



BOSTON COLLEGE

BOISI CENTER
FOR RELIGION AND AMERICAN PUBLIC LIFE

Symposium on Religion and the Liberal Aims of Higher Education

Transcription of Panel I: “Historical Perspectives”

Friday, November 9, 2012, 9:00am
The Heights Room of Corcoran Commons, Boston College

featuring:

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Studies and Julie Clarence Levi Professor in
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Julie Ruben

Professor of Education, Harvard University

Mark Noll

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Moderated by **Cullen Murphy**

Editor-at-Large, *Vanity Fair*

Introduced by **Henry Braun**

Boisi Professor of Education and Public Policy, Boston College

BRAUN: Good morning. I'm Henry Braun, professor of education and public policy here at BC,

for selecting this symposium as one of the signature events in the celebration of BC's 150th anniversary. We're very honored, and have had great encouragement from Boston College throughout the process of bringing this symposium to fruition. And I especially want to mention Frank Murtagh, Courtney Hough, and their colleagues at OMC for their support in planning and logistics, as well as Conor Kelly for his steadfast support over the last year.

Last night, President Hatch's keynote address was titled Hope and Challenge in the Middle Ground. In it, he elaborated on the essential role that private colleges play in American higher education, with particular attention to those affiliated with the Catholic Church, and especially Jesuit institutions like Boston College. And while recognizing the

At many religiously-affiliated institutions, that battle is being waged successfully. Here at BC, student formation has been a guiding principle since our founding 150 years ago, though certainly how it is framed and realized has evolved over the years.

After its most recent reexamination of the issue in 2006, Boston College issued a pamphlet titled *The Journey to Adulthood*, which noted that, ideally, college students, and I quote, “move towards new forms of identity and more critically aware forms of knowing, choosing, and living authentically.” And it goes on to point out that, while many institutions have moved to focus primarily on students’ intellectual development,

him in the *New York Review of Books*. And Mark Noll is a professor of history at Notre Dame, and the author of so many books it's hard to know which ones to cite, but *America's God* and *The Scandal of the Evangelical Mind* are two that at least come to my mind. And I'm here in the role of ignorant layman, for which I've been well trained.

Our topic this morning is the historical perspectives aspect of the overall theme, Religion and the Liberal Aims of Higher Education. And there's a large sweep of time to cover,

point, shed that affiliation, even if they don't actively hide it. Some probably maintain it, as yours does, and as this one does. So just thinking about the role of religion, and the role that it played at the outset, how do you locate religion in the idea of liberal education? What motivating power did it have, what legacy has it left?

REUBEN: Well, if we take what I was saying about what I think of liberal education as trying to understand ourselves and our place in the world that we inhabit, religion certainly has been one of the main cultural forces that have addressed that question, and has tried to answer that question, and has engaged people in asking that question.

And so if we also assume that you help people learn how to ask and answer questions by engaging them with other people's efforts to ask and answer questions, you couldn't really have a liberal education in our culture that didn't bring students into contact with religion. Because in order to understand how people have asked the question about who we are, what's our world, and what's our place in it, you would have to engage with various attempts of religious traditions to answer those questions. And so in that way, I think—hard for me to imagine a liberal education that students didn't come into contact with religious traditions.

NOLL: I think that the way you posed the question is a really interesting indicator of the modern world. Because until maybe 125 years ago in the United States, little bit longer in Europe, it was just taken for granted that liberal arts exist within a religious framework. From the origin of the universities in the Middle Ages in Bologna and Paris and Oxford and Cambridge, these are monastic-related enterprises.

At the Reformation, Protestants break away from Catholic teaching, but within the second generation of the Reformation, major reformers are going back to Aristotle and organizing Protestant curricula for higher learning in a fashion that's very similar to the way in which Catholic learning had been developed.

And then, in the United States, it's really only after the Civil War that there begins to be even the possibility that learning of a liberal sort would be—that you'd have to ask the question that you posed, because the liberal learning, the preparation of character, the preparation of leaders in society, is intrinsically built upon a religious foundation.

My colleague at Notre Dame, Brad Gregory, has recently published a really interesting book called *The Unintended Reformation*, in which he says that changes in the religious

where there's an inscription over the façade that says, something, this is erected in the name of religion, where—

DELBANCO: Actually, what it says is, erected for the students. And a great teacher I had drilled into me the notion that, when you see a principle enunciated in this kind of public, big way, you can be sure that no one believes it anymore. In this case, this is a building that—the other buildings surrounding it have names like mathematics, philosophy, law—in other words, this is the new Columbia campus that was constructed at the beginning of the 20th century. It was constructed on behalf of the disciplines, of the subjects. So we have this one building there that says, we're different, we're erected for the students. And that struck me as kind of an interesting contrast.

MURPHY: And then, beyond that, it says something about religion, and also something about, so that they may grow in character.

DELBANCO: That knowledge and character should grow together.

MURPHY: Grow together, right.

It created a new intellectual and industrial elite that worked together, and ultimately they worked together to enshrine the primacy of research-oriented universities. And they took over a lot of different organizations, like foundations, and set up accrediting organizations and other things like that, that eventually put a lot of pressure on other kinds of colleges to conform to the models of the research university.

And so I think it's a combination of intellectual changes that led to certain new institutional practices, but then those institutional practices being really supported by social and economic changes, and together, that really create a very tight and difficult set of institutional practices to break out of, and that we've lived with them for 100 and more years, and we've tried to tinker with them. But it's very hard to really transform them in a significant way, because they're linked both with intellectual standards and a kind of social setting and economic setting that support them.

MURPHY: Remind me, Julie, at some point, I would like to come back to ask you about a fascinating little diversion that you have in one of your papers about dormitories. But I don't want to get us off-track now, but I've made a note. Andrew?

DELBANCO: Well, just briefly, to add to the story that Julie tells so well, and we rightly locate—I gather Drew Faust did this in a talk here a couple of weeks ago—we've located the formative moment in the late 19th century with the rise to the presidency of Harvard the first non-clergyman to be president of Harvard, Charles W. Eliot. And I think that's all true.

But I think we want to also remember that, in the aftermath of the Second World War, a very important decision was made in this country, and that is when the federal government, for the first time, got significantly engaged in funding higher education.

19th

stalled, if not stopped. And in that context, there is—as I hardly need tell people in this room—a growing preoccupation with measurable outcomes. If we make, as a society, an investment, either through public funds or private philanthropy, in an educational institution, how do we know what we’re getting for the investment? What is the outcome?

And the problem, I think, that we face, all of us interested in humanistic education, whether we come from a particular religious tradition or not, is how do we step up to that challenge? As Nathan said last night, scientists know how to show results. If you believe, as I do, that the results of humanistic education don’t show up until they come back for their 25th

But maybe even more significantly, I think that—and this I know better from the Wheaton College experience—the people that would not come back, who would have come in their own personal journeys to reject certain aspects of what they had been taught at Wheaton—and I suspect it’s true at Notre Dame as well—nonetheless express their disillusionment or rejection in highly character-driven, highly moral terms.

So that what was clearly successful in the institution is training people to think about major life issues on the basis of grounded moral inquiry. It wasn’t as though people were upset with something happening at Wheaton College because fewer people were getting

MURPHY: Julie, as you think about this question, another aspect I'd like to add, because you've written a little bit about it, when thinking about outcomes, what kinds of people does a certain kind of education produce,

MURPHY: The religious literacy question is a fascinating one. Just as a footnote, from my own experience at Amherst, I find there to be much more religious awareness and personal religious practice at Amherst than there was 40 years ago. Partly it's a result of demographic diversity—Korean Pentecostals, Protestant and Catholic Latinos, Jesuit-educated Africans. So it's actually a very interesting experiment that no one knew they were conducting.

DELBANCO: I think that's very true, and I think faculty of my generation, at least in places like mine, don't really realize this. For instance, when they see a student walking across the campus who has the physiognomic features of a person from Asia, they think, there is an Asian-American person, whereas it's more and more likely that that person thinks of him- or herself as a Christian first. And I think very few faculty are really aware of this change that's happening right now.

MURPHY: Just thinking about religious literacy in general, I suppose there could be a tendency among some to think that, because religion seemed to be more in the public eye and more present in institutions decades ago than it is now, that religious literacy must have been greater in the past. But I wonder about that. I can certainly see that literacy with respect to one's own religion might have been greater, but literacy with respect to other religions may not have been any greater at all.

So stepping back from that, what role do you see for religious literacy? How important is it? How does that inform liberal education, or how should it? Is it a big-ticket item that we're missing, or not?

DELBANCO: Well, it seems pretty clear by now that there was something wrong with the secularization thesis of history. I can answer with an anecdote. I was put on—I think it was the last committee they put me on, for reasons that may be obvious to you—but I was put on the review committee for the religion department at Columbia, and the then-dean of the faculty clearly had the attitude that he couldn't understand why this department existed. And he had a not-so-hidden agenda to see to it that it would go out of business. I mean, we had Union Theological Seminary down the street, so why did we need this department?

And then 9/11 happened, so all of a sudden, religion became a topic of renewed interest, but religion as a kind of pathology. We needed to study religion, understand religion, because it clearly explained a lot of what was wrong in the world. We had a religious right in this country, and we had jihadists in other countries, and therefore we ought to have a place in the university where we studied this pathology.

I'd like to think we've moved through that, and we're now at a somewhat better place, and that because of the comment—what you were pointing to us a few moments ago, namely the renewed interest on the part of students in figuring out their first principles, that maybe we're coming to a moment where religious literacy might find better reasons to be deemed important as part of a liberal education.

MURPHY: Mark, anything?

NOLL: Well, I do think that the general situation has changed dramatically. If you think of the era of the American Civil War, you have the greatest speech, probably, in American public life, by Abraham Lincoln, who had been to school less than a year, much less

college or university, quoting five or six times the King James version of the Bible, and not stopping to say where these were quotations were coming from, and everyone knew, from this non-church member, what he was talking about.

What Americans in 1865 knew about Islam, or Hinduism, or Buddhism, was negligible. It would have been probably just a few people within five miles of where we sit today that would have had any knowledge. On one hand, I think, in fact, contemporary students have a much better grasp of the religions of the world, but also probably a much weaker grasp of the particular traditions that have been important in the West.

And I would say, about religious literacy at places like Notre Dame and Wheaton, and many colleges and universities of that sort, so far as I can tell, there's an unambiguous, unapologetic requirement that all students take basic—I think at Notre Dame it's two theology and two philosophy courses. At Wheaton it's three and a half Bible courses and theology courses over the course of their tenure at the college.

I think maybe it used to be that these were courses designed to give an intellectual and a theological standing within the tradition. Now, I think they function to teach people who are there, for reasons of some interest ahead of time, actually to give some content, to give some intellectual and theological ballast to what it is that the institutions say they're doing. The students sort of know, and are interested in, but in many cases may not have a whole lot of particular information as to what that tradition actually means in intellectual and theological terms.

I'm certainly not sure how well the institution thinks those required courses work, but looking from the outside at the administration of those courses, they seem very proper, and done usually quite decently, and a major assist to keeping alive religious literacy amongst the parts of the population that are supposed to be religiously literate.

REUBEN: I think that one of the things that you point out about, in many ways, students are coming who are more personally religious, is a great reminder that universities and colleges are not operating in a vacuum, they're operating in a social context that brings students to them with different levels of commitment and things.

And it is true that we're living in a world where there's a high level of personal religious commitment, and our students come to the institutions with those commitments, but one of the issues is that those commitments remain largely private at many institutions, so that students with their religious commitments pursue them, support them, remain in their groups that they create in the extracurricular world, but it never gets integrated into the main part of the university, and students don't necessarily communicate across traditions,

most interesting projects had to do with religion and getting people to be able to speak across religious groups.

Even more difficult than speaking across religious groups than—so, say, getting Catholics and Jews or Catholics and Muslims to speak together—was getting people who had religious commitments to be able to speak with people who didn't have religious commitments, or who had clearly commitments against theistic kinds of understandings of the world.

It seems that a remarkably wonderful opportunity for institutions that want students to learn from each other, and want people to be able to learn from the diversity that we're intentionally creating at these institutions, is to think about religion as an important dimension of difference and an important opportunity for people to be able to learn and to discuss.

So to be creating intentional opportunities for people to move their religion out of private practice and into the intellectual life of the institution seems like something that colleges

NOLL:

I think the challenge for institutions that have a particular religious standing in character formation is to combine two things that are often difficult to combine, which is strong rootedness in the tradition, but secondly, highlighting those aspects in the tradition that are outward-looking to the world. All the major theistic traditions do combine those, in theory.

That is to say that they are Jewish, or Muslim, or Catholic, or evangelical Protestant, or Lutheran, and all of those theistic systems have strong views of the imago dei, they have strong views of God creating everything, but it's difficult to maintain the balance between the particular and the general, and somehow training in character should have as an ideal formation by the best in your tradition and as much openness to those who are not of your tradition as possible. This a way, I think, to have character that functions in public—which is not always the same as character functioning in private. That's a challenge, and I think I remain a little bit still residually gloomy about the prospects, unfortunately.

But I also think that the likelihood that competition among institutions for prestige, the need for outside funding, those kinds of things are going to continue to push institutional leaders to try to do business as usual. So it's a little bit of a—I think there are opportunities there, but I think that there are also pressures that might make us overlook those opportunities.

MURPHY: Thank you. Just making myself aware of the time, I realize there may not be time to go to you for your questions at the expense of the questions that will likely be out in the hall. So we have 15 minutes, and if there are any questions—OK. Yes?

OPPENHEIMER: I'm Mark Oppenheimer. The first time that anyone said the word that I'd been thinking the whole time was just now, when Ms. Reuben said prestige. That's so central to the tension that you're talking about, which is that it's probably not that difficult to have a kind of coherent sense of your Christian mission or whatever, your ethnic mission, your character forming, if you're willing to sacrifice, if you're willing to get off the treadmill for prestige.

If you don't worry about—if what you want to be is an evangelical Christian college with

MURPHY: We have time for one more question, and I did see a few more hands. Yes?

the principle is there, and in the modern world, gives institutions with a religious-particular basis some opportunity for showing how their particularities mandate the universal kind of respect and dialogue you articulated in your question.

MURPHY: Thank you very much. It's been a wonderful conversation, and, Julie, Andrew, Mark –

BRAUN: Thank you very much.

[END OF TRANSCRIPT]