor “to make grateful acknowledgement to Alma Mater.” Each subject of knowledge and human endeavor is represented with its appropriate attributes. Divinity is garbed in a cross-covered robe and signaled with a halo. Literature stands in a robe with a laurel wreath crown, quill pen and paper in hand, and hand over heart as if to give an oration. Music, with harp in hand, bows down to Alma Mater, while Fine Arts, clothed in a painter’s smock and holding a palette, lays a figure of Winged Victory at the feet of Alma Mater. At Alma Mater’s left, separated from the others, Science, holding a microscope, and Labor, grasping a hammer and sickle, present the fruits of the earth to Alma Mater.⁴⁷

⁴⁷ “Mural Decoration by Professor Savage,” 76. This hammer and sickle are sometimes interpreted as communist iconography. See Betsky, *James Gamble Rogers and the Architecture of Pragmatism*, 248 n. 81.

The mural is in many respects a very proper, straightforward allegorical mural celebrating the work of the university. The figure of Alma Mater personifies Yale. The blue and white colors of her clothing mirror the colors of the university. Her book displays the Yale motto, which is also embodied in the figures of Light and Truth. Laurel wreaths and Corinthian columns signify wisdom, and the sphere of learning represents the realms of learning available in the university. The tree represents the Tree of Knowledge. The Winged Victory statue, an imitation of the famed Greek Winged Victory of Samothrace, symbolizes truth’s victory over evil, and the fruits of the earth suggest an understanding and harvesting of the physical world. The mural articulates both the university’s role in gathering knowledge and the higher ideals that govern that acquisition.

But like most everything else in the Sterling Memorial Library, the mural also possesses a strong religious connotation. The immediate impression of the mural is of a religious icon. Alma Mater reads as the Virgin Mary or at least a saint; the blue in her garments is a classic Marian depiction, and the white signifies sainthood. Formally, the composition itself makes divine references. The trilobed arch above Alma Mater rings her head as if it were a halo, echoing the haloes of Truth at the left and Divinity at the right. The three arcs within the arch also evoke the Holy Trinity, as does the triangular, symmetrical arrangement of the three haloed figures of Alma Mater, Truth, and Divinity. The Tree of Knowledge, taken from the book of Genesis story, whose fruit Eve consumed at the urging of the devil, represents the knowledge of good and evil, and the medieval city suggests heavenly Jerusalem. If the mural is a representation of the university’s role in producing knowledge, it is equally a representation of knowledge’s divine origin.

The architecture of the library heightens the mural’s religious associations. Positioned at the culmination of the entrance nave, above the “altar” and rood screen of the delivery desk, under fan vaults, and within a pointed arch, the painting appears as an altar piece (fig. 17). The inscription on the extravagantly carved oak delivery desk that reads “Many shall run to and fro, and knowledge shall be increased” (Dan. 12:4) from the Old Testament book of Daniel further strengthens the religious association. As a modern, sophisticated equipment system of conveyor belts and pneumatic tubes worked behind the desk to deliver items from across the library, above the desk Alma Mater, appearing as a religious figure, guards, governs, and

oversees access to the immense store of knowledge in the book stack tower beyond.⁴⁸

The mural combined with the library's *marche* (French architectural term meaning movement through a building) made palpable knowledge's divine association. Entering through the bastard abbey portal, walking past the telephone booth confessionals, visiting the card catalog in the side aisle, and processing to the circulation desk altar to present a book request under the gaze of Alma Mater was a ritual experience with intentional religious overtones. Such visual and bodily cues indicate to the library patron religion's authority and relevance to the work ahead. As Sally Promey argued in her analysis of John Singer Sargent's *Triumph of Religion* murals in the Boston Public Library, the ritual purpose of Sargent Hall is an "orchestrated preparation for privileged intellectual activity."⁴⁹ The entrance hall of the Sterling Memorial Library similarly orchestrates a sense of knowledge's divine origin before a student or faculty member enters the reading room or ascends the stacks. As James Gamble Rogers wrote, the monumentality of the entrance hall, which he described as "large and imposing," was intended "to give the best first impression and the best last impression."⁵⁰ The *Alma Mater* mural intensifies this experience. Although the mural may be read as an allegorical representation of the university, the decided impression it gives is as an altarpiece for a cathedral library, albeit a shocking one for a historically Protestant institution.

Both/and Iconography

In mixing secular and religious content, the Sterling Memorial Library's rich iconographic program fosters and reinforces multiple interpretations of the building's meaning. That the library trustees sacrificed six tiers of book stacks in order to fund more ornament indicates the importance they assigned to the symbolic expression of the library.⁵¹ Yale professors aided in the selection of the images and

inscriptions, and a 1931 issue of the *Yale University Library Gazette* meticulously, even ponderously, recorded the sources of the decorations.⁵² For example, the entry for a Cro-Magnon image in the library reads: "Wall engraving of a bison and horse from Les Combarelles. Second phase. Aurignacian epoch."⁵³ Such detail and classification reflected the mastery of modern scholarship and promoted the library's role in preserving knowledge.

Embedded within the neo-Gothic shell are images and words that variously describe the history of recorded knowledge, the history of Yale, and the tie between religion and knowledge. At the library's main entrance, a medieval scholar divides the portal, above which are carved a Mayan serpent, Athenian owl, and Roman wolf, representing the European and American civilizations, and Greek and Arabic inscriptions signifying the ancient. In the fan vaults over the delivery desk, carvings of record-keeping implements range from the ancient chisel and hammer, sand shaker, and quill pen and scroll to the modern typewriter keyboard, telegraph key, and telephone.⁵⁴ Images of the previous Yale library buildings surmount the York Street entryway, and ten triforium panels in the entrance hall record scenes from the history of the Yale Library, including the founding of Yale College. Words also reinforce the connection between religion and learning. The inscription over the door of the librarian's office from Shakespeare's *Henry VI* offers this moralizing message: "Ignorance is the curse of God / Knowledge the wing wherewith we fly to heaven."⁵⁵ An Arabic inscription taken from the Koran over the library entrance reads, "God! There is no God but he. . . . He knoweth that which is past, and that which is to come unto them, and they shall not comprehend anything of his knowledge, but so far as he pleaseth."⁵⁶

And, as is often cited in descriptions of the Sterling Memorial Library, some images challenge the library's rarefied atmosphere. A bookworm

⁴⁸ Betsky, *James Gamble Rogers and the Architecture of Pragmatism*, 122–23.

⁴⁹ Sally M. Promey, *Painting Religion in Public: John Singer Sargent's "Triumph of Religion" at the Boston Public Library* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1999), 103.

⁵⁰ James Gamble Rogers, "The Sterling Memorial Library: Notes by the Architect," *Yale University Library Gazette* 3, no. 1 (July 1928): 5.

⁵¹ Betsky, *James Gamble Rogers and the Architecture of Pragmatism*, 122.

⁵² See "The Decoration of the Sterling Memorial Library," *Yale University Library Gazette* 5, no. 4 (April 1931): 80–123. An immense collection of images used as models for decoration in the Sterling Memorial Library can be found in RU 696, RG 46-B, Records Documenting Buildings, Facilities and Grounds, Photos and Pictures of Sterling Memorial Library, series 2, boxes 6 and 7, Manuscripts and Archives, Yale University Library. For their origin, see Betsky, *James Gamble Rogers and the Architecture of Pragmatism*, 126.

⁵³ "Decoration of the Sterling Memorial Library," 82.

⁵⁴ *Ibid.*, 100–101.

⁵⁵ *Ibid.*, 89. The quotation comes from William Shakespeare's *Henry VI*, pt. 2, act 4, sc. 7.

⁵⁶ "Decoration of the Sterling Memorial Library," 83.



Fig. 17. The *Alma Mater* mural in its context above the delivery desk. (RU 696, Manuscripts and Archives, Yale University Library.)

in different stages of development enlivens the lanterns on the library's Wall Street entrance, and lest the purpose of the janitor's closet on the first floor across from the altarlike circulation desk be misinterpreted, inscribed within two very proper looking shields over the door are a mop and bucket and brooms.⁵⁷ A figure carved on a corbel studiously hunched over a book whose pages read "U R A JOKE" greets the visitor walking through the cloistered exhibition corridor.⁵⁸ Such unexpected cheekiness within ecclesiastical forms sharply challenges the expectations drawn from the library's architecture, opening up the possibility for new readings and allowing the building to be both a nod to a religious past and a modern, secular present.

Within this varied iconography, so dense that William Harlan Hale cautioned that these decorations were "meaningless without a handbook," is a dual reading of Johannes Gutenberg and his invention that particularly strikes the traditional and modern, revealed and empirical, divine and human tensions the library embodies.⁵⁹ Like the *Alma Mater* mural, the display of Yale's copy of the Gutenberg Bible exemplified the fluidity in meaning the library as a whole fosters.⁶⁰ As a document of the word of God, the Gutenberg Bible is the very definition of revealed knowledge: its passages contain messages from God, recount the life of Christ, and instruct how one should live a moral life. Within the Sterling Memorial Library, the Gutenberg Bible was presented as a religious relic. At the end of the rare book room, positioned symbolically at the front of the library on Cross Campus, was, as one observer described it, "a chapel in the corner for the Gutenberg Bible!"⁶¹ James Gamble Rogers had indeed created a chapel-like space, a polygonal chamber set off by iron gates by Samuel Yellin, whose tall walls, pierced by lancet windows, culminate in fan vaults (fig. 18). Originally the Gutenberg Bible was placed at the center of this Grand Exhibition Room, displayed and protected under glass (fig. 19). Movement through the library to see the Bible in this protected envi-

ronment created a secondary ritualistic event akin to a pilgrimage to venerate a relic. This reading of the Gutenberg Bible as a sacred object supported the interpretation of the Sterling Memorial Library as a sacred space, overtly Christian in tone and message.

Yet another nonreligious reading of the Bible and its setting was possible. Made by German printer Johannes Gutenberg beginning in 1455 with his printing press, the Gutenberg Bible marked the first use of movable type, a revolution in printing and bookmaking that allowed for the mass production of books. Aside from its religious content, the book was an extraordinarily important document of the beginning of the modern transmission of knowledge. The Gutenberg Bible was in this sense also a secular relic. Its guarded display in the library's rare book room signaled its historical value and significance, especially to a library filled with the products of Gutenberg's invention.

The depiction of Gutenberg and his printing press in the library's courtyard further stressed the fine line between the secular and the religious interpretations of the Gutenberg Bible. The theme of the Librarian's Courtyard, landscaped by Beatrix Jones Farrand and itself a monastic-like space, paid homage to printing and the graphic arts. At the southeast entrance to the courtyard is an image of the Gutenberg press, and below is a pair of shields, one with the head of Gutenberg and the other an open book with the inscription, "In the beginning was the Word" (fig. 20).⁶² This inscription and the image of his press at work suggest that Gutenberg and his invention heralded the beginning of the large-scale production of the printed word and the start of modern knowledge. But for those who could recognize its source, the inscription was incomplete. In full, the first verse from the Gospel of John reads, "In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God" (John 1:1). The appropriation of the quote for Gutenberg, and the pairing of it with a relief of his image, suggests that modern knowledge—the entire range of human discovery shared with others through the printed word—possessed its own form of divinity. However, the quote's implicit

⁵⁷ *Ibid.*, 100.

⁵⁸ *Ibid.*, 103. Figures on other corbels include a student reading a sad story, a student reading an exciting book, and a student "with radio headphones on, books neglected."

⁵⁹ Hale, "Yale's Cathedral Orgy," 472.

⁶⁰ Yale's Gutenberg Bible now resides in the Beinecke Rare Book and Manuscript Library (1963), a modern building by Gordon Bunshaft of Skidmore, Owings, and Merrill.

⁶¹ Munthe, "Norwegian Impression of the Building," 56.

⁶² "Decoration of the Sterling Memorial Library," 88. Below these images is an inscription in Latin "from the colophon of Johannes Balbus's *Catholicon* printed in 1460 and attributed to Gutenberg's press." For the images used as a model for the images of Gutenberg, see RU 696, RG 46-B, Records Documenting Buildings, Facilities and Grounds, Photos and Pictures of Sterling Memorial Library, series 2, box 6, folder 75, Manuscripts and Archives, Yale University Library.



Fig. 18. Grand Exhibition Room, Sterling Memorial Library, with Gutenberg Bible in center display. (RU 696, Manuscripts and Archives, Yale University Library.)

religious source suggested this new knowledge's religious foundation and its sanctification.

Finally, the iconography at the very center of the library also directly engages this dual reading. Prominently displayed on the arch before the crossing of the entrance hall nave are eleven bosses taken from *Speculum humanae salvationis*, a medieval manuscript presented to the school in 1715 by Elihu Yale, the patron who donated over 400

books, gave financial support to the fledgling institution, and after whom the university is named (see fig. 14). The *Speculum*, translated as the Mirror of Salvation, used both words and images to show that events from the Old Testament prefigured those in the New Testament. Former Yale Secretary Anson Phelps Stokes suggested developing the theme of the mirror from this manuscript in the library's iconography "because the

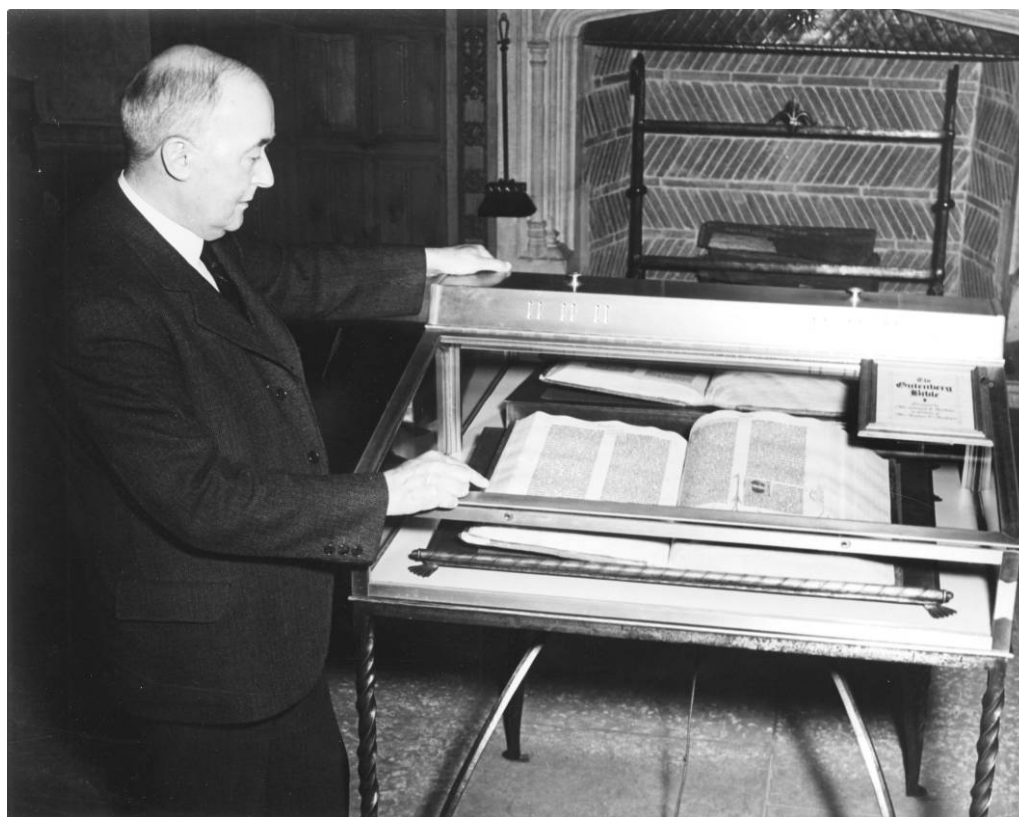


Fig. 19. University Librarian Andrew Keogh with Gutenberg Bible in the Grand Exhibition Room, June 1938. (RU 686, Manuscripts and Archives, Yale University Library.)

library reflects the world's knowledge."⁶³ Images were drawn from both the Old and the New Testaments: Jonah and the whale, fishermen drawing in their nets, the fiery furnace, Daniel and the lions, the adoration of the Magi, the creation of Eve, David and the beasts, Noah, the Baptism in Jordan, and the flight into Egypt.⁶⁴ The arch culminates with a depiction of the Nativity, illustrating the beginning of man's salvation through Christ. Such bosses reinforced Christianity as the path to salvation as library patrons passed underneath them in their procession to the delivery desk altar. From a strictly historical standpoint, however, these *Speculum* images highlight an important written source of religious instruction in the Middle Ages and pay homage to the university's namesake.

⁶³ Anson Phelps Stokes to James Gamble Rogers, December 5, 1927, temporary folder 3, files of Judith Schiff related to the seventy-fifth anniversary of Sterling Memorial Library, Manuscripts and Archives, Yale University Library.

⁶⁴ "Decoration of the Sterling Memorial Library," 98–99. For the images used as a model for the bosses, see RU 696, RG 46-B, Records Documenting Buildings, Facilities and Grounds, Photos and Pictures of Sterling Memorial Library, series 2, box 6, folder 75, Manuscripts and Archives, Yale University Library.

Like much of the library's iconography, these images possess both sacred and secular interpretations.

Reception of Yale's Ecclesiastical Metaphor

The ecclesiastical metaphor and even irony of the Sterling Memorial Library was not lost on its contemporaries at its opening. The library's appropriation



Fig. 20. Images commemorating Johannes Gutenberg above the southeast entrance of the Librarian's Courtyard. (Photo, Margaret M. Grubiak.)

of religious imagery sat uncomfortably for some. One visitor described the library's edifice as similar to one "in my memory of an old illustrated Bible for children" but wondered, "Was it the Tower of Babel, or a Babylonian palace?"⁶⁵ This tongue-in-cheek rhetorical question identified the building as either a supreme example of human pride and direct challenge to God's authority—an act for which God, in the story of the Tower of Babel, punished humans by dividing their languages, a story perhaps appropriate to a library and university—or so beautiful as to be like one of the seven wonders of the world. A cartoon in the *Yale Record* depicted the interior of the library's entrance nave with a student asking an irritated adult, "Say, when does the feature begin?"⁶⁶ The library, or rather Tower of Babel or movie palace, recalled multiple images of fantastic spaces.

For a writer in *Commonweal*, the most striking part of the library was the cathedral-like entrance hall with its confessional telephone booths and massive columns. Most astonishingly of all, "The altar is the place at which books are dispensed!" The author got to the heart of the library's significance to a modern university in which scientific pursuits had superseded religion as the primary concern: "Thinking the whole thing over, one is torn between a tendency to find the whole affair just slightly ridiculous and a feeling that is quite unintentionally symbolic. After all, is it not science (of every form and order) to which innumerable moderns bring sacrifice and from which they expect help and solace?"⁶⁷ Here, the writer astutely identified the tensions and transformations at work in the university. As much as the Sterling Memorial Library sought to keep religion central within the minds of the faculty and students of the modern American university, a deep shift had already occurred in which religion played a secondary role. Although the altarlike circulation desk dominated by the guise of *Alma Mater* cultivated a religious atmosphere, those seeking books from the skyscraper beyond nevertheless increasingly sought the substance of science, not religion.

Other critiques took advantage of the Sterling Memorial Library's iconography and architecture to frankly mock the earnestness of placing religion at the center of the university. A suggested replacement for Eugene Savage's *Alma Mater* mural



Fig. 21. "SUGGESTED MURALS FOR YALE BUILDINGS," no. 3, "To replace the Savage Mural in the Library." From *Yale Record*, May 21, 1934, 382. (Manuscripts and Archives, Yale University Library.)

from Yale's humor magazine presented an irreverent account of university life (fig. 21). Whereas Savage sought to express the intellectual and spiritual life of Yale, the artist of this parody illustrated the sordid side of student life, inserting alcohol bottles and dice into Savage's composition, just as the library inserted its own imagery into an ecclesiastical framework. The seemingly inebriated *Alma Mater* holding a mug of beer certainly contrasted with the pure image of a *Mary* figure in Savage's original. This parody is shockingly effective in its irreverence, precisely because the real *Alma Mater* mural reads so strongly as a religious image.

Another critique was a satiric defense of the library notably written in verse, in which the poet admitted that the "Library is anachronistic, / Revivalistic, mystic, and atavistic." Yet the poet reasoned that the library's religious image was secondary to its function:

⁶⁵ "A Noble Pile," *Commonweal*, August 26, 1931, 393.

⁶⁶ *Yale Record*, October 22, 1930, 49.

⁶⁷ "A Noble Pile," 393.

I see no good reason why things pedagogical
Should not be allied to things theological.
If we are true Sons of Eli and bibliophiles,
Such minor details ought not to stir our biles.
A library's the place for intellectual concepts
Whether it be round or square or have a nave
and two transepts.⁶⁸

This poem ironically captured the Sterling Memorial Library's intended purpose: it was to be the omnipresent religious background for the modern work at hand. From the perspective of Yale's leaders and James Gamble Rogers, if religion was no longer the central concern of university education, it nevertheless retained a rightful role in the university. The Sterling Memorial Library crafted a place for religion within modern inquiry by appealing to the liberal Protestant notion of the unity of truth, an idea articulated by outgoing Yale Chaplain Elmore M. McKee in his final appeal for a new Yale chapel in 1930.⁶⁹ For McKee, the astronomer, the biologist, the engineer, the social scientist, and the student of literature, history, and art fundamentally asked the same questions about purpose in the search for truth: "What insights into life's meaning do these characters and events and developing customs give me?" and "Is there a purpose in the universe and in life, which links together the stars or water-life and the personality making the investigation?" McKee forthrightly asserted, "Now the instant a man is conscious of his search for an Order, a Plan, a Purpose beyond himself, he is at the threshold of worship." McKee argued that a chapel at the Yale center, across from the Sterling Memorial Library, would be "the inevitable outcome of the worship which is taking place from day to day in all the other buildings" and a "unifying, integrating center in which each individual contributes his own finding, and is enriched by the findings of his fellow-worshippers."⁷⁰

What McKee, writing four months before the Sterling Memorial Library dedication, did not foresee was that the library attempted to accomplish the same feat on its own. The library's ecclesiastical metaphor reinforced the deeper origins and out-

⁶⁸ Ross, "Concerning the Library . . ." *Yale Record*, January 14, 1931, 211.

⁶⁹ For an understanding of liberal Protestantism, I have relied on William R. Hutchinson, *The Modernist Impulse in American Protestantism* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1976); and William Hordern, *A Layman's Guide to Protestant Theology* (New York: Macmillan, 1955). See also Roberts and Turner, *Sacred and the Secular University*, 67–68.

⁷⁰ "Statement of the Rev. Elmore M. McKee, University Chaplain, to the Corporation," December 13, 1930, RU 30, RG 1-B, Yale Corporation Records of Committee on Architectural Plan 1913–31, acc. no. 1932-A-007, box 2, folder 22, Manuscripts and Archives, Yale University Library.

comes of every search for truth. In employing religious imagery in a building frequented by students, the Sterling Memorial Library also cunningly created a regular religious experience without compulsion while emphasizing the religious dimension of education—thus taking over and even improving the purpose of the defunct compulsory chapel requirement. As the central gathering space for Yale with room to accommodate over 2,000 students and scholars at any given time, the library subtly fulfilled the same communal role as compulsory chapel. Especially given the absence of a new chapel at the Yale center, the library's intention was to make all who entered its doors understand that all learning was sacred and that the mission of the university was in part religious.

The Sterling Memorial Library was not the first or only library on the American campus to appeal to the ecclesiastical metaphor. In addition to the antebellum libraries at Harvard and Yale, the Oxbridge imitation persisted in the modern university era in such buildings as the William Rainey Harper Memorial Library (Shepley, Ruttan, and Coolidge, 1912) at the University of Chicago; the Henry Suzzallo Library (Gould and Bebb, 1923–26) at the University of Washington in Seattle; and James Gamble Rogers's other neo-Gothic library, the Charles Deering Library (1931–33) at Northwestern University. Although perhaps the desire to signal adherence to the whole man theory of education was the principal reason behind the selection of the neo-Gothic for these libraries as well as for countless dormitories, dining halls, laboratories, and lecture halls, the widespread religious imagery on the American university campus in the early twentieth century also suggests an underlying attempt to reframe religion for the modern era.

This reshaping of religion is certainly true for the Sterling Memorial Library. Yet even as James Gamble Rogers and Yale's leaders intended the Sterling Memorial Library to negotiate an accord between religion and modern knowledge at the heart of the university, the library could not escape its context as a building caught between the desire to preserve religion within academic life and secular concerns shaping the modern university. That the library's iconography could be read on a spectrum from sincere ecclesiastical emulation to a parody of a religious past points exactly to this transformative moment for religion on the campus in the early twentieth century. William Harlan Hale's attack on Yale's "cathedral orgy" for failing to meet modern conditions describes just how fragile religion's position in the university now was.