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Former British PM Blair to teach religion course at Yale

Chris Herlinger Religion News Service | Mar. 11, 2008

(RNS) Former British Prime Minister Tony Blair has accepted a one-year appointment at Yale University to participate in a course on the connection between religion and globalization.

Blair's appointment as Yale's Howland Distinguished Fellow during the 2008-09 academic year was announced Friday (March 7). Blair served as British prime minister from 1997-2007 and converted from Anglicanism from Roman Catholicism last year. He plans to launch a foundation this year dedicated to improving interfaith relations.

Richard C. Levin, Yale's president, said: "As the world continues to become increasingly inter-dependent, it is essential that we explore how religious values can be channeled toward reconciliation rather than polarization. Mr. Blair has demonstrated outstanding leadership in these areas."

Details of the course remain to be worked out; the university said that Blair would work with the faculties of Yale Divinity School and the Yale School of Management.

Blair's interest in faith set him apart from most other political figures in Great Britain, where public espousal of religious values, common among U.S. political figures, is relatively rare. The planned Tony Blair Faith Foundation will "promote understanding between the major faiths and increase understanding of the role of faith in the modern world," according to the Yale announcement. It has already been criticized by some in Great Britain in light of Blair's support for the Iraq war.

"It is a pity that Mr. Blair did not think more deeply about issues of religious strife before he went and bombed Baghdad," Ian Gibson, a member of the British Parliament, told a London-based newspaper in 2007. "Now he wants to be vicar to the world? It is ridiculous."

Blair's foundation has support from leading British advocates for inter-faith dialogue, including the Rev. Guy Wilkinson, the Church of England's adviser on interfaith relations, and Sir Sigmund Sternberg, the co-founder of the Three Faiths Forum.

-- Chris Herlinger

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