

Welcoming the New Religious America

I feel so honored to be with you at Simpson College today and grateful to President Kevin LaGree for the invitation to address you on one of the most memorable days of your lives. It is fair to say that I learned much of what I know about academic leadership, particularly prayerfully discerning academic leadership, from President LaGree during the time that I was his associate dean at Emory University's Candler School of Theology. You are very lucky to have him.

You, the class of 2004, have lived through one of the watershed events of contemporary world history. You were just starting your sophomore year here at Simpson when the horror of September 11th hit you. Suddenly the world changed for you—for all of us. That morning remains etched in our memories with a stark intensity that time has not erased. Against the backdrop of a clear blue September sky, we stared at the gut-wrenching results of religious fanaticism. Within hours, as the names and the motivations of the terrorists became known, religion exploded into national consciousness. And it has stayed there. In the last two years, the upsurge of media attention to all forms of religious belief and practice has been remarkable. The enhanced interest expressed by people across this country seems boundless. In those horrifying moments, we began to catch up psychologically with the extraordinary demographic transformation that the United States has experienced in the last twenty-five years, a demographic change that has recast the religious landscape of this nation.

You are graduating into a country that is different from the one into which your parents graduated twenty or thirty years ago. And you will raise your families and build your careers in a nation that will continue to see dramatic demographic realignment. According to the most recent Census Bureau report, by the time you are ready to retire, i.e. 2050, the European-descent or non-Hispanic white population of this country will be only 50%. Asian-Americans, who now form about 3.8% of the population, will represent 8%, their numbers increasing from 11 million to 33 million. Overall, our population will expand from its present 293,000,000 to 420,000,000.

Why am I reciting all of these facts and figures to you? Don't I realize that your exams are over and all your courses completed? Probably the last thing you want this morning is yet another data download. Well, there is a reason for my recitation of statistics. They are the numbers behind the faces of your fellow Americans—the people with whom you will work and play, the people whom you will meet and marry, whose children will be the friends of your children. Many of those people will be Christians who share your beliefs and ways of worship, but many will not.

For the last forty years, the most rapidly-growing portions of the population have been Asian Americans and Hispanic Americans. In 1965, Congress passed the Immigration and Nationality Act, the Hart-Celler Act. By abrogating the national origins quota system of earlier laws, this 1965 legislation changed both the percentage and the profile of foreign-born in the population. In just one decade of the last quarter century, i.e., from 1980 to 1990, the Latino population increased by 53% and the Asian by 96%.

Asian-Americans, whether of west Asian, south Asian or east Asian origin, profess several different faiths, including Buddhism, Hinduism and Sikhism, as well as various forms of Chinese and Japanese religion. The largest number, however, are Muslim and, combined with African-American Muslims, they have made Islam the fastest growing religion in this nation. While their presence is most evident in large urban centers of the United States, Muslims can be found everywhere in this country. According to my research, the number of mosques and Muslim community centers in Iowa is well over 20. Earlier this spring, the Muslim Students Association at Iowa State held its 4th Annual Iowa Conference on Islam.

At the same time that we are witnessing the rapid emergence of Islam as an American religion, we must realize that contemporary Christianity itself is experiencing an equally dramatic shift. Your college mission statement speaks of your connection to the Judeo-Christian tradition and to the United Methodist Church. I know that Simpson was founded as a Christian college and remains a church-related institution. But the worldwide church to which you are related is changing. Probably most of us walk around with a rather vague mental map that visualizes the Christian communion as radiating out from a Euro-American center. We know that the American population is predominantly Christian and we speak of nations like England, Spain, Germany and Italy as “Christian” countries. But the center of gravity for Christianity no longer lies north of the equator. It has moved south. The combined Christian population of Africa, Asia and Latin America already outnumbers that of Europe and North America. And the north/south demographic gap will widen rapidly in the decades to come.

I did my own undergraduate and graduate work during an era when the “secularization theory” held sway. The “conventional wisdom” of a generation ago linked the decline of religion as both a social force and an individual attachment, to modernization. Put succinctly, the more modern we became, the less religious we could expect to be. Religion would take a back seat to science and technology, increasingly relegated to the realm of the private as merely one psychological profile among many. For the last two decades, however, these assumptions have been under increasing attack. Some like to date the first crack in the seamless facade of the secularization hypothesis to the Iranian Revolution of 1979. Others point to the rise of evangelical Christianity, to the emergence of the “Moral Majority” as a force in American politics. Certainly, these two events focus our attention on what some sociologists have called “the two most dynamic religious upsurges in the world today, the Islamic and the Evangelical.” (Berger 1999 – add full citation?) But there are many others: the Solidarity movement in Poland, the conflict in Northern Ireland, the Rushdie Affair, the murder of Archbishop Romero and then, a decade later, the murder of six more Jesuits and their housekeeper and her daughter, the mass suicide in Jonestown, the rise of “New Age” spiritualities, the killings at Waco. The list could go on but the argument that I am making is clear: the last quarter century has provided ample refutation of secularization as “the main theoretical and analytical framework through which the social sciences have viewed the relationship of religion and modernity.” (Casanova 1994 – add full citation?)

What does all of this mean for you as young Americans in the 21st century? It means that religion will be a part of our public discourse in new and sometimes disconcerting ways. It means that our political and social institutions will be asked to adapt themselves to new aspirations and to new understandings of the place that religion should occupy in the public and

professional spheres. As a nation, the United States is already adjusting to at least two forms of profound change, that of religious diversity and that of the reconfiguration of the still-dominant religion, Christianity. Both of these developments are reshaping our contemporary American landscape and they will continue to do so into the future.

I welcome these changes and I hope that you will, too. I want to live in a land where religious beliefs and practices of all kinds can flourish. I want to live with people from many backgrounds who seek meaning in a deeper understanding of the human condition, one firmly grounded in a divine-human reality and relationship.

Those of us who live and work in religiously-affiliated institutions, such as Simpson and Georgetown, have a real advantage. We feel both comfortable and confident engaging in religious discourse. We can speak to those of other faiths with a mutual recognition that the language of faith has an intellectual vitality and rigor that can meet the challenges of social, cultural and political change. Christians and Muslims are particularly well-equipped in this regard. Each can draw upon the rich resources of a tradition that understands the use of human reason to be fully integral to the life of faith. Earlier this spring, Georgetown University hosted the Archbishop of Canterbury, Dr. Rowan Williams, as he convened a three-day dialogue meeting between a group of 30 Muslim and Christian scholars. We spent our days in intense and focused discussion of specific passages drawn from both the Bible and the Qur'an. We had done the same thing last year when we met in Doha at the invitation of the Emir of Qatar.

On both these occasions, as with other dialogue engagements, I was reminded of how much we Christians and Muslims share. Our mutual belief in God, in prophethood, in divine revelation, in final judgment and in life everlasting binds us together. We rejoice in the family as a fundamental human institution and we seek to instill in our children the virtues of individual integrity, social compassion, and a reverence for God's creation as—to use a qur'anic word—*ayat* or “signs” of his beneficence.

Some scholarly Cassandras have tried to read this recent history of religious resurgence as the prelude to a cataclysmic clash of civilizations. They have looked for the next fearsome enemy and decided that in a post-Soviet world, that enemy must be Islam. In their doomsday scenarios all Muslims are demonized by the deadly actions of a few. I see a different vision, one in which American Christians and American Muslims, as well as those of other faiths, can work together on the grave social and economic issues that confront us.

We share a religious heritage and a core of values that foster mutual collaboration. We seek and work within a deeper sense of meaning, a more profound understanding of our common human condition than secular materialism allows. As graduates of Simpson you are well-equipped to exercise leadership in this new religious America. You are conversant with a language of faith and you understand how to take the religious discourse of others seriously.

Forty year ago, Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. spoke from the steps of the Lincoln Memorial and challenged this nation with his powerful vision of a world free of prejudice and injustice. I was privileged to be among the great throng of demonstrators who stood spellbound listening to him on that hot August day. Rereading his “I Have a Dream” speech during this anniversary year, I

was struck by how current and compelling his rhetoric remains. As we face both the continuing and the new social concerns of this nation, such as that of our changing religious demography, we need voices like yours that will carry the message of support and fellowship and friendship to Americans of all faiths. We need voices like yours to offer the words of welcome in our new religious America.

Congratulations and best wishes to you all!

Jane Dammen McAuliffe
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