

# BOISI CENTER INTERVIEWS



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**TAL HOWARD** is an associate professor of history at Gordon College in Wenham, Massachusetts, whose work concentrates in early modern and modern European intellectual and religious history. He spoke with Boisi Center undergraduate research assistant **Kitsy Smith** before his presentation on evangelicals and the Catholic mind at the Boisi Center.

**SMITH:** Here at Boston College, the Catholic identity is all around. How prominent a role does the Evangelical faith play at Gordon College?

**HOWARD:** I think it's very, very prominent. There's a mandatory chapel program that students attend Monday, Wednesday and Friday. Professors enjoin their students to try to integrate faith in learning in various ways.

We have a prominent speaker series entitled, *The Faith Seeking Understanding* lecture series—that famous phrase coming from St. Anselm. A lot of the speakers—not unlike the Boisi Center, would be thinking of the intersection of faith and ethics and religion, contemporary affairs.

Most students decide to attend Gordon College because they have Christian, and specifically, Protestant evangelical convictions and background.

**SMITH:** Your book discusses religion's role in American universities. What would you say are the pluses and the drawbacks between religiously affiliated and secular universities?

**HOWARD:** They are big categories on both sides, and there are different kinds of religious institutions and different kinds of secular institutions.

At a school like Gordon, and probably, to a degree, like Boston College, if you're interested in the particularities of a faith background and sort of thinking within its tradition, you'll have much more opportunities to do that. Like Boston



College, if you want to take classes, and the philosophy at Thomas Aquinas, or Catholic social thought those would be available. If you went to Memphis State, for example, you probably wouldn't find those.

Diversity often comes up. Sometimes you'll find some religious schools much more homogenous in their student background, and it's always a challenge,

at places such as Gordon, to remain faithful to a tradition and its constituencies while also exposing students to the broader world. That can be a challenge sometimes, whether that's by definition racially or religiously.

If you went to some of the larger state schools, Ohio State or something like that, you would find quite a bit of diversity just in the student line that you might not find at some religiously affiliated universities. That's not true of all, though. They're tough generalizations to make, and it would depend on the particular institution.

**SMITH:** Narrowing the categories a bit, now, could you comment on the differences between evangelical and Catholic universities today, their strengths and their weaknesses?

**HOWARD:** That's still a big category. They come out of two very different traditions. We could talk about evangelicalism and ask, is that the same thing as Protestantism? Yes and no is the answer there.

But Catholic colleges and universities in the United States have a long background. They began in Europe with some of the famous universities of Paris and Bologna, and there's a long intellectual tradition there. They think of universities as they have of hospitals, as well: this is

something we established, but it's a kind of gift to the world. That kind of larger European background of Christendom is there.

Evangelicals have come from a much different historical experience that shaped them both in the old world and particularly in the new world. They come out of a more populous revivalist tradition that has a historically placed emphasis on the life of the mind, *la vita contemplativa*, as the Catholic universities have.

Sometimes Evangelicals see themselves as a way to preserve a subculture. Often, professors have to sign faith statements and it can sometimes be a bit more restrictive in that respect, so they haven't thought of themselves necessarily as "we do education." It's kind of a come one, come all.

The Catholic Church has a much longer and richer history, and even a degree of self-confidence in higher education that Evangelical communities have not had. They're trying—maybe learning, finding their way.

**SMITH:** What about students who come to religiously affiliated schools that are members of another religion or aren't religious at all? Enrollment numbers are soaring and religious schools are consistently ranked quite high nationally. What do you think is the draw for individuals who come to these schools but not necessarily for religious reasons?

**HOWARD:** Comparing Boston College and Gordon, you're comparing apples and oranges. The Christian faith is kind of the great unifier, but they have very different national profiles. Gordon does not have a national profile the way that Boston College does.

Most students at Gordon would come because they are Christians, but they have really different backgrounds: Episcopalians, Methodists, Baptists, a smattering of Orthodox and Catholic students.

All students, to my knowledge, don't necessarily have to profess a particular creedal statement, but they have to say that they're sympathetic to the aims of the institution, and wouldn't be there with sort of a demolitionist attitude.

Especially if you're interested in ethical concerns, the intersection of religion and a lot of other disciplines—politics, history, philosophy—you would come to a school where these would be very upfront questions. I think that can engage a wide range of people for many different faith backgrounds.

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I assume something similar goes on here at Boston College, but I probably know the situation on the ground at Gordon a little better.

**SMITH:** Where do you see the evangelical scholarship heading?

**HOWARD:** I hope it's improving. Evangelicals today, to repeat something that I said earlier, don't quite have the history of the life and mind, *la vita contemplativa*, that the Catholic intellectual tradition

has. There have been some notable developments, especially within the more reformed or Calvinist traditions, where a number of leading scholars such as the current President of Wake Forest, Mark Noll, my collaborator in this project is actually at Notre Dame. He formerly taught at Wheaton College. A number of other key figures in the reform Calvinist tradition have been very prominent.

Another figure I should mention is George Marsden, who wrote a book a number of years ago called *The Outrageous Idea of Christian Scholarship*. He taught that, just as there are feminist perspectives and Marxist perspectives on things, there should be Christian perspectives on certain issues that historically have maybe been marginalized a little bit from the secular university.

What I'm getting at in this, and it's in this book, is that evangelical scholars are looking. There's a kind of pragmatism to look at different traditions, with Catholicism being one of them. They ask, what can we learn, what can we borrow, what can we pillage from other traditions?

I think, given the Evangelicals' background as a much more activist, populist, revivalist type of Christianity, when it comes to the life of the mind, it doesn't have its own indigenous resources. I think in its better moments, it's open and embracing of other traditions as a kind of an ecumenical project. If Evangelicals can bring an activist spirit and concerns for poverty and moral issues to the table, then they should also be eager borrowers from other traditions that involve the life of the mind a lot more robustly.

**SMITH:** What about universities that have gone in the other direction, those that started off as religious and then dropped that identity more or less, such as Duke or Vanderbilt?

**HOWARD:** There's an interesting story there, or multiple stories. George Marsden, the scholar I just mentioned, wrote a book a number of years ago called *The*

[Soul of the American University – From Protestant Establishment to Established Non-Belief](#). He looked at the trajectory of a number of schools like that. Harvard would be another example. It was founded to equip Puritan ministers, and to my knowledge, that's not an abiding goal at Harvard.

Many have criticized Marsden's thesis, and commented in different directions, but I still think that's the big story of American higher education from the eighteenth, nineteenth to the twentieth century; some type of secularization has taken place.

I think a number of people are beginning to rethink that. Recently, John Sommerville of the University of Florida came out with a book entitled, *The Post Secular University*, and discusses how we entered a period of post secularity. America remains a very religious society. After 9/11, and for a lot of other reasons, people are very interested in thinking about religious issues.

I think a number of colleges and universities are trying to rethink their history—and ask, "Is there a place for religion here? Are we capturing an aspect?" It might not look the same as it did in the eighteenth or nineteenth centuries, but is there a way to shore up, re-personate, bring back the lives, and some aspect of our religious identity.

That's being called hand in hand with a lot of new study programs, and interest among students on religious questions and questions of religious identity.

**SMITH:** Providing religious courses or chapels on campuses would be one way of responding to this? Or is that more or less provided anyway?

**HOWARD:** I think that's happening, but yet, it's hard to generalize across the board. I would say, even with the secularization there, that George Marsden and other universities have changed what they offer. It's not sort of an inexorable process, from some religious point in the



past, to creeping secularity that continues ad infinitum. It has reached a point where people are beginning to rethink that narrative, and rethink the identities, backgrounds, and mission statements of their colleges and universities.

A huge swath of American colleges and universities has had a religious founding. Johns Hopkins University, or Cornell University in the nineteenth century have purely secular foundations and are models of secular research universities. But most do have a religious founding of some sort. The story is getting more complicated now. That's what I'm trying to dig into the past, and see what's salvageable and what has salience for the future.

**SMITH:** Would you say that, in the same sense as you alluded to earlier about Evangelicals being open minded and looking at what they can borrow from Catholic schools, that secular universities are similarly looking for answers from religious institutions as well?

**HOWARD:** Probably not at the general university level, but I think probably at the faculty level, and within particular institutes on campus. I think they would be looking to different professors and different models of thinking about faith learning, issues that religiously affiliated schools have kept alive. I bet that would be a very interesting study, and see what

folks in the secular academy are able to glean and learn from religiously defined academies.

But I think that kind of cross-pollination is going on, if not at the level of presidents and provosts, then a lot of professional societies and among individual scholars.

**SMITH:** Let's hope that everyone is better for it.

**HOWARD:** Yes. I think, different from American pluralism, democracy in higher education gets that kind of cross-pollination.

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