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BOISI CENTER
FOR RELIGION AND AMERICAN PUBLIC LIFE

Symposium on Religious Diversity and the Common Good

Dinner Panel: Working for the Common Good in Boston

November 13, 2013

QUINN:

Thank you. Well, Father Neenan, who many of you know, would never give thanks for the food until he'd first tasted it. So on behalf of Boston College and Father Leahy, our president, who's unable to attend this evening, I welcome you all to this dinner and to the panel discussion that will follow.

It's been a long day, but a stimulating day full of interesting ideas and conversation, so my remarks will be brief. I don't want to stand between you and the rest of your meal. Actually, more accurately, I don't want to stand between me and the rest of my meal. So this evening comes as we end 18 months of activity celebrating Boston College's sesquicentennial – the 150 years

We're not in Boston, although actually we are, in this particular building, but the main campus and our address is Newton. And we're not a college, but we're Boston College.

The earlier sesquicentennial symposia have touched on such topics as education and its role in democratic societies, religion and the aims of higher education, migration, the legacy of Vatican II, the challenges facing Catholic higher education, and just two weeks ago, the penultimate one was on energy, featuring our newly elected Senator Markey.

Tonight's panel discussion is about working for the common good, and Alan Wolfe will be introducing the panelists later. But let me be one of the first to thank our panelists tonight for sharing their time and showing us what we might learn from those who have made the common good the focus of their professional, public, and spiritual lives.

The phrase 'common good' is found in a variety of contexts. It's used by economists, like myself, legal scholars and practitioners, philosophers, political scientists, politicians. However, for Boston College, given our Catholic Jesuit identity, the concept has special significance. Educating men and women for others is our

This has been a great event. I'm looking forward to continuing our conversation after dinner. And now I would like to ask Father Terry Devino, Vice President and University Secretary, and head of the Sesquicentennial executive committee, to give the blessing. Thank you, Terry.

(applause)

DEVINO:

So God will not mind when we pray, so this is good for us to be here. So let us conclude the day and enter into this evening and our discussion, again, by just pausing for a moment and allowing ourselves to be blessed by God and blessed by that companionship that we've shared here.

Boston College was founded by the Society of Jesus in 1863, with three teachers and 22 students, and opened its doors on September 5th, 1864. But the story of Boston College really began in 1534 when seven idealistic and open students at the University of Paris met in a chapel and vowed their lives to the service of God and the well-being of their fellow women and men. They were founders of the Jesuits, and they did not choose monastic life but instead went out to encounter and transform our world, committed to finding God in all things.

And so tonight, we gather as persons of memory, celebrating the works, the visions, the stories, the hopes, the ideals of this place of learning where minds and hearts have been transformed and where we have sent those minds and those hearts into our world, committed to finding God in everything.

Tonight we gather, grateful for a day that brought together women and men of every story, united in the struggle of transforming our fragile world. Tonight we gather at the conclusion of a tremendous day that has brought together journalists, academics, writers, religious and civic leaders devoted to the common good, and for this, oh, God, we are most grateful.

Tonight we gather and we come together to pray that God bless our companionship and our conversations, that God bless this meal and those who prepared it, and especially all those who go without. And in God's holy name we pray. Amen.

Welcome and enjoy.

WOLFE:

The primary focus of the article with Edsel's research in general was about race, but it immediately made me think about this panel tonight. How has the religious demographics of Boston changed, and how has that influenced the work that you do? I think, John, perhaps you experience this most directly as the interim superintendent of schools, so I want to begin with you. But I certainly want to hear from Amy as well on all of this, really.

McDONOUGH: Thank you. I was a little bit anxious about accepting this invitation tonight because it is difficult to talk about religion, per se, within a very public organization. But I do think that what we do on a day-to-

But of course, for the library, and especially in day and age, this must be a huge challenge you're facing.

RYAN:

Well, it is, and thank you, John, for running down the statistics because that was on my list to do. But the Boston Public Library's mission, which is carved in stone in our wonderful McKim building from 1885 is advancement of learning. So it really is about responding to our mission of really reaching out to people from all over the world.

Our roots go back into the early 20th century where people from all over the world turned to the Boston Public Library to learn English, but they weren't from Vietnam or China or Haiti. They were from Ireland and Italy and Eastern Europe. So it really is about just marching our mission along but expanding it to what it means today for the Boston Public Library and for the city.

We just opened a wonderful new branch library in East Boston.

So we really just move ahead our mission of reaching out, advancement of learning from people from all over the world.

WOLFE: Thank you so much. Mohammad, what can you add to our reflections?

REDA: I don't have anything to talk about, Boston Library or – Actually, when I moved to Boston in 1974, there was one mosque in Boston, that's in Quincy. Currently probably I can count 12. I don't know every single mosque in there. In the mosques in Boston, there is probably no country in the world not represented in there. The diversity of Muslims in Boston is staggering. I can see those people speak different languages as original languages. Fortunately we speak to everyone in English.

WOLFE: The lingua franca, I guess, of – Now it's only by sheer coinci

WOLFE: Boston's a suburb of Cambridge.

WALTON: Right. But in terms of the way that this kind of religious, racial diversity impacts my position as the Plummer Professor of Christian Morals. It's a good thing for the four years I've been at Harvard, every entering class at Harvard College has been more religiously and racially diverse than the year before, and that's a beautiful thing. That says something about not only Harvard's commitment, though we still have a lot of work to do, but also religious/racial commitment and class – commitment to disrupting as much as we have been able to do some of the class divides.

back 40 years ago, it was not only dominant in numbers, it was dominant in culture. Fifty to 60 years ago, the one line slogan in the Boston Beacon Hill legislature was, what does number one think of it? And number one meant one person. His name was O'Connell. The legend was that he had someone that sat in the balcony, and if he raised his thumb up, it meant the vote was yes, and if he raised his thumb down, the vote was no. That's obviously gone, totally.

So the change is both in the context and the content of Catholicism. The change in the context is not only the diversity, which is obviously to be welcomed and is significant and pervasive. By the way, I was on the road today so I didn't read Thomas Edsel. I hope one of the points he made about the campaign, while the diversity was the dominant one, was the civility of the campaign. When I heard Governor Christie talk about how everybody's looking at New Jersey, he had reason to say that. But Boston had reason to say that in a time when politics has the atmosphere of mud wrestling, this was a civil campaign fought in a very good way.

But the context obviously is change, and interestingly enough, the change is not only the diversity and religious faith, but now my understanding is that five of the six most secular states in the country are in New England, and Massachusetts is one of them, at

WOLFE:

Thank you. Jonathan, I was very taken with this notion of a positive diversity, not just diversity for diversity's sake, so let me

expectations of success for all students? And how are we sensitive to cultural differences that our students bring to us that need to be recognized in a way where we need to differentiate support. This is not about students not wanting to learn. This is about our ability to bring them to success. So that remains the large urban school district challenge in this nation.

WOLFE:

I also wanted, if I may, to pick up on a comment you made, Bryan, about how secular the northeast is and how secular Massachusetts is. If I may, I'll just refer briefly to some of my own work where I've been interested in European immigrant groups. In particular the big question that faces so many European countries about how to accommodate, how to deal, how to relate to Muslim immigrants.

One of the things that I have come to discover – really it’s been a heartwarming point for me over the past two years in this position, is my engagement with “conservative evangelicals” on our campus. And that is to say, these “conservative evangelicals” – the culture wars of the ‘90s that many of us grew up with, they aren’t even on their radar screen. Issues of abortion, issues of where one stands on same-gender love, where one stands on religious diversity, ethnic diversity –

WOLFE: It's only recently – yeah, Pat probably said it.

HEHIR:

So they take the world as it is, and part of it is that they, themselves are quite secular in their orientation. They're training from business school is what sets the context, very often. So my sense is that I think it's very important to know the history. I don't think most people who make up the Catholic community today of Boston know the history. I'm sure Jon knows it, but I'm not at all sure that the folks I look at on Sunday know that history at all. And so I'm not positive exactly how that is going to impact the future. I see it in a classroom setting. What you see is that you have a chance here in Boston in this community to do things you can't do in other places, if I can just extend this one more minute.

I had Arafat's sister in law in class, and she then came to BC to do a degree at the ed school. She was really quite striking presence when she walked in the room. She was six feet tall and she was very, very vocal. She paired with a Jewish diplomat in the class on war and peace to do their presentation on war and peace. And then she told me, she said, over at Kennedy School, she said, this colonel from the Jewish military kept looking at me all the time and he finally came over and said to me, I think I know you. And she said, you should know me, you put my mother in jail. So then she said, I got to know him and I got to know his wife and they had a child and I used to go visit them. And she said that never could have happened in Israel. She said it just – or in – It just never could have happened. So there are settings here in this educational universe that have ripples in multiple other places, and that's a good thing to keep in mind, I think.

WOLFE: I think what you say about the Catholic students is pretty much true of Boston College – Catholic students who I don't think know much about their history, not only of Boston Catholicism, because we have Catholic students from all over, but the history of the church and so on. Although I think it's getting slightly better. This year I had a student –

HEHIR: I want them to know the history, but I don't bet on it.

WOLFE: I think maybe for the first time I had a student who actually knew that Martin Luther was a German leader of the Reformation and not a civil rights leader who marched on Washington.

Weren't you saying something today, Amy, to keep people in Boston?

RYAN: Yeah, (overlapping conversation; inaudible) –

WOLFE: Because something Bryan said about struck me as very relevant to that.

RYAN: My daughter Chloe is 27 years old, and she works for the BRA for the City of Boston, Boston Redevelopment Authority, and she's the manager of what they call the One in Three program. So 33% of the residents of Boston are between the ages of 22 and 34, so the mayor initiated this program, like 10 years ago. How does Boston attract, retain, and make this a wonderful place for them – that's the dream demographic for any city. It's second only to Austin, Texas.

So Chloe has this advisory council, it's like a dream team of

Any of you have any thoughts?

HEHIR: When I hear that story, and you put it together with the numbers I gave you before, the 17%, my feeling that the challenge for the Catholic church and this community is similar to what the European Catholic church faced in the latter half of the 19th century. In other words, if you can't find a way to talk to that community, to engage them, to reconnect with them, for whatever reason, we lose a generation. If we lose one generation, we lose two generations, and it's like losing the laboring class in Europe in the late 19th century. European Catholicism never recovered from it. This is a matter of some urgency about how to find a way to address that community in a way that it makes sense religiously and connects with their professional public political lives. If we don't do this, the future is defined for us, if we can't connect.

WOLFE: (inaudible) but one of the things we learned, those who study this thing in the academy is that there's a tradition, and again, I think mostly based more on the European experience for the younger generation of Muslims to be more religious, more conservative in their religion than their parents. I wonder if there's anything similar you can say about Boston.

REDA: I'm not sure that is true in our observation. I think we are, in Boston, in general – the Muslim community is a new community, mostly immigrant. There are some black Muslims in the mix, who are American, grew up in here, their parents were Muslims or they changed to Islam. But the problem with the Muslim community being an immigrant community, they come in here and we translate what we have learned. We translate the old religion and we expect that is going to continue in here. Although the religion itself is versatile and open to different interpretation in different things, that sticking to the things which does not resonate well with the American life, with the life of the young people, I think it's very much of a threat, similar to the Catholic church, that people will be leaving. And you see people who were, with their parents'

WALTON: Well, I don't know. I hear so much about this – the rise of the nuns and the like, and I'm sure this conversation may have taken place on earlier panels today. But I'm a little suspicious of these numbers. It plays well. It plays into this narrative of decline, that each generation is going to Hell in a handbasket.

WOLFE: We got the puritans to thank for that.

WALTON: Yeah, each generation. But what I see on the other hand – I see this as the other side of the diverse communities that young people are growing up in and their openness and willing to embrace different cultures and religious experiences, and even validate them in such a way, where they do not feel the need to patrol the borders of their own religious identity. So quite often it's not about I don't have a spiritual orientation. Nancy Ammerman, her latest book, she touches on this. It's not about that I don't have a religious orientation, but it's that I am not wedged to a particular religious orientation. I think that that is a big difference.

I think it bodes well for the study of religion in many ways, what many of us are trying to do in this classroom, because we know that religious literacy is cultural literacy, as you said. That's the role that we can play as educators. Because the more that we educate our students, whether they're in politics, whether they're in history, whether they're in sociology or religious studies, the more familiar and comfortable they with a diverse set of religious traditions and understanding them, the more equipped they are to be at home in the world. I think that it's pushing them in a direction that in some ways the millennials are already headed.

So once again, I don't mean to sound too Pollyannish every time I speak, but I do think that there is a real opportunity here.

WOLFE: Well, we're not against opportunity.

McDONOUGH: I'd like to follow up from a little bit of a different perspective, but also to add to your comments to a prior question about your experience with evangelical conservatives. There's also diversity among generations that I see playing out in the workforce every day, whether it be a school building, whether it be in our administrative offices, there are different things that have brought

us to where we find ourselves. Somebody like me, who grew up in an economy where whatever motivates you to go through your career, you attach yourself to an organization. It is not the same with the workforce today.

By and large the younger generation – we have to think about this in figuring out how do we recruit and retain the most excellent teachers to put in our classrooms? The one thing that Boston has going for it are the students that we serve. We are more likely to be successful in recruitment and retention of our workforce because the motivation of a new generation of people coming into education is to make a difference to a higher, nobler goal in whatever range of careers may present themselves. It's not to the organization, it is to the goodness. It is to a common goodness – their definition of a common goodness. And I think that is another sign of hopefulness within our city and within those people who are just beginning to enter the workforce and think purposefully about their meaning of life in context with what their contribution is and not what their attachment is.

WOLFE:

Well, in my line of work, if you get two optimistic comments in a row, you bring the discussion to a close. So let me thank you all very, very much. When Erik and I put this together, we had hoped that today we'd bring together some prominent academics, and we got just really the cream of the crop of American academia on this