The Burke Library at Union Theological Seminary
Columbia University in the City of New York

Union Theological Seminary Archives 1

Finding Aid for

John Coleman Bennett Papers, 1928 - 1995

Finding Aid prepared by: Miguel Angel Escobar, 2006; Rachel Long, Ruth Tonkiss Cameron, 2008, with revisions by Rebecca Nieto, 2016
With financial support from the Henry Luce Foundation

Summary Information
Creator: John Coleman Bennett, 1902 - 1995
Title: John Coleman Bennett Papers, 1928-1995
Inclusive dates: 1928-1995
Bulk dates: 1960 -1970
Abstract: United Church of Christ (Congregational) minister, theologian, Christian ethicist, ecumenist, and Union Theological Seminary Professor of Social Ethics and President. Articles, correspondence, addresses, lectures, sermons, contributions to books, unpublished papers, newspaper clippings, photographs and memorabilia
Size: 12 boxes [2 oversize], 9.00 linear feet
Storage: Onsite storage
Repository: The Burke Library
Union Theological Seminary
3041 Broadway
New York, NY 10027
Email: burkearchives@library.columbia.edu
Administrative Information

Provenance: John Coleman Bennett donated his papers to The Burke Library at Union Theological Seminary following his retirement in 1970 and in additional later donations. Files from The Office of the President were added to the collection in circa 2002.

Access: Archival papers are available to registered readers for consultation by appointment only. Please contact archives staff by email to burkearchives@library.cul.columbia.edu or by postal mail to The Burke Library address on page 1, as far in advance as possible. Burke Library staff is available for inquiries or to request a consultation on archival or special collections research.

Access Restrictions: The collection is unrestricted to readers. Certain materials, however, are in a fragile condition, and this may necessitate restriction in handling and copying.

Preferred Citation: Item description, UTS1: John Coleman Bennett Papers, 1928 -1995, series #, box #, and folder #, The Burke Library at Union Theological Seminary, Columbia University in the City of New York.

Biography

John Coleman Bennett is widely regarded as a major force in the ecumenical movement, a highly regarded social ethicist and political activist, in other words as an interpreter of the social and political implications of the Gospel.

At his death in 1995 the Rev. Holland Hendrix, at that time President of Union Seminary, remembered “Bennett had a passion for fairness. He was an early supporter of feminism, an ardent champion of the civil rights movement, an eloquent critic of U.S. involvement in Vietnam, a prophetic supporter of economic rights for minorities - all this far in advance of the ‘popularity’ of these movements on the part of progressive religionists.”

Hendrix recalls that “the singular event that sums up President Bennett’s career at Union was his having to miss his farewell party because he had been arrested in an anti-Vietnam War protest.”

Bennett was born in Kingston, Ontario, Canada, on July 22, 1902, the son of a Presbyterian minister. He graduated from Williams College in 1924 and received a BA and subsequent MA from Mansfield College, Oxford University in 1926. He attended Union Theological Seminary in New York from 1926, earning a BD in 1927 and an STM in 1929. Bennett, who never studied for a doctoral degree, was known as Dr Bennett as a result of his large number of honorary doctorates. (See below).

From 1927 to 1929 he served as an Assistant Professor of Systematic Theology and Philosophy of Religion at Union and from 1929 to 1930 as an Instructor of Systematic Theology and Philosophy of Religion. He taught Christian Theology at Auburn Theological Seminary during the period 1930 to 1938 starting as Assistant Professor and being promoted to Associate Professor in 1936. He then moved to the Pacific School of Religion to fill the position of
Professor of Christian Theology, 1938-1943. He was ordained as a Congregationalist minister in California on June 13, 1939.

Bennett returned to Union in 1943 as professor of Christian Theology and Ethics, a position which he held until 1957. From 1955 to 1963, he also became Union’s Dean of Faculty. He held the William E. Dodge Jr. Chair of Applied Christianity from 1957 until he was appointed to be Reinhold Niebuhr Professor of Social Ethics, 1960-1970.

In 1963 he was appointed as Union’s eleventh president with an inauguration celebrated in 1964.

During the 1930s, Bennett worked with the Oxford Life and Work Conference on Church, Community and State. He became deeply involved with both the National and World Councils of Churches with leadership positions in WCC Assemblies at Amsterdam, Evanston, and Uppsala. During the Second World War, Bennett was secretary of the Federal Committee on the Relation of the Church to the War in the Light of the Christian Faith. He co-founded the magazine Christianity and Crisis with Reinhold Niebuhr.

As co-founder with Rabbi Abraham Heschel of Clergy and Laity Concerned about Vietnam, Bennett helped to organize the churches against the war and was arrested in several anti-war demonstrations. In 1970 he was invited by the Senate Foreign Relations Committee to testify on the war in South East Asia. He served as President of the American Theological Association and the American Society of Christian Social Ethics and as trustee of the Council on Religion and International Affairs.

During his retirement Bennett continued an active life as an author and lecturer, expressing his long held condemnation of nuclear warfare with increased intensity during the Reagan administration. John Coleman Bennett died at the age of 92 in Claremont, California, on the evening of April 28, 1995. His wife Ann McGrew Bennett, a peace advocate and social activist in her own right had predeceased him in 1986.

Bennett received many honorary doctorates including:

DD from:
- Church Divinity School of the Pacific, 1940
- Pacific School of Religion, 1943
- Williams College, 1947
- Franklin & Marshall College, 1962
- Yale University, 1965
- Harvard University, 1965
- Lafayette College, 1966
- Princeton University, 1966
- Colgate University, 1967
- University of Glasgow, 1967
- Wesleyan University 1968

LLD from:
- Boston College, 1964
- Manhattan College, 1964
- Holy Cross College, 1964
- St Peter’s College, 1964
- Fordham University, 1966
- Jewish Theological Seminary, 1967

STD from:
- Oberlin College, 1961
- Columbia University, 1964
- Kenyon College, 1966

Examples from a list of John Bennett’s many published books:
Collection Scope and Content Note
The Bennett papers consist mainly of correspondence, writings, addresses and records from organizations in which Bennett was involved.

Correspondence ranges from Union related matters to individual correspondence much of it international and on themes of interest to Bennett, such as pacifism and communism, as well as important correspondence related to four U.S. presidential elections.

A significant collection of lectures, sermons and addresses covers the full range of Bennett’s ethical, political and human rights interests. His writings are represented by articles, reviews and contributions to volumes with accompanying correspondence.

The collection is organized in 6 series containing 2 sub series:

- **Series 1: Union Theological Seminary, 1943 – 1994 (2 boxes, 0.75 linear ft)**
  This series is comprised of Union-related correspondence, reports, addresses and other material. It contains congratulations related to John Coleman Bennett’s appointment to the faculty and presidency of UTS, reports to the board, addresses and lectures given at UTS as well as correspondence with subsequent UTS presidents after his retirement. This series also includes statements by Bennett and UTS students about Civil Rights and The Vietnam War. Audio recordings of addresses by Bennett and panel discussions in which he participated during his time at Union, from 1957-1970 are preserved separately in The Burke Archives. Currently access to these can only be had through an onsite visit for research purposes. Please contact archives@uts.columbia.edu for further details.

- **Series 2: Correspondence, 1928-1969 (1 box, 0.5 linear ft)**
  It should be noted that Series 2A and Series 2B are stored in the same archival box.

  - **Subseries 2A: Individual Correspondence, 1944 - 1969**
    N.B. A portion of the contents of this sub series has been missing since 2003. This sub series contains correspondence related to an early biography of Reinhold Niebuhr, pacifism, communism and the issue of whether Christian colleges should require their faculty members to be Christian. Correspondence was also exchanged with a missionary in China and an Afrikaner South African whose time as a Union student led him to rethink his prejudices.
• **Subseries 2B: US Presidential Correspondence, 1928-1971**
This sub series comprises correspondence related to the presidential elections of 1928, 1960, 1964, and 1968.

1928: Smith/Thomas/Hoover
John Coleman Bennett was an organizer of ‘A Protestant Plea,’ an initiative of the Independent Committee of Protestants (for Smith and Thomas). ‘A Protestant Plea’ was a call to make issues other than prohibition—such as corruption and armament—central to the campaign. There are letters in the collection both from those who supported and those who opposed the plea.

1960: Kennedy/Nixon
Most of this correspondence concerns the ‘Religious Issue,’ i.e. Kennedy’s Catholicism. In one letter the President of the Board of UTS tells Bennett to tone down his partisanship, but not his attacks on anti-Catholic sentiments among Protestants. The collection contains numerous press clippings about this issue.

1964: Johnson/Goldwater
The bulk of this correspondence is in response to an ‘Interfaith Statement on the Place of Morality in the Campaign’ signed by Bennett and the endorsement of Johnson by the Christianity and Crisis editorial board, of which Bennett was a part. This reaction includes correspondence from Lyndon Johnson and Barry Goldwater as well as many articles about the endorsement by the editorial board.

1968: Humphrey/Nixon
This correspondence is in response to Bennett’s endorsement of Humphrey.

• **Series 3: Addresses, 1933-1991 (3 boxes, 1.5 linear ft)**
N.B. Some of the former content of this series – previously listed as ‘III.3.4. - Statements, Testimonials, Releases’ – have been missing since 2003.

This series contains texts and drafts of lectures and addresses, including sermons and television appearances, and related correspondence.

Addresses are arranged by audience – academic institutions, conferences and others. Topics addressed include amnesty for draft resisters, capitalism, economic justice, ecumenism, faith and political participation, neo-Orthodoxy, nuclear weapons, social ethics, theological education, and the war in Vietnam, as well as addresses about Harry Emerson Fosdick and Reinhold Niebuhr.

Sermons and prayers are arranged by venue and topics include amnesty for draft resisters, Christian humanism, church and society patriotism, the role of a minister, social ethics, and social action. Sermons about Reinhold Niebuhr and James Ault are also included.

Lectures are arranged by venue – academic institution and other.
Wide ranging topics include American civil religion, Christian ethics, Christian humanism, Christian realism, Cuba policy, economic justice, foreign missions, foreign policy, interfaith cooperation, liberal progressivism, nuclear weapons, poverty, process theology, social change, and women in the church. Lectures on Billy Graham and Reinhold Niebuhr are also included.

In 1950 and 1951, Dr. Bennett went on a speaking tour of Lebanon, Pakistan, India, Thailand and the Philippines sponsored by the International Missionary Council, related to his book *Christianity and Communism*. The papers related to this trip include personal correspondence between Bennett and his family.

Materials related to television appearances include transcripts and correspondence. Bennett appeared on television programs about The John Birch Society and Communism and Church and State issues. There is correspondence with Barry Goldwater on the appropriate role of the church in the fight against communism prompted by Bennett’s appearance on *Open End*.

- **Series 4: Writings, 1925-1991 (3 boxes, 1.25 linear ft)**
  This series includes articles, reviews, contributions to books, and related correspondence.

  Articles with related correspondence precede books and related correspondence. Within each section, items are arranged chronologically.

  Articles address wide ranging topics such as: the 1937 Oxford Conference, abortion, capitalism, civil liberties, Christianity and democracy, class consciousness, communism, Cuba, economic equality, euthanasia, evil, fascism, ‘God is dead’ theology, the idea of a limited God, internationalism, moral relativity, the Nazi movement and the church, the nuclear threat, the Pastoral Letter of the Catholic Bishops on the Economy, the philosophy of property, political neutrality, population control, post-war Europe, the presidency of Ronald Reagan, prohibition, race, redemption, the relevance of Jesus and socialism, the religious issue in the 1960 presidential election, Riverside Church, the role of a minister, Russia, the Second Vatican Council, Social action and The World Council of Churches, appointment of a U.S. ambassador to the Vatican, Union Theological Seminary and the Vietnam War.

  Bennett also wrote about the work of Reinhold Niebuhr, Baron Friedrich von Hügel, Rabbi Abraham Heschel, William Adams Brown, Martin Niemoeller, Paul Tillich, Ray Gibbons, Oscar Cullman and William Temple.

  Topics addressed by John Coleman Bennett in his contributions to edited books other than his own include aging, capitalism, church and state, corporations, the Geneva Conference of 1966, human nature, love and justice, morality and international affairs, the nature of God, the radicalism of Jesus, social justice and U.S. Asia policy.
• **Series 5: Memberships, 1942-1974 (2 boxes, 0.75 linear ft)**
  This series contains papers relating to Bennett’s participation in political, religious, and ecumenical organizations. Bennett was involved with many progressive organizations, both religious and secular. The series is arranged alphabetically by organization.

  The folder for Clergy and Laymen concerned about Vietnam includes a photocopy of a handwritten note to Bennett from Martin Luther King, Jr.

  The Committee on Society, Development, and Peace was an ecumenical secretariat jointly established by the World Council of Church and the Holy See. Bennett was the chair of the committee’s meeting in Geneva in 1969.

  Bennett served as secretary of the Federal Commission on the Relation of the Church to the War in the Light of the Christian Faith, while John Foster Dulles was the chairman. Bennett’s reflections on the work of the committee and Dulles in particular were recorded in a 1965 interview that is part of the John Foster Dulles oral history project, a transcript of which is included in this series.

  Bennett was deeply involved in both the National Council of Churches and in the initial formation of the World Council of Churches. He served as chair of the drafting committee of the 1958 NCC World Order Study Conference that urged for a change in US China policy. This stance was criticized by many as accommodation with communism.

  The 1973 Reinhold Niebuhr Award was presented to Cesar Chavez and the National Farmworkers Union. Correspondence with Mr. Chavez and the letter of presentation of the award are included.

• **Series 6: General, 1944-1995 (1 box [2 oversize], 4.25 linear ft)**
  This series includes information related to Bennett receiving the Williams College Bicentennial Medal in 1993, photographs, and items related to Bennett’s death in 1995, including obituaries and memorials. Also included are 8 scrapbooks consisting mostly of clippings and relating to Bennett’s public service and Union-affiliated editorial writing, articles, and social justice work related the ecumenical activist community in World War II, the Civil Rights Movement, and the Vietnam War.

**Processing**
Metal clips and staples were removed from materials and folded items were flattened. Materials were placed in new acid-free folders and boxes. Acidic items were separated from one another by interleaving with acid-free paper as needed. Some materials were rearranged. The notations of an original undated manuscript partial contents list have been retained in square brackets at the end of folder descriptions.
## Contents list

### Series 1: Union Theological Seminary, 1943 - 1994

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<td>Sermons and Prayers in James Memorial Chapel, 1947-1966 [I.5]</td>
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<td>M. Juergensmeyer Interview with Bennett re UTS -Transcript, 1978</td>
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<td>Correspondence with UTS President Shriver, 1976-1986, 89 ltrs</td>
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<td>Correspondence: UTS President Hendrix, 1991-1993, 6 ltrs</td>
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<td>Distinguished Union Alumni/ae Award, 1994</td>
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### Series 2: Correspondence, 1928-1971

*Note: Box 1 contains both Series 2A and Series 2B.*

#### Series 2A: Individual Correspondence Individual, 1944-1971

| 2A | 1 | June Bingham, 1959-1961, 7 ltrs |
| 2A | 1 | E. Fay Campbell, 1944, 3 ltrs |
| 2A | 3 | Angus Dun, 1950, 3 ltrs |
| 2A | 5 | Norman Vincent Peale, 1961-1962, 9 ltrs |
| 2A | 6 | Paul Ramsey, 1959-1969, 28 ltrs |
Series 2A: Individual Correspondence Individual, 1944-1971

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<td>Leroy Rouner, 1957, 4 ltrs</td>
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<td>Charles West, 1947-1953, 3 ltrs</td>
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Series 2B: Presidential Correspondence, 1928-1968

U.S. Presidential Election 1928-Smith/Thomas/Hoover

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<td>'A Protestant Plea,' 28 statements [II.4.8A]</td>
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<td>A-J, 22 ltrs [II.4.8A]</td>
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<td>K-W and unidentified, 27 ltrs [II.4.8A]</td>
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U.S. Presidential Election 1960-Kennedy/Nixon

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U.S. Presidential Election 1964: Johnson/Goldwater,

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<td>A-Z 174 ltrs [II.4.8C]</td>
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U.S. Presidential Election 1968: Humphrey/Nixon

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Addresses

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Sermons and Prayers

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