



# BOSTON COLLEGE

BOISI CENTER  
FOR RELIGION AND AMERICAN PUBLIC LIFE

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

### **“Religion and a Larger Vision for Liberal Education”**

Keynote Address

by

**Richard Morrill**

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Introduction by **Henry Braun**

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The Heights Room of Corcoran Commons, Boston College



BRAUN: It gives me great pleasure to welcome our keynote speaker, Dr. Richard Morrill, back to his home state. Dr. Morrill, President of the Teagle Foundation, is a native of Hingham, MA. He received his A.B. in history from Brown, a B.D. in religious thought from Yale and a Ph.D. in religion from Duke. After a distinguished career as a faculty member and university administrator, Dr. Morrill became president, successively, of Salem College, Center College and, in 1988, the University of Richmond. After retiring as president in 1998, he became the first holder of the Distinguished University Chair in Ethics and Democratic Values that was named in his honor. Dr. Morrill joined the board of the Teagle Foundation in 1989 and became its president in 2010.

Over the last two decades, the Teagle Foundation has become the pre-eminent philanthropy contributing to the health and vitality of liberal education on America's campuses through its support of the study of LE, new approaches to instruction and engaged learning and, most notably, strategies for the assessment of LE outcomes. Dr. Morrill occupies what is surely a unique leadership position in American higher education.

He is ideally suited to serve as our speaker at this, the mid-point of a day of conversations at the intersection of religion and liberal education. He brings a perspective that has been shaped through his long association with the Teagle Foundation, his tenure as president of three liberal arts institutions and his active engagement with the AAC&U, NAICU and SACS. But more than that, he brings his academic background in religion and religious thought, a longstanding interest in the critical roles of ethics and values in student formation, and an expansive view of what constitutes liberal education and its critical importance for the health of our society.

Allow me to quote from a chapter Dr. Morrill wrote, reviewing a number of different perspectives on liberal education: “If contemporary liberal education is to fulfill its aspirations to develop the full range of human powers and educate for democracy, for values and for leadership, it has to reconceptualize some of the foundations of its enterprise. It has to find ways to integrate the human powers of knowing and doing, of feeling and choosing, as elements of human agency and of personal and social responsibility.”

This is the challenge that lies before all institutions that aim to offer a liberal education that will resonate through the lifetimes of its beneficiaries --- and it is one aspect of that challenge we grapple with here today. Please join me in welcoming Dr. Morrill, whose address is titled: “Religion and a Larger Vision for Liberal Education.”

MORRILL: Thank you Henry. It is a singular honor to be invited to this anniversary celebration. I happen to have grown up 20 some miles from this campus, and I married into a family of Eagles. They must be long lost cousins of yours President Leahy since they share the same exact family name. My wife Martha’s paternal grandfather David D. Leahy graduated from Boston College in 1896 and went on to earn a law degree and serve in the Massachusetts House and then Senate, starting at age 26. An untimely early death from TB at age 35 ended a promising career in public service. His son, also David D. Leahy class of 1928, followed in his father’s footsteps to BC, as did his son John Leahy who played hockey here in the early ‘70’s and graduated with honors. If that is not enough maroon and gold, my sister Barbara earned a BC Master’s. Finally, Mr. President, you have a namesake, my 8 year old grandson in Concord William Leahy Rye. All this ought to earn a place for him in the class of 2026.

The higher education press and the media at large never let us forget for long the rising pressures on the future of higher education, and the structural economic, educational and technological challenges with which we now contend. In the middle of these seismic changes, we also find fundamental challenges to the value of liberal education. As a marketing consultant might say, higher education has a problem with its value proposition. With tuitions soaring at many state institutions and at painfully high levels in private ones, with student indebtedness reaching staggering levels, the public at large and many government officials want to know the value of education, especially in preparing people for jobs.

Federal authorities and state governments are increasingly using quantitative indicators like completion rates and starting salaries as primary measures of the value of education and of public investments in it. The problem is that completion rates and salaries are often incomplete, anomalous and misleading measures when used in isolation, as recent reports on new graduates’ salaries in several states quickly reveal. The words “value” and

“values” have other fundamental meanings, and we commonly use them to describe “worth” outside of the measuring sticks used in markets.

This was called to mind a few months ago when I saw an intriguing title on a magazine cover asking, “What Are You Worth?” I took it to mean something about the purpose of life and hoped for some existential reassurance, but the story was actually about different ways to value investments. This reminds us that the same words convey radically different meanings depending on the circumstances and choices that one has in mind. It is easy enough to measure what it costs to raise a child, but impossible to quantify the unconditional value of the child.

The same premise holds true when speaking of the value of a liberal education. Equating educational value with monetary value is taking hold in the public mind, so it is good to sort out the terms. Some years ago, Professor Thomas Green described educational value in this way: “We are born into the world, but we are educated into the possession of our powers for the exercise of intellect, emotion, imagination, judgment, memory, observation, and action in a coherent way . . . .” Taking hold of these powers that we have as human beings is the good, the value if you will, that represents the “. . . defining presence of educational worth.” In this telling, education occurs across the life span in many contexts, and, to be sure, in schools, colleges and universities. The formal elements of the process crystallize learning into disciplines of knowledge that carry their own intrinsic worth, but also become instrumental to the educational unfolding of human possibilities as a claim of human dignity.

An education in the arts and sciences plays a powerful part in the shaping of human capabilities. Recent effort to evaluate student learning in higher education has focused attention on what are typically called student “learning outcomes.” The language can be ambiguous and mechanistic, but it nonetheless calls our attention to the broad powers of mind and deepened human sensibilities and civic capacities that are the consequences of the engaged study of important texts, artifacts, problems, and methods that provide the content of knowledge in the arts and sciences. The key to seeing the enduring power of liberal learning is to trace how knowledge and its processes take up residence in students as they move toward becoming independent thinkers and agents of their own lives. A liberal education provides students with a broad set of intellectual and personal capabilities such as critical thinking, effective communication, quantitative reasoning, creative thinking, problem-solving, integrative thinking, and personal and social responsibility.

While not monetarily quantifiable at graduation, there is no question of the value of these capabilities for all individuals in the workforce of the future, as citizens and as human beings. All these capabilities have an eminently practical side that translates into skills for success in the marketplace and into abilities for dealing effectively with the intricate responsibilities of personal and civic life.

Each of the capabilities we have suggested serves as an entry point into the more specific ways that the arts and sciences open cognitive and personal doors into the social, natural and spiritual worlds of meaning in which we live. Let me enlarge my thoughts on liberal education by examining how the study of religion contributes to it. I will do so primarily by thinking about religion descriptively as one of the fields of the humanities, those subjects such as literature, philosophy, classics, history, and the fine arts. They study aspects of human creativity and self-expression, and seek to make sense of the intricacies

of human experience, often by exploring the larger questions of meaning and purpose. The humanities typically do so from the point of view of life as lived and as portrayed in the imaginative and the existential narratives that shape our social and personal identities and that embody the master values and commitments that matter most to us and that constitute the self. Since we are celebrating a Jesuit university's anniversary, we shall look primarily at religious texts and issues in a broad Judeo-Christian context.

We come to this exploration of the value of liberal education at a perplexing time in the study of the humanities and religion, since both undergraduate and graduate study in these fields now represent a small fraction of student majors and graduate study. The problem resides in many places according to critics, including an incoherent and fractured curriculum, an academic culture that lodges the professional identity of most faculty members in research and tight disciplinary specialization rather than in undergraduate teaching, and in the sharp focus by students and their parents on job preparation. All these influences have moved energy and attention away from dealing with the big questions of meaning and value and civic responsibility even in fields like philosophy and religion. On most campuses the methods of research and content of teaching in the humanities has made questions of values and of religion a largely private matter that stand outside the kinds of evidence and argumentation that prevail in academic disciplines. Academic skepticism about broad value claims, which is assumed in post-modern views of knowledge, has made the broader aims of education much harder to integrate into the curriculum and into the lived mission of the campus.

These concerns and claims about liberal education have been made in a wide variety of contexts and in a large stream of books and articles over a period of some 25 years starting in the late 1970's that sometimes reflected the bitter culture wars both on and off campus. Just in the past five or six years, there has been a new generation of reformist critiques of the state of liberal education from within the academy, reprising many of the themes signaled above, but offering ideas and proposals for improvement in strong support of the value of liberal education. The distinguished former president of Harvard, Derek Bok, has written an influential and balanced book called *Our Underachieving Colleges*. He suggests that when it comes to fostering student learning, colleges and universities are doing a mediocre job, and can and should do much better. Interestingly, these more recent authors come to the task from important positions in prestigious universities, and have influential voices in their fields. Just to choose an illustrative few, the former Dean of Yale Law School, Anthony Kronman has a book called *Education's End: Why Our Colleges and Universities Have Given Up on the Question of the Meaning of Life*, and there is one by the former Dean of Harvard College, Harry Lewis, called *Excellence Without a Soul: How a Great University Forgot Education*. Another book by the creative and prolific philosopher Martha Nussbaum at the University of Chicago is called, *Not for Profit: Why Democracy Needs the Humanities* offers a strong emphasis on critical thinking, and on the development of empathy and moral and artistic imagination. Two of the more systematic efforts to sort out the contributions of liberal education come from the former dean of Arts and Sciences at Notre Dame, Mark Roche, called *Why Choose the Liberal Arts*, and the most recent contribution, by Andrew Delbanco of Columbia called *College: What it Was, Is and Should Be*, one of our panelists this morning. Since Andy is a friend and colleague I had a chance to read his book both in preparation and after completion, and he tells a beautifully crafted and compelling story.

Like several of the other books on this list, Delbanco suggests that the years in college are a time when students are trying to find themselves and to shape their identities. In

developing this story, he draws on a manuscript diary from 1850 by a young man at Emory and Henry College in Virginia, who has just heard a sermon that leads him to record the plea, “Oh that the Lord would show me how to think and how to choose.” Delbanco goes on to suggest that though the spiritual authority of college is long gone, he has never found a better way to capture what a college should be and do. College should provide, he suggests, an “aid to reflection, a place and process whereby young people take stock of their talents and passions and begin to sort out their lives in a way that is true to themselves and responsible to others.” Both he and the other authors suggest that there are ideas and methods of dialogue and inquiry and vocabularies of reflection in great texts that can help students put probing questions to themselves as a critical part of college education.

What I take to be an interesting turn in several of these books is the claim that the core of college education has to do with the formation of the self’s identity in the inescapable quest for human fullness, not just the mastery of knowledge or the development of job skills. Except for Mark Roche at Notre Dame writing in the Catholic tradition, the authors in the books I’ve named do not, however, place the practice or the study of religion in a central place in their narratives. Delbanco provides a sensitive rendering of the Puritan experience and appropriates its deep moral seriousness about the larger purposes of education, but notes the loss of authority and the privatization of religion on most of today’s campuses. Bok focuses strongly on the importance of moral reasoning, not religion. Kronman largely reduces all religion to fundamentalism, and finds hope in secular humanism. Nussbaum offers powerful arguments about the centrality of human dignity for the development of educational capabilities, but does not ground human rights in a transcendent source, though human rights seem somehow to belong to the very nature of things.

In many ways, the weight of most of these authors’ work, again, Roche is a partial exception, is to affirm a deep ethics of authentic personal choice that should include a strong democratic conscience. After careful and deep critical thought around important texts, students have to be the final arbiters of what makes sense out of their lives. To be sure, suggesting that we should be true to ourselves and responsible to others comes with a large set of tacit values and criteria that are deeply embedded in our culture. These democratic and humanistic values are skillfully invoked by several of the authors and we feel their weight and their claims. From the point of view of the kinds of inquiries that we carry out in religious studies, however, a whole set of questions come to the fore. We are left asking about the criteria for the ultimate foundation and the source of the motivation to reach the standards for fulfillment to which we aspire. Should I define my life by justice and love, or can the responsible pursuit of status and wealth do the job? Are my authentic choices necessarily the best choices? What sustains them over time? To sum up the questions: our humanistic and democratic values provide meaning *in* existence, but what answers the question concerning the meaning *of* existence?

Like all humanities disciplines, the study of religion includes a series of specialties that engage scholarly methods from the study of ancient languages, cultures and texts to history, sociology, philosophy, and theology. The canons of objective analysis, critical thinking and scholarly rigor apply in religion as in every other academic discipline. In fact, like many other disciplines in the humanities, the study of religion on many campuses has strongly differentiated itself from any special concern with questions of the meaning of life and most professors of religion make a sharp distinction between their

own study of religion and their practice of it, if any, especially if a person's specialty is from another time and place.

I would like to take a somewhat different turn and suggest that just as humanities fields develop powerful learning outcomes, the study of religion does the same in ways that can have a strong bearing on understanding and addressing questions of identity and values. The study of religious texts and the full range of religious expressions from doctrines to practices foster patterns of thinking and learning with their own distinctiveness. The broad critical abilities shaped by religious study have potential application in shaping a set of tools and questions which can be appropriated both to understand, and to form our choices about the persons we are and hope to become. In essence, just as we aim in universities to teach people how to think, so we can legitimately aspire to teach students how to value and encourage and enable them to develop an internalized critical apparatus for making choices among values and forms of life.

Starting with Delbanco's refrain, "how to think and how to choose," we can see the range, depth and intensity that religious inquiry brings to study in the humanities, as it presses toward ever enlarging spatial, temporal and cultural horizons. We will come to meet again in an enlarged form in religious contexts many of the same criteria of choice buried in the questions we ask of ourselves in our ordinary experience, especially as we come to terms what matters decisively to us as we search for fullness. We carry naturally in ourselves questions about the *adequacy* of our choices to secure stable meanings in our beliefs, effectiveness in our labors and faithfulness in our relationships. We wonder how to achieve *consistency and integrity* in our values and actions to avoid contradictions within ourselves and conflicts with others. We try to attain *comprehensiveness* by embracing ever wider circles of experience and reality, and to affirm patterns of life that differ from our own. We silently or consciously aim to achieve *durability* in our commitments that meet challenges over time and that endure for all the seasons of our lives and beyond. In this process of interrogating our forms of life, religion seems to press inescapably for ever larger aims and forms of transcendence, to push, for example, behind policies to find the ethical principles on which they rest, but then to ask how those principles serve the larger cause of humankind, and, in turn, to reach ever further to understand how humans can come to be partners with all of creation in a universal commonwealth of being, to borrow a phrase from Richard Niebuhr.

Rather than building a lengthy abstract list of these self-transcending forms of analysis, let me turn to a text from the book of *Isaiah* to illustrate one form of inquiry and of the distinctively religious argumentation that I am signaling here. Chapter 44 has a lengthy critique of the making and worshipping of idols, and it displays distinctively religious criteria of reflection. The carpenter cuts down a cedar tree and uses part of it to build a fire that bakes his bread and gives him warmth, then he shapes the rest to take human form as an idol for his home. The text says, "No one considers, nor is there knowledge or discernment to say, half of it I burned in the fire. . . Shall I now fall down before a block of wood . . . He feeds on ashes; a deluded mind has led him astray, and he cannot deliver himself or say, 'Is there not a lie in my right hand?'" These passages display patterns of religious reasoning that demonstrate the impotence of idols and the colossal existential blunder in worshipping them. Like endless biblical passages that we might cite, it displays criteria of reflection in the terms "knowledge and discernment," that shape the reasoning and rhetoric of the texts. The Biblical writer suggests that the people of Israel are up against the sweeping creative power and judgment of the divine and must

understand deity by criteria of comprehensiveness, eternity, oneness and love that are adequate to the fullness of reality and experience.

What religion as a form of inquiry reveals is a deeper science of mattering, of providing critical forms of awareness of the adequacy and power of what we care most about in life in coming to terms with the ultimate circumstances of the human condition. Were we to look at other passages in Isaiah about the suffering servant who comes to redeem Israel, or at many texts in the Gospels about the deeds and teachings of Jesus, we find other central motifs in the ways that human fullness is understood. These texts suggest that humans find the good that they seek, but not in the ways that they expected. Humans indeed want something they can love without reserve, which virtually all humanities reveal, but instead they find a self-emptying love that first loved them. In *Genesis*, in another typical form of specifically religious sensibility, Abraham is the father of faith who is ready in fear and trembling to sacrifice his beloved son, but receives him back as a gift. Humans live *in* the world, but this and similar passages suggest that they grope toward a stance that allows them not to be *of* the world. This is joyous detachment in the world, not resignation from it. So, natural human forms of expectation are both lifted up and torn down in religion, causing a continual revolution in natural religious and moral experience. The final power that courses in and through all things is revealed in the despised and lowly, not in worldly might and dominion. In the vision of the coming of the Kingdom in Matthew 25, Jesus famously repeats that even “as you have done unto the least of these”—the hungry, the thirsty, the stranger, the prisoner—“so you have done unto me.” Religious thinking trades in reversals and paradoxes, and agape love is one of them.

I take this analysis of the forms of religious thought to be a descriptive task to display the reasoning in the texts and beliefs at hand, in this case from Jewish and Christian scriptures. The aim is to find the essential characteristics and defining conditions of a form of religious belief and experience. The description could just as easily include or focus on other religions, which would reveal parallel forms of religious affirmation and negation. In my view, this kind of study is appropriate in liberal education under any academic auspices. As in many approaches to the humanities we start with a description of texts, artifacts or events and lay out the terms and methods of the investigation.

Let me make one normative claim that goes beyond description. It seems odd and even troubling that the power and insights of humanities texts including religious ones are not more consistently appropriated for critical reflection about values and human fulfillment within liberal education. How can it be that we would leave some of the most important choices that students will ever make about the meaning of work, of power and wealth, about personal and family obligations, about civic responsibilities and service to others, basically to the play of chance and preference, to passing interests, to advertising slogans or to easy ideologies, and beyond the reach of rationality? Systems of belief and value, including the narratives in which they are usually lodged, come with their own forms of evidence, and need to satisfy criteria of integrity, consistency, comprehensiveness, fairness and adequacy. We have to test the worth of the imaginations of the heart by its own kind of evidence, different, though parallel to the tests we use for ideas and factual claims. We live now from an inheritance of values about human dignity that we cannot reproduce easily within our contemporary intellectual culture, so we need to do again the hard work of reclaiming them for our time.

There are clearly many of other tasks and opportunities for religion on campus other than the descriptive one as a field of the humanities. Another is the work of theology that tries to develop and articulate for every new age the conceptual content of faith for believers, so it is indeed faith seeking understanding. Then, there is the important educational work that comes with being a community inspired by a religious mission, yet open to all. The exploration and the practice of religion in a diverse community of many faiths is increasingly a vital opportunity to build some of the most important bridges across religions and cultures. That opportunity is a part of the educational task understood as the shaping of a full and rich identity in the search for human fulfillment in community.

Let me close by suggesting that the educational mission of Boston College as rooted in a deep, but open religious identity offers an important model for higher education, and not simply for Catholic or Jesuit institutions. The College's evident commitment to high academic achievement is coupled with a larger vision for liberal education that addresses perennial questions of meaning and purpose in a community of intellectual rigor and depth. It is supported by a coherent program of both study and wider opportunities for learning and formation in liberal education both on and off the campus. Boston College's educational voice should resonate widely across the higher education community as it lives and tells the story of the value of liberal education. We congratulate you and salute you on the wholeness of your exceptional educational achievements, and anticipate your vital contributions in the years to come.

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