

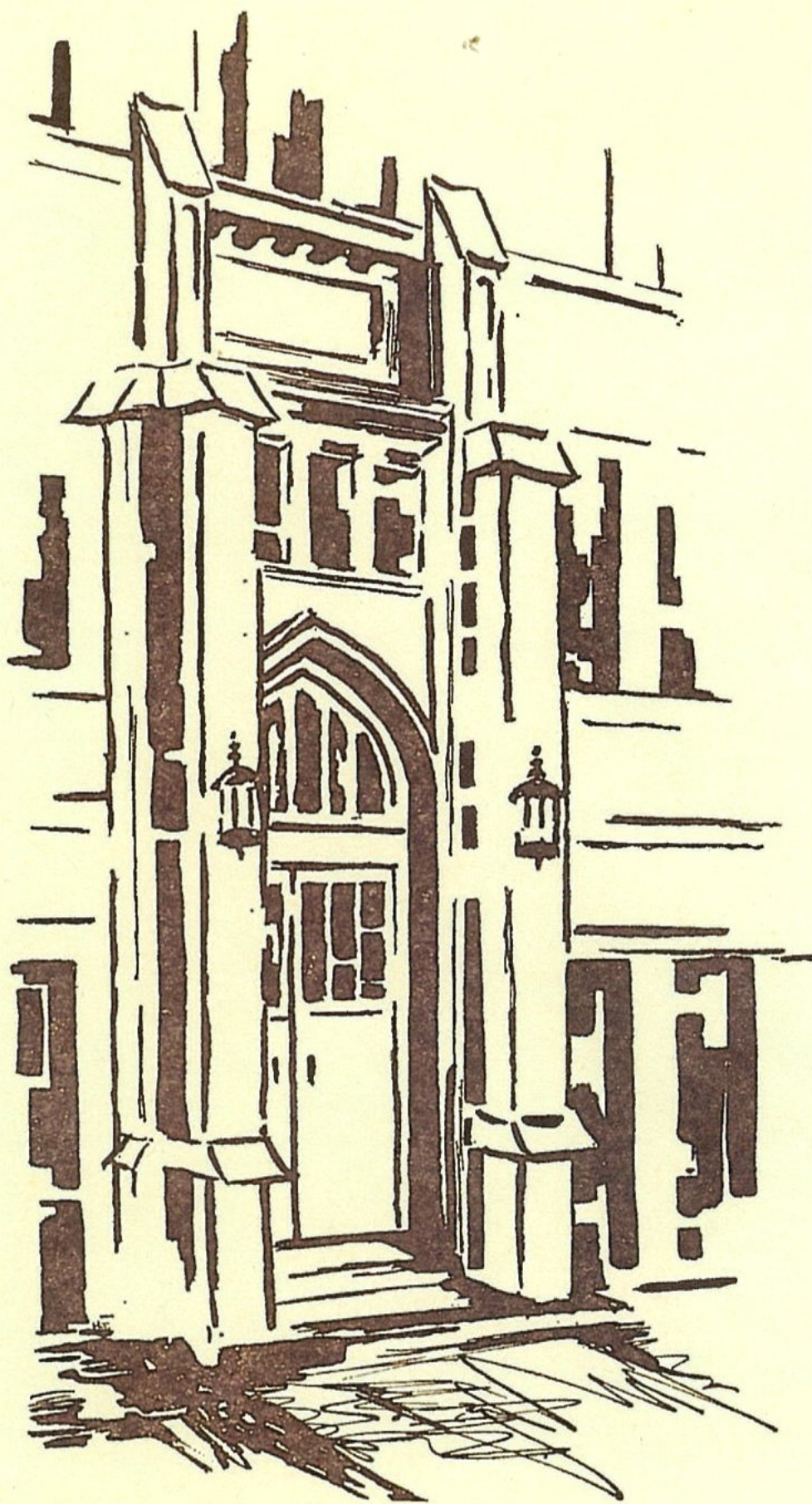
CHALLENGING PERCEPTION

**FOR 50 YEARS THE ORR FORUM HAS USED RELIGION
AS A LENS TO EXPLORE CONTEMPORARY ISSUES.**

By Amy Ensley

For more than 50 years, Wilson's Orr Forum on Religion has raised awareness of critical issues with a religious studies perspective. It has fostered meaningful and open discourse and never shied away from controversy or difficult problems facing society, including the stem cell debate, AIDS crisis and gun violence in schools.

What began on campus as part of the Presbyterian tradition known as the annual Week of Prayer has grown into a highly regarded scholarly event that Associate Professor of Religion Studies and Orr Forum director David True describes as key to "fostering and sustaining the liberal arts."



The Orr FORUM IN RELIGION

WILSON COLLEGE

Chambersburg, Pennsylvania

February 16, 17, 18, 19, 1964

The first Orr Forum in 1964 tackled the topic of "The Meaning of Responsibility in a Revolutionary Age."

"The liberal arts encourage the liberating study of the larger world; culture beyond one's own province. The process engages both critical questioning and thought," True said. "The Orr Forum also encourages the study of culture beyond one's familiar terrain and in doing so, raises challenging questions for discussion."

According to Raymond Anderson, professor emeritus of religion studies and former Orr director, the forum's underlying question through the years has been: What of ultimate worth is Wilson as a college doing for the world at large? "The forum was crucially important as it posed this kind of core question again and again with the same urgency (from different perspectives in 50 different ways) for each generation of teachers, staff and students," Anderson said.

Former Wilson President Gwendolyn Jensen said Orr Forum discussions often foreshadowed important issues that the College would have to face. "Take the environment and sustainability—the forum was discussing these issues long before we began to debate how to make the best use of the Fulton Farm," Jensen said.

Over the years, several themes have recurred. Interfaith dialogue has been particularly important to organizers of the Orr Forum, with at least seven forums devoted the theme. Twenty representatives of different faiths came together in 1987 to share ideas about the limits of tolerance, religion in the public arena and religious identity in a pluralistic society.

Similarly, the role of religion in both politics and foreign policy has dominated the forums, as participants searched for ways for people of different faiths and ethnicities to live together peacefully. The 2000 Orr Forum focused on reconciliation among peoples and nations, including Palestine, Northern Ireland, Bosnia, Kosovo and South Africa; and international students have provided critical global perspectives and insight into different faiths with their participation on various panels over the years.

"Recently, the Orr Forum has begun to function more clearly as a campus-wide lecture series—drawing on multiple disciplines and perspectives," True said. "My hope is that the Orr will continue to bring the campus together to reflect on important topics related to religion. The so-called 'return of religion' makes it all the more important for students and citizens to think critically about religious concepts, movements and personalities."

Early History

Wilson students have always played a significant role in organizing the religious activities of the College. As early as 1905, such activities were coordinated under the auspices of the Young Women's Chris-



Photos, from left: Poet Maya Angelou enthralled the audience at the 1976 Orr Forum; the Rev. Dr. James Robinson in 1969 was the forum's first African-American speaker.

tian Association. Accordingly, students participated in choosing speakers, arranging the schedule for the Week of Prayer and leading dormitory-based discussion groups.

In the late 1920s, the college catalog noted that students were expected to attend chapel daily, church services weekly and observe all customs that would normally be associated with a Christian-affiliated college.

The Week of Prayer at Wilson became known as Devotional Week by the end of the next decade. World War II brought a shift in the discussions from traditional Bible-based sermons to broader topics of faith related to war and its aftermath. The final lecture of the 1942 program posed the question, "In this kind of a world, why keep trying?"

But in the 1960s, students were beginning to rebel against required daily chapel. President Paul Swain Havens charged the standing Religious Life Committee with the task of evaluating the current state of religious activities on campus and with finding ways to rejuvenate student interest. One suggestion was to choose speakers and contemporary topics with more relevance to the lives of the students.

Around the same time, the College found itself to be the recipient of a new bequest. Upon his death in 1936, Thomas A. Orr of the founding family of Orrstown, Pa., established a fund for the maintenance of the Reformed Presbyterian Church of Orrstown in honor of his parents, William and Mary. However, the congregation dwindled, services ended and the church fell into disrepair. The family's last

surviving heirs decided to donate the remaining \$30,000 to Wilson College in 1959 to support religious education as a "living memorial" to the Orrs.

Orr Begins

In 1963, the Board of Trustees approved the establishment of a lecture series funded by the Orr bequest, to be known as the Orr Forum on Religion. The forum would

bring in distinguished scholars to campus for discussion of contemporary topics, as suggested by the Religious Life Committee.

That fall, Professor of Religion Harry Buck and three Wilson students met at the home of Professor Edward J. Jurji of the Princeton Theological Seminary in New Jersey to plan the first Orr Forum, which was to take place the following spring. The theme was, "The Meaning of Responsibility in a Revolutionary Age," with Jurji as the speaker. Jurji, who was born in Latakia, Syria, was professor of Islamics and comparative religion at Princeton Theological Seminary at the time.

The forum began on a Sunday and

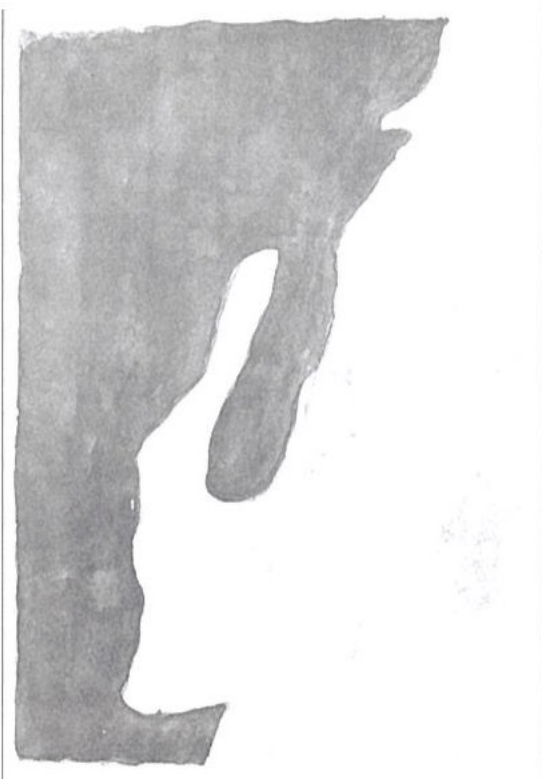
consisted of a combination of chapel services and lectures that ran for four days. Buffet dinners rotated through each dormitory to allow time for students to interact with Jurji. The forum closed with a seminar and dinner and a communion service featuring the meditation, "Beyond Human Sacrifice."

For the 1965 Orr Forum on "Faith in Search of Maturity," the college community was asked to prepare for the series by reading *The*

The liberal arts encourage the liberating study of the larger world; culture beyond one's own province. The process engages both critical questioning and thought."

—DAVID TRUE

Associate Professor of Religion Studies
and Orr Forum director



The program for the 1973 Orr Forum, which featured the mind-expanding Jean Houston (left); volunteers unfold a portion of the NAMES Project AIDS Memorial Quilt for the 1993 forum (right).

Art of Loving by Erich Fromm. The Kittochtinny Players performed Jean-Paul Sartre's *No Exit* and the film *David and Lisa* was shown. The lectures included "Faith in Formation," "The Feminine Mystique and the Female Student," "Faith in Rebellion," "Sex and Fantasy" and finally, "Communication between Generations."

Orr Through the Years

The Orr Forum has always embraced timely discussions of deep importance. "Often these featured inspiring guests who were concerned to remind students to face up to the underlying intellectual issues behind their studies, their basic life meaning and their calling," Anderson said.

The first African-American Orr Forum speaker appeared in 1969. The Rev. Dr. James Robinson was founder of the Morningside Community Center in Harlem in New York City, and founded Operation Crossroads Africa, which John F. Kennedy credited with being the progenitor of the Peace Corps. His lecture topics included: "Civil Disobedience: Alternative to Injustice," "Brotherhood: Alternative to Destruction" and "Imperative Choice: Alternative to Neutrality."

One of the best-attended forums was in 1973 with Jean Houston, director of the Foundation for Mind Research. Early in her career, Houston studied the effects of LSD on human personality. She was also involved in the field of futuristics and in the study of altered states of consciousness.

Perhaps the most recognizable of all Orr Forum speakers over the past 50 years was Maya Angelou, who came to Wilson in 1976 with the theme, "African Values in American Life." A *Billboard* headline of the event raved, *Maya Enthralls Audience*. "From the moment she walked onto the platform, she captured the attention of the audi-

ence. All her abilities as an actress, singer and poetess were brought into play during her speech," the review noted.

The first of three forums to focus on the health of the planet was held in 1982. "Living with Planet Earth" included lectures by Thomas Berry, who warned, "No traditional civilization or religion presently constituted is able to manage change on the order of magnitude that will confront us. The glory of the human has become the desolation of the earth."

The 1993 Orr Forum—"AIDS: Our Community Responds"—was one of the most moving. With funds from the Franklin Area AIDS Network, a portion of the NAMES Project AIDS Memorial

It is important for a college to put questions into a religious, philosophical and spiritual context for discussion. It is important for students to have the opportunity to engage in those types of discussions."

—GWENDOLYN JENSEN
President Emerita

Quilt was displayed in Laird Hall. Dr. David Rogers, vice chairman of the National Commission on AIDS, gave the keynote. Professors Raymond and Gunlog Anderson each moderated panel discussions comprised of experts on caregiving and support. Wilson's dance group, Danceteller, performed "Before Forever," a piece about living with AIDS.

Gun violence in schools was addressed in the 1997 Orr Forum. Anderson, at the time, described the issue as “one of the most pressing problem areas of the day, where community awareness and action are desperately needed.”

Continuing Relevance

When she first came to Wilson as president in 1991, Jensen said she was pleased to discover the Forum. “I admired the work of Ray Anderson. It is important for a college to put questions into a religious, philosophical and spiritual context for discussion,” she said. “It is important for students to have the opportunity to engage in those types of discussions.”

In carrying on the legacy of Buck and Anderson, True has remained faithful to the ideal of providing a platform for civil discourse on matters of substance. While adamant about ensuring the academic and scholarly quality of the Orr Forum, True is also eager to experiment with the format.

This year, True has invited a series of speakers for Orr@Midday. These 30-minute monthly lectures relate to the main theme and bring the college community together in a more intimate setting. Scholars from disciplines ranging from literature, history and art to philosophy and dance add to the conversation and provide a compelling lead-up to this year’s main program, “Prophetic Fragments” with George M. Shulman of New York University in March.

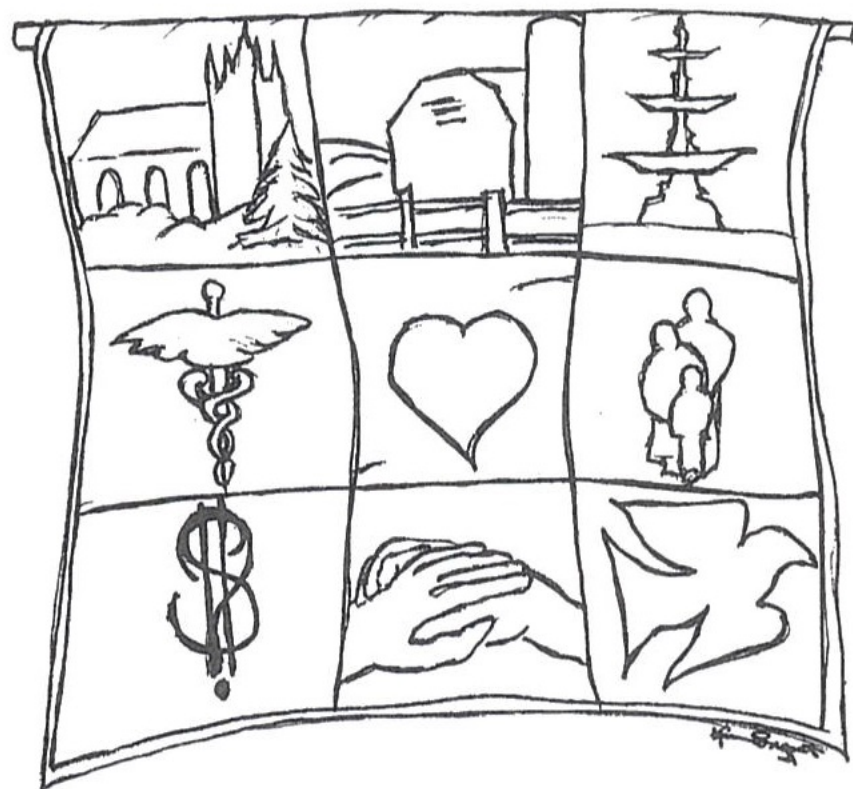
Prophets by nature challenge society’s values and issue dire warnings to get communities back on track, True said. Examples of prophetic fragments include the speeches of Martin Luther King Jr. or the works of author Flannery O’Connor’s, according to True.

“Religion often challenges adherents and hearers to reorient their lives—so in studying religion, these challenging perspectives often come to the fore,” he said. “This is true in the case of the prophetic tradition, which often makes deep and radical criticisms of the present order, warns of consequences and calls for a new way of being a community.”

The intellectual climate fostered at the College has been reinforced for more than 50 years through the forum and is reflected in Wilson alumnae/i, Anderson said. “...Even in this day of encroaching social inequality, it remains practically impossible to find a Wilson alumna/us who is content to think of her or his own life goals merely in terms of self-absorbed merit, status and wealth,” he said. “It has always been a question of the heart and soul of the College.” **W**

AIDS:

Our Community Responds



The 1993 Orr Forum at Wilson College



The program for the 1993 Orr Forum on AIDS (top); Professor Emeritus of Religion and Orr director Raymond Anderson (center, bottom photo) leads a discussion.