



BOSTON COLLEGE

BOISI CENTER
FOR RELIGION AND AMERICAN PUBLIC LIFE

Symposium on Religion and the Liberal Aims of Higher Education

Transcription of Panel III: “Dynamic Tensions”

Friday, November 9, 2012, 3:00pm
The Heights Room of Corcoran Commons, Boston College

featuring:

Susan Jacoby

Author and Independent Scholar

Eboo Patel

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Nicholas Wolterstorff

Noah Porter Professor Emeritus of
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Moderated by **Mark Oppenheimer**

columnist and Lecturer in

PATEL: Louisville says “ Grawemeyer.” Everybody else says “Grawemeyer.”

OPPENHEIMER: The Grawemeyer Prize for work in religion, which is important to know because it’s a lot of money. I mean, it’s extraordinary. He could’ve bought a really nice car with that money. Every year I get the press release from the Grawemeyer people saying “I

his desired r

JACOBY: But I'm just as annoyed by it, and I don't have any religious impulses. [laughter]

WOLTERSTORFF: What's that?

JACOBY: I'm just as annoyed by it as you are and I'm not a Christian.

WOLTERSTORFF: Terrific. But Susan, the problem is some people were perfectly happy with it, obviously.

JACOBY: Yeah, of course.

WOLTERSTORFF: I mean, the makers of the anthology.

PATEL: And so let me tell a story, which I think illustrates this as well.

Secondly, in a diverse democracy, if we're not bringing them to the table, we're hiding things. I think the larger question for me is what do we do with particular identities in a world of diversity? That, for me, is the central question of this conference. What does a Boston College do in the most religiously diverse country, some say, in human history?

WOLTERSTORFF: And I'm sure what you would add, as well as I, we bring them to the table and allow them to be corrected. Don't just stand on a Hyde Park podium. If I misinterpreted the history of modern philosophy in some way, you know, I've given it more religious import than it actually does have—I think it has got a lot more than is traditionally acknowledged—then I should stand corrected on that score.

invitations come from historically religious colleges, whether Catholic or Lutheran, the few Episcopal ones that are left, or Baptist—which is to say American Baptist, formerly Northern Baptist Convention. And one of the—

OPPENHEIMER: The Southern Baptists never invite you?

JACOBY: Never. I've never been invited to speak at a Southern Baptist school.

PATEL: That's because they actually read the books.

JACOBY: Right. No, I do hear from Southern Baptist history teachers who say they wish they could invite me. But anyway, one of the things I've found out about the students is that students at these lectures know much more about my subject than the students at secular colleges where I speak do. Because they do mention this—

OPPENHEIMER: Schleiermacher is better on drugs than (inaudible). Is that what you're saying?

WOLTERSTORFF: So I just went ahead and highlighted what I, given my Christian formation, thought

that's the first opening of my eyes, honestly, to the evening news and to the role that religious diversity issues are playing in the evening news, which is mostly murder to the soundtrack of prayer.

JACOBY:

Catholic hospitals. 250-some Catholic colleges and universities. 7,000 Catholic

And then there's a whole school of thought about higher education which is to say it should challenge you in ways that may actually crumble all that.

And yes, given what historians tell us, they should also be sometimes be horrified at what human beings have done to each other. Yes, it's got all kinds of uses, but it's something that should awe us and horrify us. And if my students emerge never being awed—isn't this wonderful, isn't this fascinating—I haven't been successful. That's how I've come to think of a liberal arts education.

JACOBY: Right and I think one of the worst things I've heard today, and I can't remember who said it, but it was at the edge of the last panel, about finding ways of measuring the effectiveness of liberal arts education. Something like a scale of, yes we can see that this person has better critical thinking on a scale of one to five.

WOLTERSTORFF: This is what Dante does to you, you know.

OPPENHEIMER: So going back to the title of this panel—acceding to the fact that you liked it very much—what are the big dynamic tensions? I'll suggest one. When the president of Wheaton College was sitting where you are, for example, and was talking about the education there—is he still here? Where did Philip go? There he goes. I may be wrong in this anecdote. I seem to remember reading in the five or six years ago that my old college acquaintance—we weren't friends, but he was all right—my old college acquaintance Joshua Hochschild was fired for becoming a Roman Catholic. Is that right?

RYKEN: He actually resigned, but sure.

OPPENHEIMER: He resigned. He's still a very committed Christian. He'd become a Christian in college, I remember when that happened, and let's assume the best about him. I assume that through this arduous process of self-searching, and critical thinking, and doing all the things that a liberal arts education at Wheaton, or a

Larry Shinn's presidency at that time, had brought a Muslim to speak about religious diversity and social justice was because of their vision of that cross. I didn't want them to cover the cross, I wanted them to have a robust articulation of that vision of it.

So I think that, actually, the intersection of particularity and diversity is this—the ability to articulate, from your tradition, your relationship with other traditions and ways of being. It's not to say that for the Muslims and secularists, etc. to be safer at Boston College, we have to be less Catholic. It's to say that we have to have a full

And I thought to myself—and this, by the way, was somebody who six months before had arrived at Augustana wanting to be a minister, and now he wanted to be a high school teacher. Why? He'd already been exposed to a different idea of Lutheranism with his professors there. And I said to him, that is a question that everybody who believes they're in possession of the absolute truth has asked

down in all kinds of ways and old rules begin to look pointless. I do want to say that what you point to as the dark side is something that's really to be celebrated in American higher education. You can get together and start a college for goodness knows what reason. People show up, you find some donors.

JACOBY: There is a compromise, though, between some of the things about the European and American system, and I think we see this because of the lack of preparedness, because we don't have any national standards for elementary or secondary education, either.

WOLTERSTORFF: [inaudible]... it's true.

OPPENHEIMER: We're getting some in two years with the national core.

JACOBY: But that's not going to be enforceable. I don't think it's a great thing, and certainly I would object to any public money ever being spent—and all colleges get some public money indirectly—for a college which decides that a person can be an educated person, that they can issue a degree, and teach nobody any science. I think that that's ridiculous, and I think in that respect, the European system is better. And I think that there is a compromise to be made between that and the idea that, say, Patrick Henry University can decide to set itself up to teach homeschooled children to become right wing lobbyists in Washington. It's ridiculous to even call it a university.

WOLTERSTORFF: There's another downside to, with respect to our topic of liberal arts education, to the European system. In the European system, since it's run by bureaucrats, in recent years—England, Holland I know best—is becoming run by—I was going to say efficiency experts—purported efficiency experts, and so even more relentlessly than in the States, they're asking what is the economic payoff for? The Dutch universities are close to eliminating all teaching of languages.

JACOBY: Oh, God.

WOLTERSTORFF: I find this just excruciatingly painful. The Dutch were, in the Renaissance, the early Renaissance, the great linguists of the world. And now they're saying it makes no

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What's interesting is that that policy was not enforced explicitly when it came to fraternities, which of course creates its own brouhaha. This is only to say, which I think is, and I'm happy for a better solution to this, because I recognize that my articulation leaves everybody half-full—in a diverse democracy, the expressions of some peoples' identities are hurtful, marginalizing, insulting, etc. to other people. The question is how can those communities still live together? I think sometimes the response to that is you have to not pick the fight.

OPPENHEIMER: Either of you want to address that?

JACOBY: Yes. There's another word for that which I meant to say about the Wheaton situation. There's common sense. If you are a Roman Catholic, and it's not a matter that Roman Catholic identity is hurtful to Wheaton College, it is that Wheaton College is an evangelical college. It does not believe the doctrine of

manual labor for the expression of our humanity, especially in light of a New Testament teaching to lead simple lives, quiet lives, and to work with our hands.

WOLTERSTORFF: I didn't quite get that question.

OPPENHEIMER: The question was with regards to *C*, Matthew Crawford's book about working with motorcycles, wasn't it? And the virtue-building effects of that.

those, the Judeo-

such that he could not see them having the future if they went to a Catholic college. He sent his girls to Catholic colleges, which doesn't tell you anything about

We're not talking about the role of historically black colleges and universities, or Hispanic-serving institutions. Some Catholic institutions are very powerful at doing that.

And so I think as we expand this out to interreligious dialogue, including the nones in the dialogue, we also have to think about what the institutions we're not including in a dialogue about the place of religion or the place of non-religion.

HENKING: OK, it was a comment not a question.

OPPENHEIMER: Prompt any thoughts from anybody?

JACOBY: One thing, and this, in a way, relates to what Dr. Hatch said last night, which I agreed with partially, but not always. What we're not talking about here is public education, public higher education, which is not religious, and in a way, because they don't offer something special, something like Boston College offers, is in a much worse situation. And this relates to what you said, too. One reason I don't think we have any reason just to crow about the diversity of the higher education

JACOBY: [Laughter]

BIRNBAUM: I think there's a major tension. You know, there's no way to number. I've been at Boston College for 34 years. There's no way to number the tensions. Too many tensions exist within an institution like this, which has a religious commitment, as well as a scholarly commitment, as well as professional commitments. One that we've missed that I think is very important is the conversation with culture.

I will say that students at Boston College have an opportunity to meet culture, public culture, in a way that students at other colleges don't. I attended secular colleges as well as my Yeshiva, but for example the hookup culture which is prevalent—I don't imagine it's at Wheaton, but I'd imagine it's at a lot of places outside of those evangelical schools that have very tight control over student life. But it is prevalent at all Catholic colleges and prevalent at—I believe, I shouldn't characterize it—well, this is an interesting tension. It's a fascinating tension.

Here you are in an institution which you have freely chosen, unless your parents dragooned you into showing up here. 70% of our undergraduate students are Catholic. They know what Catholicism means, they've been catechized. And here they are and there's this tension between what popular culture says—I should say what culture says—

