

Onward Echoes the Story: The Study of Religion amid Miami's narrative of Justice & Change

Research Journey:

Since the protests following the death of George Floyd in 2020, we see changes on a global to a local scale. In January of 2021, Apple committed to a \$100 million pledge to challenge systematic racism including a new “first-of-its-kind global innovation and learning hub for Historically Black Colleges and Universities (HBCUs).¹ As we all know, Apple was by no means alone in this venture. Miami University took initiative with various DEI task forces, new MU curriculum requirements, and guest speaker series. So, I took a step back and absorbed the world around me in an attempt to understand what was actually happening. What dawned on me is that these changes were not unique. In fact, they felt more like déjà-vu than a cultural revolution or awakening.

I questioned how these conversations differed from classroom discussions surrounding the Civil Rights movement and opposition to Vietnam. Distraught with the endless parallels, a paradox emerged of the idea of “progress” from across our nation to my own college campus. Has the narrative remained the same as MU wrestles with the national conversation on diversity, equity, and inclusion? An initial glance to the University Library from a 1977 report of the Committees to Review the Status of Women and Racial/Ethnic Minorities at Miami University, Heanon Wilkins and Mary Sohngen echoed the demands of protestors on campus today. They concluded, “with respect to Blacks particularly, they have gone beyond anger, and are now in the process of giving up on Miami”(10). Such sentiments echoed the words of students in the *Miami Student* today.²

I turned to religious scholar Charles Long to provide me with a theoretical research approach to this. He states, “One must account for the misunderstandings and misinterpretations [of interpreting events]..to tell a story of America that is both true and authentic, moving beyond concealment and invisibilities”.³ My mission from Long was clear, to search for the concealments and unconcealments in Miami's history. In the Summer of 2021 with a USS Summer Scholars Program with Dr. Nathan French Comparative Religion Professor and I examined primary source materials from Miami University Havighurst Center Archives such as the Black Action Movement (BAM & BAM 2.0), the Black Student Action Association, YMCA/YWCA, UCM, the “*Gentle Revolution*”, Voices of Reason & Dissent, the *Mandala*, as well as official institutional statements. Through these sources we began to piece together a

¹ See: “Apple Press Release January 13, 2021 <https://www.apple.com/newsroom/2021/01/apple-launches-major-new-racial-equity-and-justice-initiative-projects-to-challenge-systemic-racism-advance-racial-equity-nationwide/>

² [Sinait] Sarfino said, “The results will always be the same.” See: Justeen Jackson, “Black student GroupMe hacked: Racist imagery sent to more than 500 students,” *Miami Student*, January 13, 2021

³ Charles H. Long, “The Black Reality: Toward a Theology of Freedom,” *Significations: Signs, Symbols, and Images in the Interpretation of Religion* (Colorado: Davies Group, 1986 [1968]), p. 147, 167

narrative of how the different organizations institutionalized the Civil Rights & Anti-War movements.

“KhAOS” in Middletown:

The first project objective I decided was to determine the official institutional narrative at the time by observing university policy. I choose to start with the Board of Trustee meeting minutes from 1964, which I was fortunate to access virtually over the summer through the Miami University Digital Special Collections. I choose this time period as a starting point to observe changes following the Civil Rights Act of 1964. Working through the years, I stumbled on a very interesting meeting in October of 1969 involving a man known as Adrian Jestice. The year prior he had filed suit with the university for discriminatory employment practices. After a little more digging, I found Adrian was a White middle-aged male living in Middletown, Ohio where his family was from, backing up to several generations. I was confused. Why would a White man file suit with Miami in the late 1960s claiming discrimination with the Ohio Civil Rights Commission. The answer resided in the *KAOS* newspaper digital archives. The positions in question were for a new Office of Black Student Affairs and a Director of an Economic Opportunity Program in the Office of Minority Affairs.

The purpose of the new positions addressed; “genuine concern of the Board to the disproportionate number of White students and White faculty members as against the number of Black students and faculty *and* concerning a need to develop a segment of Miami’s curriculum having particular relevance to Black minority students.” (BOT October 24, 1970) I discovered Jestice was part of a subnational group called the United Citizen Council of “Amerika” (UCC.) They served as a “nicer facade” to the Ku Klux Klan providing “rationalization” and “scientifically” bound conclusions for White superiority. One challenge was determining whether the group existed in the Miami student body. However, it was very much alive in Middletown high schools, and middle schools as documented by *KAOS* Student Newspaper Issue October 6 1970. Another interesting *KAOS* issue was in 1967 on the study of police practices and training towards minorities.⁴ At times, Miami University and Middletown's story would intersect with professors such as Sherman Jackson as guest speakers at a Black History Week assembly. During the assembly fighting broke out between students wearing white t-shirts. This was a usual occurrence of the school and prompted their longtime principal to retire after threats had been made to his family.⁵

What the “concealed story” of Middletown helps me to understand is that out of the Civil Rights charismatic movement, civic groups and academic offices became institutionalized both in Middletown and the University. It is my understanding from religious scholar Max Weber's argument on charismatic authority, that both of these civic groups and the university were attempting to survive in this new world post the Civil Rights Act by bureaucratizing change in

⁴ See: “Focus: Middletown” *KAOS*, October 6, 1970, 1.digital scan, Walter Havighurst Special Collections and University Archives at Miami University, Ohio. See: Sistinolsabelle_project2

⁵ See: Ace Elliot, “Middletown Tense After Melee,” *Dayton Daily News*, February 14, 1970, 1. accessed via newspapers.com See: Sistinolsabelle_project2

new charismatic authorities evident in the new Office of Minorities Affairs, faculty, BSAA, and the UCC.

A War Between Dissent & Reason

I continued the same research theory to determine what was being routinized from the national movements on the Oxford Miami campus. As Long suggested, and as I've learned as a Comparative Religion major, our work in the humanities goes behind the headlines, to uncover that which is unseen and disguised. This process entails bearing in mind the surrounding context of students and faculty. Through studying ads and Op-Eds in the *Miami Student*, I solidified my general understanding of the Oxford campus environment and discovered a New Left Movement had taken root. This study was furthered while traveling to Oxford this past summer and later this fall, to access the Havinghurst Archive unscanned documents. The first box in the Havinghurst Archives I examined was the *Student Unrest*.⁶

Through the box's materials, I learned Miami was also virtually split between two charismatic groups known as: "Voices of Reason," and the "Voices of Dissent." The Voices of Dissent began in 1964 sponsored by multiple student organizations including Student Senate, Panhellenic Assn, YMCA/YWCA, and surprisingly the University. Recorded from the *Miami Student*, the series featured "persons nationally identified with various extremes of a current issue". Civil rights, economics, 'student revolt', and Black Power were the original topics. Some of the panelists included, Dr. Roland, Dr. Delaittre, and Dr. Walter Havinghurst. The Voices of Dissent had been created to vocalize varying opinions via "dissent" from the norms through engaging conversations generating reform. Just prior to the *Miami Student* issue stated above, the Voices of Dissent proposed a *Gentle Revolution*.

This proposal was seen by the Voices of Reason as a "radical reform". Many of the demands were congruent with the national New University Conference occurring across campuses nationwide. Through this I continued my quest to find how national movements were felt and later bureaucratized within the university. The proposals included: Freshman Year Seminars, Independent Studies, Work Studies, Honors Studies, and a university book store. There was also a statement of support towards the BSAA's request to create a program for 'high-risk minority students' within the Office for Black Student Affairs. I noted that many of the propositions raised in the "Gentle Revolution" have made the journey from being radical to rational. This is evident in current implementations today from the recent DEI committees, UNV 101, Miami Plan courses, Independent Studies etc. I also noted concluding the pamphlet was the proposition to remove the R.O.T.C. Almost exactly one year prior to the occupancy of Rowan Hall.

Although the "Voices of Dissent" series topics remained consistent, it was at this point, I noticed a change in those that associated themselves with the group. In that same year, a published opposition group arose including... Walter Havinghurst. Considering the tension

⁶ Walter Havinghurst Special Collections and University Archives at Miami University, Ohio. Student Life. General Student Unrest and Protest Movement Materials. Folder 14: New University Conference. Miami Chapter. See: Sistinolsabelle_project3

between the groups, and the split in people like Havinghurst that had originated with Voices of Dissent but then gradually disassociated themselves to preserve their way of life. The Voices of Reason even wrote a “Survival Kit” explaining the “enemies within the gate” aka campus.⁷ This helped me consider contemporary institutions that once resisted or were neutral to the BLM were now in support.

“Information NOT counseling”

Throughout this project, Dr. French and I questioned continuously what made this a “comparative religion” project. While our methodology and theory, drawn from Long and Weber, rested within the framework of history of religions and phenomenology, to a new reader that would not immediately be apparent. We turned our attention to student religious groups by exploring the *Student Religious Orgs* archival box. I discovered the presence of YMCA/YWCA activities on campus, as well as something called the United Christian Ministries. A letter in the UCM folder written by the Rev. Watler “Bud” Zimmer, hoped to clarify to the UCM Board and community of Oxford ministers that resources of the UCM had been misappropriated with the responsibility of mimeographing a vulgar pamphlet known as the “Mothers of Apostle Review.” I thought, what could a pamphlet, published in a basement in the middle of the night, have contained that elicited a community-wide response?

It was here I turned to the archivists. Fortunately, Alia Wegner had recently scanned such a document. This unraveled what we call the “pamphlet revolution”. Unfortunately I faced the challenge of the anonymous authors and never fully determined whether it was actually printed within the UCM building today known as the “Old Manse”. However, I did uncover the UCM’s role in social demonstrations occurring alongside the Draft Information Center in part of the national Vietnam Moratorium, as outlined in the *Mother of Apostle Review*. I also encountered the *Mandala*, a publication featuring essays and poetry by Miami University faculty and students, also took syndicated material from the nationally known Liberation News Service.⁸ *Mandala* communicated students national concerns with new sexual boundaries, feminist movements, the Black Panthers, and of course the Vietnam War. What I learned was that ultimately students were challenging the norms and authorities they were accustomed to by creating new legitimate legal authorities within themselves.

Conclusion

By studying the racial tension we uncovered other tensions between the Old Guard and the New Left which existed among students and faculty alike. This is important moving forward with today's changes according to Long to comprehend the misinterpretations of our history. The “official” Miami narrative surrounding the occupancy of Rowan Hall only concerned the Vietnam War. After examining many sources provided by the careful preservation and

⁷“Declaration of Voices of Reason”, Walter Havinghurst Special Collections and University Archives at Miami University, Ohio Digitally accessed, <https://digital.lib.miamioh.edu/digital/collection/activism/id/121/rec/3> See: SistinoIsabelle_project3

⁸ One Challenge was not knowing how widely distributed or funded and there only being three known issues. See: SistinoIsabelle_project4

organization of the Walter Havighurst Special Collections University Archive & Preservation center, we argue that Vietnam is not the full story. We discovered religious institutions had a bigger role than we realized in the social movement. Additionally the issue of race was always present.

Students need to understand we are not merely transplants on this campus. We come from backgrounds of influence complete with unique political and socio-economic biases merging in a sort of melting pot of exposures. We must know how to relate to one another while keeping the current national conversation in mind. Furthermore, to instill true changes, we must further examine our historical paradoxes and understand how change actually manifests itself through every aspect of society through institutional authority. What started as a charismatic, organized dissent against structures from the late 1960 and today of iniquity, injustice, and oppression, have become a part of the bureaucracy of the very institutions that once resisted.

In continuation of my project, I will focus on current activity on civil rights and liberties, urban development, and police reform utilizing the Pew Research Center data. This will be in comparison with my work in Middletown Ohio. I will also examine how the role of religious groups has evolved today in civil discourse in a mainly secular civil society.