From Silver to Gold: The Next 25 Years of Law and Religion

Opening Keynote Address:
"The Foundations, Fundamentals, and Future of Law and Religion"
James T. Laney, President Emeritus, Emory University
Wednesday, October 24

Introduction by John Witte, Jr.

It was Dr. Laney, our keynote lecturer this evening who had the foresight to see that religion would remain a vital dimension of human life and human learning, which no serious research university could long ignore. It was Dr. Laney who had the vision that religion and ethics must saturate the curriculum of Emory University, reaching even into the long secular precincts of law, business, and medicine. And it was Dr. Laney who had the vision that inspired us to create the Law and Religion Center in 1982 under Professor Frank Alexander’s initial direction.

It’s therefore a wonderful privilege for us to welcome to this keynote lecture this evening, Dr. Laney, and invite him to reflect on what he foresees for this field of law and religion over the next 25 years.

Educated at Yale University and ordained by the United Methodist Church, Dr. Laney first distinguished himself on the military battlefield and then on the mission field before commencing his teaching career at Vanderbilt University.

He first came to Emory as the dean of the Candler School of Theology before his appointment as the president of Emory University in 1977.

In the course of the next 16 years, President Laney led Emory to the top tier of research universities in the world. He left the school with the sixth biggest endowment. And he left the campus bristling with a vast array of new academic initiatives which our current president, Dr. James Wagner, is expanding with equal alacrity.

In 1993, President Bill Clinton appointed Dr. Laney to serve as the United States ambassador to South Korea where he played an award-winning role in helping resolve the nuclear crisis that was eminent there with North Korea.
Since his retirement from university and diplomatic service, Dr. Laney has continued to grace distinguished pulpits and lecterns throughout the world, collecting two dozen honorary doctorates and scores of awards and citations along the way.

And he has continued to lend his formidable intellectual vision, moral courage, and wise counsel to Emory, to Yale, to Harvard, to the Henry Luce Foundation, to the Council on Foreign Relations, and not least, to our Law and Religion Center.

Ladies and gentlemen, will you please join me in welcoming to our keynote lectern this evening, our center’s great founder, Candler’s great dean, Emory’s great president, and America’s ambassador to the world, Dr. James T. Laney.

James T. Laney

Thank you very much, John. I’m afraid I don’t recognize myself in all that lovely and generous and gracious introduction, but thank you. I also am surprised to find that I’m listed as founder of this marvelous program. To tell the truth, I think I was just the early banker and abettor. It’s a wonderful sense to gather here with people who share these concerns and to see your eagerness for what this program is doing and what it is destined to do in the future.

I am greatly envious of my successor, Jim Wagner, in all that he has before him. He’s doing a marvelous job and I can’t think of anything that is more appropriately joined together than Emory University and Jim Wagner, and we’re gonna have at least 20 more years of marvelous leadership. Debbie, I know that’s hard news for you. I also am deeply honored to be asked to participate in this great occasion. There are so many illustrious scholars here this evening who will be sharing their wisdom and visions for the future of the center in the years ahead.

I think I can say without hesitation that all of us at Emory are simply astonished at what has happened with this center. The range of work, the reach of its influence, which has already been spoken of, not only across the university and the nation, but increasingly around the world. This all reflects the vision and drive of John Witte, the director, not just his executive leadership, but his own seminal studies spanning so many areas in breaking new ground.

I also want to congratulate Frank Alexander who first had the dream of the program in law and theology, and whose friendship and counsel have always been a source of encouragement and support for me. I first met Frank when he was an undergraduate at Chapel Hill working on his senior thesis as a Morehead Scholar. I was immediately drawn to him, who isn’t? And our relationship deepened when he turned up unexpectedly in a seminar I was teaching at Harvard Divinity School a year or so later. I can’t remember for sure the name of the course that I taught, but I remember the title of Frank’s paper. It was “Complicity.”

Then after becoming president of Emory, Frank came on the law faculty much to my joy. And it was only a short step from there, knowing Frank’s infectious enthusiasm for law and theology, to our launching a program combining the two major interests of his and fulfilling a dream of mine to create a major interdisciplinary program here.
For some time, I had been concerned about the isolation of the professional schools and the
departments, academic departments from each other. Of course, it reflected the extraordinarily
successful specialization that had occurred over previous decades, the scholarly and research
results of which were very impressive.

But it also fostered, I felt, too narrow professionalism, sometimes self-reinforcing, sometimes
self-serving. And I and a cadre of colleagues had become persuaded that higher education and as
presumptuous that it may sound, society in general, would be better served by more cross-
disciplinary study.

But one thing, it was important for me that it provide intellectual stimulation and not just
academic interchange. That is, a yeasty mix, an encounter which challenged assumptions that
were unexamined and posed questions from outside the field. Such cross-fertilization, I felt,
would allow questions of value to emerge naturally, thereby at least posing something of a
challenge to being value neutral. Frank’s enthusiasm for law and religion continued with those
concerns of mine to make it a top priority. And so when discretionary funding became available
through the Woodruff Endowment, law and religion was launched.

Early on, Frank’s suggestion to invite Hal Berman caught my imagination. And we persuaded
him to become one of the first Woodruff professors. Hal brought a towering reputation from
Harvard. And his own capacity to be a mentor and his standing in the field assured that this new
program would have immediate legitimacy. He gave a star attraction in his eminence and
encyclopedic scholarship that was so impressive for the whole university.

We miss Hal tonight. And he is much beloved and I want us all to acknowledge in our hearts
how much he has meant to this program. But along with himself, Hal brought his brilliant young
associate, John Witte. And the rest, as they say, is history.

Looking back now, it’s hard to appreciate how truly groundbreaking this step was. Its success in
turn encouraged other similar ventures. And today, as I mentioned, under the inspired leadership
of President Wagner, Emory is a national leader in creative interdisciplinary programs, really not
just interdisciplinary, multidisciplinary, multi-departmental, multi-school, multi-university. It’s
extraordinary, the range in creation we have.

And I might mention that the same year that launched the law and religion program here, 1982,
we started The Carter Center, which was also an interesting venture. That was a busy year for us
at Emory.

So law and religion have been the stimulation for so much. And I might add, just in passing, for
many similar programs around the country. There are now more than 30 universities with such
interdisciplinary programs.

Law and religion have a relationship, as we all know, that go back to the beginning, to the mists
of time. It was only in the modern era that they were so emphatically separated. This occurred
in law, of course, through the development of legal positivism, and religion probably through a
great emphasis upon individuality and privatized spirituality. But now the tide has turned.
Conversation has been renewed along with a mutual appreciation of how they interrelate and entail each other.

U.S. Supreme Court Justice Harry Blackman once aptly observed, “Law and religion are an inherent part of the calculus of how men should live and how a society should run.” How this interaction has occurred in the past, is occurring today, and should occur in the future is the leitmotiv of this program here at Emory, and really the subject for the next two days. Their commonalities are obvious. Both deal with text, tradition, interpretation, authority, and behavior. Both have personal as well as institutional expressions. Both are tempted to consider themselves ultimate or paramount, and that is all the more reason why two should be in dialectal partnership. Most importantly, they both deal with the “should” of life, the “should” of life. How we should live. How society should run. Now the term “should” is associated, in all of our minds, with obligation. Under law, what we must do. And in religion, what we ought to do.

The first is backed by sanction, even force. The second, by disapprobation, called “sin.” In the Decalogue, these two spheres overlap at points. But the whole suggests the basic requirements for a good society and its functioning. In this, law and religion established the foundation for living.

But on second glance, “should” suggests more than “ought” or “obligation.” It also implies “response,” a response to a summons or a claim or a call to go beyond self, to be pulled forward. It implies a kind of power from without, the ignoring of which would be a diminution the self, or if it’s done generally of society.

Of course, how one should live means minimally obeying the law. How a society should run means minimally order. The importance of these must not be slighted. And one of the roles of religion in the calculus with law is to provide more than a utilitarian justification for living together.

But it is the “should” in the responsive sense that I want to speak to for a few minutes tonight. In the Christian tradition, this was seen as vocation, the call from God to serve in the first instance within religion itself, within the religious institution’s church.

Then following the reformation and John Calvin, it was to serve God in the world. Max Weber who is known to many of us as the one who linked the Protestant ethic and the spirit of capitalism. He helped us to understand the power of aspiration as it became embodied in a character type that was the result of vocation. And it was institutionalized in the economic system.

He showed how the indirect consequences of serving God faithfully in the world bolstered by the discipline of religious sex, provided the model and the discipline for great economic achievement, both personally and in society.

I want to emphasize the word “indirect.” The call was not in the first instance to prosper, per se, that is, the vocation that brought about the spirit of capitalism. It was to serve God by serving
one’s neighbor in one’s daily life in the economic sphere. And over time, it became difficult to distinguish the indirect result from original primary purpose of faith.

And by the mid-twentieth century, driven by economic rationalism, with economics recognized as a science, even in Stockholm, reliance on faith is the engine for the economy had passed. And with it, vocation.

This development resulted in what Weber called “the purely cognitive comprehension of the world.” “The purely cognitive comprehension of the world.” You see what’s left out? Faith.

The capacity to comprehend the world by our rational inquiry and investigation. No longer responding to a call to work hard, to serve, to pay debts, to be honest in order to glorify God, we saw the possibility, the possibility of operating the levers and the systems and the formulas to make the economy work on its own terms.

Law should facilitate the economy. Policies should support the economy. People were enjoying the work hard, not to glorify God, but if they could, to prosper, now, to prosper.

How in the order of freedom was freedom of the market. The unleashing of huge, latent, potential through this freedom of the market has brought about enormous new wealth, not just in the West, as we know, but around the world.

Regardless of how one views the adequacy of Max Weber’s ideal type in explaining how religious faith produced character, which was conducive in turn to the rise of market capitalism, regardless of how we view that, there is no doubt that religion played an important role, that it gave meaning to the economic pursuit that it would not have had otherwise.

People did see themselves as responding to what they believe God intended, not only for them personally, but for the world. As a result, their lives were felt to be suffused with purpose as they sought to fulfill God’s will on Earth. Success and prosperity were indicative of faithfulness and diligence. In some ways, it was the best of both worlds.

In time, of course, the economy came to be virtually an autonomous sphere subject to rational analysis and behavior. These days it’s hard to imagine a time when that was not the case.

I recall one of the early discussions of what was then known as “national income analysis.” I was a student in an advanced economic course in college. It was devilishly difficult for us students to comprehend, to grasp, the concept of the economy as a whole.

It was almost a Copernican revolution. Now it’s a commonplace with GDP as the index. But it required a new paradigm, a new way of thinking. We had to move all these things around.

But within this autonomous sphere, I say, there is required human action. And us humans need justification for our behavior, especially if it is to our advantage.
We want to feel right. We want to feel that we deserve it. If it’s not God’s will, then it should somehow be for the overall good. And this is where we were at the end of the Protestant era.

Enter Adam Smith, as we all know, an 18th century political philosopher. He described the economic scene as one where people in pursuing their own interest, contributed to the larger prosperity of the whole, not from benevolence, but from interest. This was the way the general welfare was served.

Restrictions on trade, whether local or national, were impediments to the operation of the economy in the production of wealth. This was a fortuitous discovery. We no longer had to serve God in our own work. We could serve ourselves and it would be for the best.

Adam Smith saw the pursuit of interest in the local economy to be at a mutual advantage. His was not a veiled prescription for greed. It was an acknowledgement of a basic human motivation. Interest is a fact of life, and left to play out naturally, Smith suggested, without artificial constraints, governmental or monopolistic, it would serve the general welfare best.

Adam Smith’s invisible hand became a marvelous transformation, a surrogate for divine providence, and a rationalization for interest.

Of course, until the mid-20th century, the influence of the Protestant ethic was still very persuasive, not just in economics, but also in all of the areas of study and higher education. Before the middle of the 20th century, I would say, faculty saw themselves in their role as having the capacity to shape character and, indeed, the duty to do so. Higher education consists in the formation, as Anthony Kronman has put it, “as the shaper of souls.” Kronman is the former dean of Yale Law School.

“As shaper of souls,” I guess that may sound both quaint and audacious and also rather strange for us today. But it was really a very important part of education until the mid-20th century. Chapel services and courses in religion were widespread. And they were surprisingly, remarkably influential.

This may be hard to believe, but Franklin Roosevelt, in his fourth inaugural, quoted his old mentor from school, Endicott Peabody, from memory. That’s a remarkable testimony to the influence and power upon a young man who later was to lead the free world.

Martin Luther King Jr. often referred to Dr. Benjamin Mays in his lectures and chapel talks as a source of great inspiration.

The levers of world and somehow were involved in education at that time when there was less reluctance to think that the discussion of issues of great importance were appropriate.

The humanities, at that time, defined themselves as dealing with the great questions of life, not just religion, but philosophy, history, and literature. These were studied for their content. And literature, for example, offered students vicarious participation in the struggles and moral dilemmas and aspirations of its characters.
Education was seen as preparation for life. It was career, of course, they needed to go out and do something in the world, but it was also for responsible citizenship, how we should live, how society should run.

And the faculty saw themselves as intellectual mentors to be sure. But also to use Kronman’s term, “as shapers of souls.” Now this is not just a trip down memory lane for an old man. I’m not asking you to indulge my nostalgia, but I, myself, was the beneficiary of that time in ethos.

Certainly, in the better schools, this was not intended to be proselytizing. But the problem came in the change, which played out with Weber’s purely cognitive comprehension of the world. This occurred, of course, as we all know, with the ascendance of science and the dominance of science in the ethos of education.

Now if you were wondering why I’m talking about this and where I’m going, this is part of reflection on my own career, but it’s also – and I want to say this very frankly, an esprit de corps. I want to bracket my concerns in time to say that what’s going on in law and religion is one of the most exciting things that has happened, not only to Emory, but of my lifetime in higher education. I want to make that point. But I’m also dealing with an issue that’s both broader and more elusive and maybe more difficult than law and religion traditionally attacks or addresses.

The scientific ethos, this purely cognitive comprehension of the world, driven by peer review and research grants and reinforced and all of these things, and publications, but the science has been spectacular. It’s unbelievable what we’ve been able to achieve. And even in the social sciences, I think, they have been prospering, especially in economics and business.

But the humanities are another matter. We’ve been markedly less successful in establishing the authority on the terms of any kind of science. Even though we have research, we try to find new discoveries, all the things that mark scholarship, examination of text and context, all of that. The fact is that in the process, the larger questions of life and purpose, somehow, are muted.

Now, to be sure on every campus, there are students, clusters of them, who are engaged in great causes, working for social betterment, being exposed to a variety of conditions and cultures around the world. And there are faculty that encourage this and invest themselves in ways that do not always get recognized, especially by their peers. But we, in the universities around the country, and I’m speaking generally, not at Emory, fortunately, Emory is an exception.

But we are at a juncture in this country where we really need to think of what we’re doing. We are preparing the next generation of leaders for all walks of life and society in general. They will graduate from our superb institutions marvelously equipped for their careers and their professions. But are they equipped for life? Are they equipped to make the decisions? Are they equipped – are they sensitive to hear the summons that “should” – this what I’m talking about.

Has that been nurtured on campus? Have they been exposed to the literature in ways that cause them to think in different angles and see new perspectives? Does it give them some glimpse of a better society?
Do not be content with the way things are even if they are wonderfully rewarding. All of our college graduates – all of them – most of them are gonna make good money. Some of them are gonna get rich. But to what end?

We in higher education have an obligation to think about this. What is it all about? Where are we going? Now this is what I’m really asking.

One needs to ask how the character type that came out of the location of the Protestant ethic is being duplicated today in its own unique terms fit for today. Is there a character type?

I don’t mean a monochrome. I don’t mean a stereotype. Is there something that is made available to which they’re able to respond.

I think the free market, the new ethos, dominated by Adam Smith’s ideas, the free market mentality, is of course legitimated by the huge success it’s achieved. But it tends to reduce how we should live to an enlightened self-interest. And education as a whole has not been offering an effective critique of its adequacy for life.

Education itself is caught in the toils of the very ethos I’m speaking of. We have to ask, what are the premiums and rewards for certain kinds of behavior? What encouragement is there for considering a life that moves beyond pure self-interest? In this ethos, is there a role for vocation, that pull of the larger purpose than self? And where will those questions be asked and what models of character will be held up as worthy?

Speaking of models of character, it was Walter Bagehot, the 19th century British political economist, who pointed out how important it was in any culture, in any society, the kind of moral character, the model of character, that it sought to emulate.

For him, such a model included a willingness to serve the larger good, especially in public service, to subordinate or sublimate ambition in such service and to discipline one’s own interest into the larger interest of the home. Of course, for Badgett, also included knowledge of the wheels of government and understanding of the limits and use of power. It offered privileges and carried responsibilities.

For Bagehot, education was for leadership at the bar, in business, and government. It involved an immersion into a culture of purpose and value, where one’s outlook, indeed, one’s very purpose, was shaped. This was, in his idea, Kronman’s “shaping of the soul.” Or as I have been wont to put it in the past, “the education of the heart.”

Now, for those of you who don’t know about Bagehot, he is still quoted, especially in The Economist magazine, which makes it all cool, that gives him a real authority.

Now, I want to ask, where is this to take place if not on campus? We see all over the country higher education morphing into business. Thank God for Emory with its ethical engagement in all dimensions of life. But as it morphs into business, we have the similar goals and procedures and practices and language, increasingly similar standards.
Given the dominant ethos on campus, or its culture, around the country, what do students graduate with? What will be the overarching purpose of their lives, regardless of the profession or career? What will they see as validating their lives?

Thank God the law and religion program here at Emory has gone a long way toward addressing these issues. And beyond that, the university itself has embarked on a whole set of new initiatives which are designed, as I understand it, to involve itself with some of the most pressing of the world’s problems, bringing its formidable array of specialists to bear upon them.

But one approach that Tony Kronman has suggested with regard to the culture of campus, this domination by science and really by the rationalization of the economy. He suggests that the recovering of the classic role of the humanities is essential. Now this would include religion, but also touch the others. And it would provide the possibility for a guide to the meaning of life. His experience suggests, and he teaches an undergraduate course at Yale, that a syllabus that includes the great writings in the western tradition from Plato and Herodotus through Locke and Hume on up to the present time, really are very good at stimulating the kind of discussion among bright undergraduates. And having them ask the questions about what they were wrestling with and where they wanted to go. And he says that it provides a new pertinence and relevance to the diminishing authority of the humanities. With this, I would agree.

Attempt to recover why the humanities were needed in the first place in the curriculum. Because they dealt with human issues, human conflicts, human struggles, human aspirations, human failures, the tragedies, because illumined these either historically, philosophically, or in literature. I, for myself, think, and I would hope that law and religion would both be willing to try this, to include selected literature, not just the writings that Kronman suggests, a literature which offers a portrayal of life before it is compartmentalized by discipline or profession.

I found, for example, that some of my most suggested works in the courses I once taught in ethics were novels. Like George Elliot, where there was comprehensive sweep of the understanding of the hypocrisies and deceptions and hopes and aspirations and failures of the characters. And that those novels opened up areas of discussion and illumined things that an ordinary course with principles and understanding like that did not.

Now, I’m totally aware of the difficulty finding space for a new course in the curriculum. That may be an impossibility today. But I think we need to look at it in light of the larger question of what kind of persons that we want to graduate and what we want them to do.

Beyond those portrayed in literature, is there a functional equivalent, I want to say, to the model of character engendered in Protestant ethic. One that may not be professedly religious, but nevertheless, has the component aspects of feelings, the tone, the emotion that religion gives.

What I’m looking for is what are the figures that would inspire, inspiration as that ineffable, moral, attraction that deserves respect in the desire to identify with.

In taking a cue from Adam Smith, we could locate this capacity for moral response in the makeup of the human being itself, not unlike the pursuit of interest, but maybe not as great.
That’s why it needs nurturing. We don’t have to fan self-interest. It’s there. We don’t have to feed it. It’s there. We don’t have to grow it. It’s there.

We do have to nourish and nurture and fan the susceptibility to the call, to that larger sense of vocation for life, for the capacity that’s latent in us all to be able to respond and serve. And to do it not with annihilation of self or interest or ego, but in some way comprehending it within a larger hole from which we gain even greater sense of fulfillment and richness of life.

Now this is what we want to offer our students in addition to all the things, the panoply of marvelous courses that prepare them to master the world. We know how to master the world, but we have ask “for what end?” How is power used and for what? This sense of attentiveness to biography, I think, is really very rich and one that I would hope would be suggested. Are there some figures in history that we know enough about whose accomplishments and character are worthy of study? Not in a hagiography way, not didactically, but by examining them from the standpoint of their appeal because of what they went through and why they went through it and for what.

I must confess that in my own life, I recur to certain seminal figures over and over again. It’s always like turning a diamond around because the facets are different each time. I don’t do this as hero worship. I do it because I gain strength. I gain moral courage.

Of course, the first one is Jesus. That is the one that is definitive for me. But there are two others that really, even though I know they seem commonplace, are well worth considering. And I think it would mean something to students in law and religion and undergraduates or anything, to consider people like that, not necessarily just these two.

The first one that I think of, and I’m known to mention this, is George Washington. And I think one of the reasons is because as I began to gain more responsibility, I felt the enormous inadequacy of knowing how power should be used morally and ethically.

And I kept going back to Washington, whose sense of majesty was so far beyond me that I had no sense of identity there. But that first winter at Valley Forge where he took his straggling army into that, what was then a wilderness, woods, and there they endured enormous privation over the next several months.

And the fact that Washington decided to remain with his troops, foregoing the traditional privilege that went with his rank of living apart, maybe even having a social season like Cornwallis

And I keep recurring to that, the identification with the common soldiers, virtually unheard in the annals of military history. And he was aloof by nature. This was not something that came easy for Washington.

But his presence there conferred a dignity on the men. It wasn’t just a morale booster. His presence conferred a dignity. And a dignity meant a new kind of power for them. This was empowering. It was more than just the privation. They must have appreciated that.
But the voluntary identification that Washington brought to that situation was something that was powerful to them and it remains powerful to me. Why is it powerful? Because it was obviously not in the immediate first instance of self-interest.

I ask you, how many people do you admire who are driven by self-interest? Is that the basis for admiration? Our culture is driven by self-interest. We reward self – we actually honor self-interest. I don’t want to take away anything that the free market has brought. I’m happy with that.

But as the soul of the culture, or as the shaping of the souls of the students, we have to ask, is that enough to bring about this emergence of spirit? It’s not self-interest. It’s when we see someone voluntarily do this in a way that’s very moving.

It was the same kind of situation that enabled him to put down a incipient mutiny at Newburgh later on in the war when the officers were just sick and tired of not being paid. But the kind of authority that Washington brought, because he had shared it with them, was an enough to deter them. Power and authority. But used in this way.

When we talk about a summons or a call to do something or become something, it is always, of course, in terms of the capacity to achieve something.

The question that I’m raising and the kinds of suggestions that I’m making have to do with achieving it to what end and by what means for what purpose.

The other, of course, is probably unexpected, is Lincoln. Again, the same thing – now both of these men had the power to prosecute a war. I’m not talking about the inability to lead. I’m talking about the kind of leadership that is given, that is able to – and makes them – enables them to be the person that empowers other than gives the whole thing. It’s significance.

We have Lincoln. The thing that – there’s so many things about Lincoln, but the thing – almost weekday for several hours, Lincoln had an open door for his office for anybody who would walk in. The White House is open. They didn’t guns, but they could come in and see the president for a very short time, anybody.

This vexed his staff and it frustrated the cabinet. They thought he was wasting his time. All this time – the president of the United States has got a war going on and he listens to these people with their petty concerns and whatever it is. But of course, they also shared their hurt, their loss in war, their longing, and he asked, “Why do you do this?” And he says, “How else will I know what my people are thinking?”

By conferring with him a few minutes, of course, conferred a dignity upon them which they never forgot. It was not just being near a hero. He wasn’t really a hero then. It was the capacity to realize that President of the United States took time.

He didn’t get all that much information. But Lincoln too was empowered. And I think that when he was making the Gettysburg Address, when he said, “of and by and for the people,”
which was not just a rhetorical flourish, it was because Lincoln had been with the people. You see what I’m saying? And his lack of self absorption – and I can go on and on.

But what I’m saying is can we hold up – we don’t want to be didactic. We don’t want to be preachy, homiletic. But can we hold up those people in biography, those characters, whose lives have the capacity when properly studied and understood, to awaken in us things that lay dormant and make us see a vision of greatness, not in terms of grandeur and glory, but greatness in terms of the capacity of the soul and the heart. That’s why I go over these lives over and over again.

Because – I guess I’m just making a testament -- cause they mean so much to me. I’ve gotten so much from them in my own life and work. I want to see the students have the opportunity to think like that outside the ordinary strictures of disciplines.

And law and religion, by opening up these kinds of courses, can break new ground. And in the process, challenge the ethos, the ethos that is so pervasive like a fog upon our national soul.

Now this is not an indictment. It’s a call. I’m saying that we have a call. There’s a summons to us to participate. The idea of vocation is not gonna be just what do we do. How it works out, that may be part of it. But it’s what we aspire to become. It’s in our soul. Can we awaken the dimension of our souls?

I have to say – I guess some of you are familiar with, it’s a rather hackneyed painting, the one shows Washington kneeling at Valley Forge. It’s been painted about 30 years ago. I’m almost embarrassed to say that it wasn’t the quality of the art, but the fact – and this was historic – that Washington did, in fact – Henry Knox, General Henry Knox, saw him often go out by himself into a little knoll into the wilderness and kneel in prayer. Only a couple of people would see that, which was done very privately.

I remembered that when I was in Korea and we were faced with a huge crisis. We were about to go to war. In the sense of anxiety among the civilians and among the troops themselves was enormous. And we were faced with how do we have clarity of vision? How do we assess reality? How do we keep from being confounded in our own anxieties? How do we make judgments that are cool and detached?

I found myself remembering that picture of Washington. There was a big capacious bathroom next to the ambassador’s office. It had carpet on the floor. And I used to go in there. I don't know whether I was encouraged or emboldened or legitimated by Washington. That made a great deal of difference to me.

It wasn’t a prayer of piety. It wasn’t an esprit de corps. It wasn’t an appeal to save us from all of this. It was an attempt to gain a clarity, to bracket the inevitable sense of uneasiness and anxiety that went with high tension and eminent crisis and the possibility of great tragedy, and the desire to want to see clearly.

Iris Murdoch, who’s not only a novelist, but was a marvelous Oxford philosopher, has written that the ability to not be overcome with one’s self and to allow one to see, to perceive, reality
clearly and fully may be the closest to goodness that we can get. Now, I don’t agree with that, but I think what we need in times of great, meaningful decision is that clarity. And this is not something that we have normally within us.

When we’re faced by great, enormous eminent possibility of disaster, we clutch up and we get tense. The normal thing is I’ve told is the sense of want to flee or fight or something. And to try to find a way to bracket those feeling so that one can see and make decisions that are uncluttered and weigh the things coolly is a great gift. It may be the great gift of grace.

But that’s how I found the power of these lives upon me. And given the fact that we have an ethos that is so eviscerated is so flattened in terms of value and longing and meaning. And it seems we can introduce, through these kinds of courses, the possibility of a new thinking and a new responsiveness, and the possibility of a new summons, a new vocation. And it’s that possibility of a more generalized view of vocation, but allowing young people to have an option for more than just their own pursuit of self.

And to do it deliberately, not adventitiously, oh, well, that’s their business. And to give the faculty permission that they feel in the ethos of the school, of the university, that it’s okay to talk about some of these things.

We are so buttoned up. We’re so fixated – I’m thinking of myself. Ostracism or ridicule. Whenever one shows a feeling or expresses a deep emotion or a sense of aspiration or hope, we’re so accustomed to making an analysis through a hermeneutical suspicion.

Is it possible – we’re talking about the ethos of higher education. We’re talking about the ethos of our culture. We don’t have the Protestant ethic anymore. It’s not coming back. What’s gonna take its place?

And I long for the possibility that law and religion can, in its vast panoply of activities and projects and conferences, might have some small aperture for examining what it is that I feel would be so enormously important, not only to the lives of the people involved, but also to our culture.

Can we provide the opportunity to awaken these young people to the “better angels of their nature” as Lincoln once said? There are a lot of other demons in our nature. Is there gonna be equal time for the better angels? And how can we do that? I’ve suggested a couple of things that may not be practical or worthwhile. But to do it, to get the power of your program to begin to examine that, to see how it might be possible, within that ethos which so flattens things, to make it possible for there to be a parting of the clouds and a new sense of light and hope, maybe even sunshine.

Thank you.