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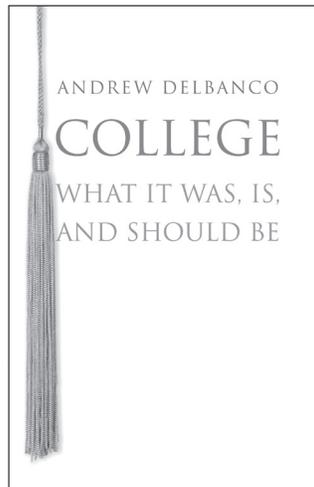
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# The Religious Genealogy of College: Interrogating the Ambivalence of Delbanco's College

Andrew Delbanco opens his *College: What It Was, Is, and Should Be* with a bold statement of five “qualities of heart and mind” that all colleges should instill in their students. At the top of Delbanco’s list stands “a skeptical discontent with the present, informed by a sense of the past”. That phrase holds as an apt epigram for Delbanco’s work as a whole, which devotes almost half its length to telling the story of the development and then partial eclipse of college as a distinctly American educational institution. On the basis of the ideals articulated in an opening philosophical chapter (“What is College For?”) and two historical chapters (“Origins,” which traces the American college from the founding of Harvard in 1636 to the Civil War, and “From College to University,” chronicling the rising dominance of research universities following the Morrill Act of 1862), Delbanco subjects contemporary higher education to considerable “skeptical discontent.” While his critiques are sharp, they are those of a committed insider. In the name of what he calls “the college idea” (what college was and should be), Delbanco calls the higher learning (what college now is) to account, challenging readers to recover a sense of what is “precious” (171) about this distinctive if vulnerable educational arrangement.



## Delbanco, Nussbaum, and Concordia's Vision Statement for Humanities

As a statement and defense of liberal education, Delbanco’s book retraces familiar apologetic pathways. During Spring Semester of 2012, I led a discussion and drafting process leading to a Vision Statement for the Humanities Division at Concordia.<sup>1</sup> As we prepared our statement, I saw advance publicity for Delbanco’s book and preordered it, hoping to find fresh ways to articulate our shared sense of the enduring importance of liberal arts in general and the humanities in particular. The book arrived late in our drafting process, and I felt a mix of confirmation and disappointment when I saw that Delbanco organizes his opening chapter in terms of the familiar tripartite apologia that we had adopted to frame our statement. Our statement speaks of preparing students for *Lives of Vocation*, for *Lives as Responsible Citizens*, and for *Lives as Whole Persons*. Delbanco speaks directly of the first two lines of argument, labeling them respectively Economic (which he frames in much narrower terms than our notion of preparing students for lives of vocation) and Democratic (which closely parallels our notion of responsible citizenship). But he is much more

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oblique in speaking of the third line of argument, saying that it is “harder to articulate without sounding platitudinous and vague” (31). He variously describes this third rationale as learning “how to enjoy life,” achieving “the fulfilled life,” and, quoting Judith Shapiro, making “the inside of your head to be an interesting place to spend the rest of your life” (32-33). In our Vision Statement, we frame this as preparing students to flourish as whole persons, which we explicate in terms of freedom, wisdom, self-awareness, humility, moral conscience, curiosity, aesthetic delight, quality of attention, connection, and reverence. Readers of Delbanco’s *College* will find celebrations of each of those traits in his picture of the liberally educated person.

Martha Nussbaum identifies the same three lines of argument in her *Not for Profit*, but as indicated by her subtitle, *Why Democracy Needs the Humanities*, she heavily emphasizes the significance of liberal arts to civic education. In essence, Nussbaum argues for the usefulness of liberal education by pressing us to expand our understanding of utility beyond the narrow categories of profit and loss to include establishment and maintenance of a democratic social order. Delbanco, more than Nussbaum, defies the spirit of the times by refusing to focus on social and economic benefit, making his case rather by articulating how “learning in the broad and deep meaning of that word” (24) enriches individual lives. Like Cardinal Newman, Delbanco ultimately justifies liberal education in terms of the type of person it gestates.

Nussbaum is well-aware of the power of such a line of argument, but sets it aside for a telling reason:

Education is not just for citizenship. It prepares people for employment and, importantly, for meaningful lives. Another entire book could be written about the role of the arts and humanities in advancing those goals. All modern democracies, however, are societies in which meaning and ultimate goals of human life are topics of reasonable disagreement among citizens who hold many different religious and secular views, and these citizens will naturally differ about how far various types of humanistic education serve their own particular goals. (Nussbaum 9)

I quote Nussbaum to highlight what strikes me as most distinctive about Delbanco’s *College*. Where Nussbaum

shies away from the third type of argument for the value of liberal education so as to avoid potentially divisive religious issues and commitments, Delbanco robustly engages the religious genealogy of “the college idea.” Though he not only endorses but also assumes the modern college as a secular institution (“all colleges, whatever their past or present religious orientation, now exist in a context

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of secular pluralism that properly puts inculcation at odds with education” [16]), Delbanco says it is “a pity and a waste” that so many academics have such an “uneasy relation” (65) with the religious origins of college as an educational institution and ideal that they evade and ignore that background. In these passages, we see Delbanco’s striking ambivalence about the religious dimensions of the college idea. As he sees it, religion is both the defining source of the college idea and now an anachronistic irrelevancy to the operation of contemporary colleges.

## The Religious DNA of the American College

At the close of his chapter on the first 230 years of American college education, from the founding of Harvard in 1636 to the Civil War, Delbanco summarizes his message concerning the centrality of religion in that venture:

To anyone glancingly acquainted with the history of American education, it is hardly news that our colleges have their origins in religion, or that they derive their aims, structure, and pedagogical methods mainly from Protestantism, and, more particularly, from the stringent form of Protestantism whose partisans are called...Puritans. (64)

In the following chapter, tracing the rise of the research university as the paradigm of American higher education, Delbanco describes the gradual retreat of religion from

centrality to the point that only “vestiges” such as neo-Gothic architecture and campus chapels remain, especially at the elite institutions that define American academic culture.

But, as Delbanco reads it, genetic material from the religious origins of American college remain within the modern university’s genome, shaping its “aims, structure, and pedagogical methods” in ways that few appreciate. The very idea of college as a place of “lateral learning,” is based on the Puritan concept of church as “a voluntary gathering of seekers who come together for mutual support” (53). The goal of comprehensive, unified knowledge enshrined in the term “university” derives from the conception of all reality as the creation of the one God. Delbanco directly connects lecture as a pedagogical format to the Protestant sermon as well as saying that dialogic pedagogies have their origins in Puritanism’s “proto-democratic conception of truth emerging through discussion and debate among human beings who are inherently equal” (60). Perhaps most strikingly, Delbanco expresses the need to reach back to what he regards as anachronistic terminology to speak of the magical, mysterious moments that make college precious. He writes, “Every true teacher...understands that, along with teacher and students, a mysterious third force is present in every classroom...Sometimes the spoken word is nothing but noise that evaporates into air...Sometimes it can have surprising and powerful effects—yet it is impossible to say why or when this will happen for some students and not for others” (48). The only term Delbanco finds that is adequate to this mystery is grace.

“The religious founders of America’s colleges were addressing deep human realities, realities we are losing touch with as college becomes ‘the anxious pursuit of marketable skills in overcrowded, underresourced institutions.’”

Delbanco acknowledges that his own case for college in terms of character-formation, as gestating an intrinsically valuable way of being in the world, is a secular version of an originally religious project: “College, more than brain-training for this or that functional task, *should*

be concerned with character—the attenuated modern word for what founders of our first colleges would have called soul or heart” (43). This sentence takes us to the heart of Delbanco’s ambivalent relation to the religious roots of American colleges. As a secularist, he celebrates the movement from theologically particular conceptions of the college mission to more general, “thinner” notions. That attenuation makes room for much more diversity among students and faculty, releases the institution from doctrinizing agendas, and allows college to be “true to itself” as a place where students ask and answer fundamental questions for themselves. But Delbanco doesn’t want to simply cut loose the religious past. In speaking of “the continuing pertinence of [college’s] religious origins” (171), he affirms that the religious founders of America’s colleges were addressing deep human realities, realities we are losing touch with as college becomes “the anxious pursuit of marketable skills in overcrowded, underresourced institutions” (7). Delbanco appeals to the religious origins of America’s colleges as a “usable past” whose ideals can be translated into a secular idiom. He speaks of common “educational aspirations...[w]hether expressed in Hebrew, Greek, Roman, or Christian, or the secular terms of modernity” (45).

## Questions from and for Delbanco

While it was not his goal in writing *College*, Delbanco effectively poses fundamental questions for those of us who live out our professional lives within institutions that still affirm denominational affiliation. First, to what extent does Delbanco name our reality? To what extent is he correct when he says that “all colleges, whatever their past or present religious orientation, now exist in a context of secular pluralism that properly puts inculcation at odds with education” (16)? His assumption here and throughout the book is that a college can only sustain the centrality of its religious identity by taking on a catechizing agenda, an agenda that subverts diversity and the autonomy of students and faculty and that claims “spiritual authority” on behalf of the institution (15). Is that assumption warranted or are there non-authoritarian, non-catechizing ways to be a college of the church?

Second, he implicitly asks us whether the things we care deeply about in our Lutheran colleges can be translated effectively into thinner, “attenuated” vocabularies that potentially win wider affirmations. Concordia, for example, has translated the resolutely Lutheran theme of vocation into the idiom of “becoming responsibly engaged in the world,” otherwise known as BREW. Many students and faculty who couldn’t make an affirmation of confessional Lutheranism are enthusiastic supporters of BREW as Concordia’s signature theme.

Delbanco’s questions to those of us who continue to affirm our colleges’ religious identities solicit us to question him in return. To what extent can the concepts and values that grew out of religious conviction and commitment remain effective when cut off from that rootstock? Nietzsche challenged the right of secular liberals to affirm what amounted to Christian ethical commitments apart from Christian religious beliefs. Can “the college idea” that Delbanco celebrates survive apart from the context in which it developed? As I have shown, Delbanco is himself deeply anxious about the condition of “the college idea” in contemporary circumstances. This relates, in part, to the regnant utilitarianism of our day that increasingly demands that education justify itself in terms of cost-benefit analysis. To what extent is the transcendent horizon of a religious worldview an essential context for Delbanco’s “college idea” in which education is more than job preparation? Further, Delbanco bemoans the way higher education has come to legitimate gross inequalities in American life. The meritocratic ideology of the admissions process at elite colleges effectively states that elites deserve their elite status. Delbanco ties this development to the eclipse of religious identity when he writes, “our oldest colleges have abandoned the cardinal principle of the religion out of which they arose: the principle that no human being deserves anything based on his or her merit” (138)—a rather nicely Lutheran point, that.

## Christian Colleges after Christendom

At the end of *College*, Delbanco abruptly turns toward Nussbaum’s stratagem of looking to democracy rather than religion as the source of inspiration for liberal education: “If an old, and in many respects outmoded, religion seems an improbable touchstone for thinking about education today, perhaps a more plausible one is democracy” (172). But that parting denigration doesn’t erase Delbanco’s spending goodly portion of his book calling higher education back to “the college idea” by invoking the religious origins of that idea.

What if, instead of appealing to religiously-identified higher education as a “usable past,” we look to it instead as a “usable present?” *In The Soul of the American University*, George Marsden surveys in much more detail the same arc leading from “Protestant Establishment” to “Established Disbelief.” And yet, unlike Delbanco, Marsden makes a plea for the continuing existence of colleges that dare to depart from homogenized national norms to offer distinctive, religiously-informed higher education. Even if such institutions are in a definite minority, and even if they aren’t numbered among the elite institutions on which Delbanco focuses, they may and I believe they do serve a disproportionate role in keeping Delbanco’s “college idea” vibrant. The challenge, of course, is figuring out how to be a Christian college after Christendom, that is, in conditions of pluralism, skepticism about authority, declining denominational affiliation, and pervasive anxiety about finding one’s place in a “winner-take-all” economy.

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