



# BOSTON COLLEGE

BOISI CENTER  
FOR RELIGION AND AMERICAN PUBLIC LIFE

## Symposium on Religion and the Liberal Aims of Higher Education

### Transcription of Closing Remarks

by

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FR. LEAHY: Obviously a whole lot of points have been raised in this symposium, and I certainly don't presume to weave everything into a summary or send you home with all the pithy points that were raised. But what I would like to do is speak from my experience as someone involved in education, involved in the Catholic Church, also as someone who has had any number of conversations over the years about this whole question of how religion, theology, and religious beliefs intersect in higher education.

And so I want to start with saying, in the way of a preface, that the question for me is not *whether* religion, religious beliefs, values, convictions, theology should have a place in higher education. I very much think [John Henry] Newman had it right in his book, *The Idea of a University*, in the mid-19<sup>th</sup> century, when he said that the circle of knowledge is incomplete without attention to theology. So I would say that for state institutions with a department of religion—I come from the state of Iowa, where the University of Iowa has a department of religion, and I think it's a stronger school because it has that department—there is the possibility of discourse around religion, I think, at a higher level than in a state school that doesn't provide any kind of possibility for discussion. The question for me is not *whether*, but *how*. How will religion, religious beliefs, values, convictions, theology have a place in higher education in the United States, and also in the life—particularly of college students—but in the life of our society?

So I want to make some comments briefly here on issues that came up in this conference more than once. I want to talk about vision, mission and leadership. Because I think these three words capture a whole lot of what was discussed here, not only among panelists,

but also in the questions. Many people at Boston College have heard me say this quotation from Proverbs, but I think it is so apt. Proverbs 29:18 says, “Where there is no vision, the people perish.” And I think that’s true for institutions as well.

Where we are in the United States, and especially in faith-based institutions, I think is what the prophet Habakkuk urged his followers years and years ago. I think his words apply to us: “Write down the vision clearly upon the tablets so that one can read it readily. For the vision still has its time, presses on to fulfillment and will not disappoint. If it delays, wait for it. It will surely come. It will not be late.” For all of us who believe in liberal arts education, I think one of our tasks is to review the vision that we have, make sure that it’s clear, grounded in our tradition, whatever that tradition might be, and that it’s always kept fresh.

We hear a lot about the word vision, but it’s a word that, for me, suggests a way of seeing and conceiving that is transformative, that offers realizable ideals so compelling that individuals are energized and willing to invest themselves in an activity or an enterprise far more effectively and extensively than they could ever have imagined. Vision that is effective, that’s compelling, captures in a concise, convincing fashion the aspirations and ambitions of an institution, of a group of people, and it does that in a way that inspires and sustains.

So most simply, a vision challenges, encourages and calls people to engagement and greatness. We in the liberal arts colleges, and places like BC and any school that has a faith tradition at its underpinnings, always needs to be thinking, conversing about its vision. Now, you may say, how does one create and revitalize, keep fresh, vision? Some thoughts.

I think, first of all, there has to be an ongoing dialogue with the tradition that gave birth to the institutions and shaped their development. Not simply to maintain previous formulations, but to understand the religious and educational principles, values and hopes that led to the founding and development of those institutions. That dialogue requires a familiarity with the roots and origins of an institution. And I think in the case of faith-based schools, it has to pay attention to how is that institution affecting not simply the intellectual dimensions of a student’s life, but also the religious, social, and affective parts.

Second, besides dialogue, I think you simply have to engage in widespread conversation and consultation within the institution and outside it. My observation about a number of Catholic institutions is that they would be ahead if they would talk more to their alumni about what’s been the impact of the particular set of experiences, courses that those alumni had at an institution. I think it would refresh and encourage the institutions. And I think it also generates much, much more involvement on the part of alumni in the school and persuades them—they have to give the next generation the opportunities that they had in that particular institution.

Third thing about creating vision is that it simply has to integrate intellectual excellence and religious commitment. There is no substitute for that kind of integration.

Now, I don’t have a lot of time, but if you ask me what are my words that describe the vision that I have for BC, I’ll give you three. University, Catholic, and Jesuit. And I can build a whole vision statement, a series of subsets about where I think Boston College

must be. But I start with university. For me, it's the noun. Catholic and Jesuit are the adjectives. They particularize us. They shape us in immense ways.

But first of all, we're a *university*. We are committed to being a community of scholars, learners, teachers. We're not a parish, we're not a seminary. We're not a social service agency. But we're an academic institution where teaching, research, scholarship, and service take place. Our students come here to learn and they learn in a whole spectrum of disciplines, and they also internalize values and beliefs. So being a university is key. And it's not that we simply transmit the past; we have to foster the spirit of intellectual inquiry. And so what we want to do is inform. Yes, we also want to form—but the goal is to *transform*.

So we're about imparting information, formation as well, but the goal is transformation. And so for us, being this university that we are, liberal arts are at the heart of what we're about. We are an institution that stresses undergraduate education with an emphasis on the liberal arts. We have selected graduate and professional programs. We want to deliver all of that educational and personal experience in an atmosphere of caring and faith that reflects our heritage, our history as a Jesuit Catholic school. But university is key.

*Catholic* helps us differentiate ourselves, stay true to our roots. Liberal arts education is so much a part of the Catholic heritage. We came out of that. We at BC, because of this Catholic root, have a desire to engage faith and culture. We want to be this meeting place, and we're very much about helping people integrate the various dimensions of their lives.

If I had to make the case for liberal arts, I would say liberal arts help people become more whole, more free, more human, and more able to engage modern culture and use their gifts and talents for the good of all.

When I hear parents ask, "Will my son or daughter have a job after they leave Boston College or any liberal arts institution?" I say, "I'm confident they will." I don't know what that job's going to be, but I can remember when I was at Marquette University and a banker was talking with me about who he likes to recruit. He ran a big consumer banking operation, and he told me the best employees that he hired were philosophy majors, not accountants or finance majors. Because, he said, the philosophy majors understand texts, they can see a whole bunch of evidence, and they can make connections. He said, "I can teach them my system for financial analysis, but it's hard to teach someone who has a narrow perspective about the business of making loans and judging who is a good credit risk."

Another Jesuit that I knew well used to say that being in a Catholic university is like being in a mist: stay in it long enough and you'll get soaked. That to me is wonderful. I like people to be soaked, to be immersed in an atmosphere where they learn, where they're challenged, where they become better human beings. And I want them to pursue what excites them, what gives passion to their lives. I really don't care what their major is. I say major in something you love, and you'll have a great life.

So vision is very, very central, but it has to get translated. Here's where mission comes in. Vision and mission inform and influence each other in many ways. I think of mission as a specification of the vision; it's the articulation of the vision in concrete circumstances and given current realities.

Missions can change. Our mission here changed over the decades. We started out as a small college focused on the liberal arts and educating primarily immigrant males. We've evolved over the decades: we added professional schools; we moved from being a commuter school to residential one; we added certain graduate and professional programs; we're much more committed to integrating the scholarship and teaching elements than we were fifty years ago.

Our mission has evolved, but our mission still has to fit with the vision and the heritage of Boston College. A lot of the comments made during this conference turn on vision and mission, but the one element that I think needs a whole lot more attention—and Nathan Hatch touched on this last night—is leadership.

There was a question this morning from the president of Gordon College, asking who has real influence on campus. I would agree with the panelists who responded that faculty are very important because they have that day-to-day role. There are a lot of them in key spots. But I would say to you that the group that can have a lot more influence than they may exercise are the president and the senior-level administrators in an institution, because in so many ways they can translate the vision and mission into concrete realities.

Take lines for hiring, for instance, or budget support for new centers or new initiatives. They have to have the faculty involved, and clearly student interests have to be part of it, but I would not undersell at all the importance of leadership, especially at the senior level. Developing that next cohort of leaders is the huge challenge, I think, in faith-based institutions. It's clearly a major, major issue in the Roman Catholic world.

Sometimes I think about how we have to be like a major league ball club. I like the St. Louis Cardinals a great deal. One of the secrets of the rise of good baseball teams at the major league level is they have a philosophy about what kinds of players are they going to have on their ball club. They have great scouts who spot talent. They have a farm system that brings people along at the varying levels, so they're ready one day for the major league. So if I could wave a magic wand for all of you, I would say that you should spot those bright undergrads in your institutions who have an interest in religion, in quality academic endeavors, then urge them and encourage them to pursue careers in higher education. Once they get their Ph.Ds, help them find positions where they can be mentored as faculty and, down the road, as administrators.

We have to grow our cohort of future administrators. It's part of the responsibility of leaders to prepare the next generation. And so when we have a conference like this, I think people can come away thinking, "Oh, it's so complex," or "How are we possibly going to meet all of these demands?" (which are very real). The financial pressures in so many institutions of higher education in the private sector are immense, and they're only going to grow. That's a reality. But look back in the history of higher education in the United States, especially among private schools. We've always had a shortage of resources, people and money. Somehow we've evolved. We have to have that kind of hope and confidence that what we're doing is important, and we can make it carry on.

So we have a lot of work to do. Going forward, I think it's important that we reflect on the roots, the heritage, the vision, the mission, but also some words that I find very comforting. On my computer I keep passages from scripture or things that I've read that I find heartening. I'm going to end with three passages. These are all from scripture.

Luke 18:1, a passage I like a lot, says “pray and not lose heart.” It’s important for us in higher education, especially in the private sector, that we don’t lose heart.

Jeremiah 29:11-12: “‘For I know the plans I have for you,’ says the Lord, ‘Plans for welfare and not for evil, to give you a future and a hope.’”

And then Psalm 27 verse 14: “Wait for the Lord with courage. Be stouthearted and wait for the Lord.” So I say, be stouthearted and wait for the Lord. He’s around. He’s in us.

So that’s my wrap-up, if you will, of all these words and points that were made. To me, it’s about vision, it’s about mission, it’s about leadership. And everything else will come together.

Thank you for being with us. We’ve had a great group, and I want to thank the sponsors of this symposium that we’re having in the context of our sesquicentennial. It’s been marvelous, and having all of you here is such an uplifting aspect to us at Boston College as we celebrate our past but also look to our future. So I’m grateful to you. Thank you.

Erik Owens: Thank you, Father Leahy, and thank you all for being stouthearted right to the end. And we now invite you to join your fellow audience members, panel members, speakers for refreshments that will be appearing shortly on one wing or the other. Thanks very much and for those who have traveled, safe travels home. Thank you.

[END OF TRANSCRIPT]