The Future of the Church-Related College
Our theme this year – the future of the church-related college – began to germinate in my mind about fifteen years ago. There was in the 1990s a major set of discussions, over several years, about this subject, called “The Rhodes Consultation on the Future of the Church-Related College,” headed by Dr. Stephen Haynes of Rhodes College, who will speak tomorrow morning. At the end of that Consultation there was a major wrap-up conference, held at Ghost Ranch in New Mexico. Stephen asked five people hitherto not in the consultation to come and be resource people for the conference. Among those were my wife, Dr. Barbara Wells, now Academic Vice-President and Dean here at Maryville and me. Another resource person was Peter Steinfels, a noted Roman Catholic writer and journalist. Some thoughts shared then by Steinfels have stayed with me.

At a break in our meetings, Peter remarked to me that the term “church-related” is a characteristically Protestant one; that Catholics in the main would have no trouble in calling, e.g., his college – Fordham—“Catholic.” Further, Peter said, it seems to be a term that came from colleges in which a liberal protestant theology had become dominant. Peter thought George Marsden was right to argue in one of his books that so-called “secularization” came to church colleges not because of the fight between religion and science (though that was there) but because of
the advent of a liberal theology in the religion department; a theology that wasn’t at all sure that there was a solid, traditional basis for belief anymore. He thought that was behind the advent of the term “church-related,” because the people shaping and guarding the identities of the various colleges were unsure about what to say; hence they invented this euphemism, or so Steinfels said. As said, those ideas stayed with me. And, when I shared some of these this with President Bogart late last fall, we decided to go with this theme.

I should say one other thing. As we begin the 7th annual Symposium, a question to ask is: why should a small liberal arts college host a scholarly meeting on “The Future of the Church Related College” under the heading of “Conversations on Faith and the Liberal Arts?” The short answer is this: the Symposium springs from the twin pillars of Maryville College’s identity, that is, a liberal arts consciousness formed in a church context. On the one hand we join other liberal arts colleges in supporting the ideal of the free and unfettered pursuit of truth in all academic disciplines. We are unafraid of where ideas might lead us. At the same time, the church-relatedness of the college invites the perspectives of faith-based inquiry. Even as we are unafraid of where ideas lead, we are unembarrassed that faith is part of the mix in the teaching and the scholarship to which this community of learning aspires.

We are not unaware of the tensions and contradictions that this conjunction might leave us with. But, we choose to embrace those tensions, and not give up just because the going is hard. In American higher education, a majority of liberal arts colleges, despite the religious roots of most of them, have elected to distance themselves from their religious heritages. They say that the goal of striving for academic quality must mean keeping religious viewpoints marginalized, in what one scholar has called “the God box,” i.e., the religion department and the
chaplain’s office, and/or in the realm of private belief. We are also note that a minority of liberal arts colleges takes the opposite tack; that is, they believe that faith-based ideas must lead the discussion, and, in some cases, be the essential filter through which all academic work must be done. For them, “God” is not in the box but on the throne of the college.

Maryville College and this Symposium take a determinedly moderate approach in this regard. We embrace the tensions involved, and acknowledge that the seeming paradoxes are hard to resolve, if they can ever be fully resolved. There are many other colleges in North America – almost a hundred at last count – committed to this moderate approach, what has been called a “third way.” They tend to be gathered in the Lilly Fellows Project. It was President Gibson’s hope, and now President Bogart’s hope, that we might join in that on-going discourse of third-way colleges, and that our Maryville Symposium might play a modest part in it. We are encouraged to go ahead in this respect by the recent work of the British social philosopher, Phillip Blond, who has written that in terms of institutions of higher learning in our time, we are now both “post-religious” and “post-secular;” by which he means that we are passed the time of accepting as valid standpoint to guide college either militant fundamentalist-evangelicalism, or more typically at quality liberal arts colleges, patronizing secular liberalism.

This year our “big liberal arts idea” is “The Future of the Church-Related College.” There are of course many facets to these questions that our distinguished speakers and commentators will take up over the next days.
The Church-Related College in Our Time:
Reflections on the Maryville Symposium on Faith and the Liberal Arts

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[What follows is based upon notes taken while at the symposium and then prepared quickly as closing remarks on Saturday, October 25, 2014. This essay is taken from those notes, from memory, and from further reflection. Material has been added to clarify things or to bring ideas into bolder relief.]

In keeping with the spirit of this gathering, where so many of us have shared personal experiences in our respective institutions, I should “out” myself, so to speak, as it relates to the conclusion of my remarks. I’m a Catholic who went to Catholic school as a boy, trained by some lovely Dominican sisters and faithful lay people, including my mother in the sixth grade. My last name is Polish and my extended family is from Chicago, which, until a few years ago, could claim the distinction of being largest Polish city outside of Poland. Today I teach at an ecumenically Christian university in the South that at one time was related to the Tennessee Baptists; the learning curve has, by necessity, been relatively steep in my time there.

Needless to say, for me this symposium has been at turns vital and enlightening, or strange and arcane, depending upon the vagaries of the moment or how deep into the doctrinal weeds discussions happened to go. (I’ve found that rather fine doctrinal quibbles tend to be vigorous sport for certain Protestant
intellectuals, not entirely unlike disputes among certain American Marxists in the 1930s.) Anyhow, I should preface in my remarks that I’m not scholar of Protestant American religion or religious institutions in the way that so many assembled are. I study and teach the intellectual and cultural history of the United States after the Civil War with an emphasis in political theory, philosophy, and American literature. Yet, teaching where I do qualifies me in other ways, not the least because it has piqued my interest in the concerns of our gathering.

From my point of view, a surprise in our discussions has been the lack of much sustained attention to the political texture of religious differences at church-related colleges and universities. This could be for reasons of collegiality in a polarized political climate, but I don’t mean this in the superficial sense of party affiliations and the like. Too often, we tend to assume that talking about politics requires disagreement over particular “issues” rather than careful considerations about the character of issues themselves—their meaning—which should naturally take place within a larger discussion about the proper forms that institutions might take. So I’d like to bring a bit of “worldliness,” in something like an Arendtian sense, to our discussions of the past two days. To oversimplify for purposes of clarity, Hannah Arendt saw political activity—the space of freedom and concern with working out the principles of a shared human world—to be the highest of values, beyond those of mere biological necessity or the inward, private concerns that take place within ourselves. I’d also like to bring along my ambivalence about our topic to give my remarks a critical edge. In that spirit, worldliness and ambivalence, I have four items for your consideration. But in keeping with my charge let me first offer a summary of what we’ve heard over the past two days.
Summary

Drs. Rhonda and Douglas (Jake) Jacobsen, our keynote speakers, move chronologically, offering a history of church-related colleges in the climate of what they call “pluriform religion,” before offering some prognostications for the future of church-related colleges. On the whole, the Jacobsens take a rather optimistic view of things, working an irenic register. They begin with an historical overview before detailing the new climate for American religion and higher education. In the 19th century and into the 20th, overwhelmingly white, Protestant male educators at American universities taught elites like themselves, emphasizing moral instruction and leadership. By the middle of the 20th century, colleges and universities increasingly sought to mirror the demography of the masses, as student bodies expanded to include parts of the population that had previously been excluded, featuring more diverse populations when it came to gender, race, and ethnicity. The liberal arts and sciences reigned, ideas of personal success supplanted Christian moral instruction, and religion moved aside in favor of detached or neutral scholarship as a prized goal. For their part, church-related colleges and universities either imitated these trends by secularizing much of their curriculum, or they rejected those trends, becoming havens or oases for like-minded people.

In the last few decades, this model has met with challenges as religious diversity has increased, paralleling larger developments nationwide. Today, the Jacobsens explain, there is a “new diversity in religion” where definitions of religion have become “blurry or fuzzy.” Traditions have fragmented or hybridized and the line between the formally secular and religious is increasingly hard to discern. Religion and spirituality now come in a startling array of packages, as the Jacobsens put it (and I love the tidiness of their description) “a fuzzy spectrum of religio-spiritual secular lifeways.” They call this phenomenon “pluriform religion.”
In this broader context, several trends in higher education have intervened to complicate matters even further. Multiculturalism, feminism, and postmodernism, in the Jacobsens’ view at least, unsettled things such that individual and perspectival ways of thinking came to the fore, opening up space for religion as a legitimate form of life. Learning has become student-centered, focused on personal goals and values, including, presumably, religious ones. Professional studies and schools have gradually begun to overtake the liberal arts, and in the breach these disciplines have sought to incorporate professional ethics as a part of their curriculum, which admits religious worldviews. The increasing globalization of programs and curricula, the theme of interconnectedness, has made it necessary for students to familiarize themselves with a variety of faith traditions and practices. This “new university” terrain, “pluralist” in spirit, academically, culturally, and spiritually diverse, overlaid with a rhetoric of personal success and global citizenship, means that new ways of thinking and talking about religion have become necessary.

For the Jacobsens, this context requires up-to-date, irenic perspectives on historical, public and personal religion. Church-related colleges and universities are uniquely equipped to supply these perspectives. Thinking differently about historic religions, for example, requires a new religious literacy where students can begin to see beyond widespread popular assumptions that religious beliefs are hopelessly opposed, incommensurable, or always conflict-ridden. Instead, emphases on historic interactions with others mean that inter-religious and inter-spiritual conversations can take place that cross the religious-secular divide. In public or civic spaces, church-related colleges and universities can provide openings to discover shared values and engage a morally pluralistic world beyond the trap of the culture wars. Instead of framing debates over absolutely opposed sets of values, a language concerned with “negotiating agreements” can take advantage of the students’ need to “get involved” across
multiple levels of society. As for personal religion, rather than seeing college as an occasion for a “moral holiday” for students, campuses can be places for “transcendent unsettling.” Instead of tearing down beliefs in a way that leads to radical despair, students can emerge on the other end of their experience with a more critical commitment to their faith.

Dr. Beau Weston, in his sparkling, astute discussion of “The Vocation of the Church-Related College” makes a case for why education in the Presbyterian Church is distinctive. He reminds us that colleges and universities are stewards of our whole society and have long existed in a competitive market. As Weston gently chides, we should disabuse ourselves of the tendency—and here he uses a tidy etymological pun—to be “agoraphobic,” living in fear of the marketplace. After all, from a historical perspective, Americans were pioneers in religious markets. Absent an established religion, American Protestants long ago discovered that they could hardly win a monopoly. They would have to compete as denominations. In another neat market-based pun, Weston suggests that these religious denominations form equally valid representations on a common market, signifiers rather like certain denominations of currency. (In that limited sense anyway, to complete the thought, the market designates their value.) The age of “pluriform religion” described by the Jacobsens also happens to be ideally suited for markets. Weston contends that sheer openness in itself is not attractive on the open market. Church-related colleges and universities best compete when they adopt what the Jacobsens have called the “generous host” model, remaining distinctive and specific while openly letting others in.

In Weston’s view, Presbyterianism—properly considered—features a set of fundamental beliefs that make it distinctive in a competitive marketplace and a most generous host to other people and faith traditions. First, Presbyterians believe in the sovereignty of God. Because the universe has an intelligible order (even if we can’t know it fully) it’s entirety is
available for inquiry; to study God is to study the universe. Second, Presbyterians value stewardship and so feel a responsibility for the whole of creation. Their universities weren’t created to educate merely their own kind, but everyone. Third, because Presbyterians have a calling or vocation, they view their work as a gift from God rather than drudgery; they labor with a will and a heart. That vocation, in keeping with the Protestant emphasis on sola scriptura and a priesthood of all believers, has meant a historic emphasis on universal education for everyone. Fourth, Presbyterians believe that God wrote two books, the scripture and nature, and so have valued scientific inquiry from the start. The fight between the sciences and religion has proven less a problem for them. Finally, Presbyterians believe in the doctrine of the Fall, which means that people need both Jerusalem and Athens, revelation and reason, free inquiry and obedience. As fallen creatures, our self-criticism must remain constant, which has meant that Presbyterianism has long been home to seekers.

For his part, Dr. Stephen Haynes shifts gears a bit for us by considering, with welcome clarity, an institutional matrix where church-related colleges and universities worked through “The Meaning of Church to College and College to Church.” This is important, because, by describing a vehicle for ideas, Haynes gives us a sense of how they travel (a concern that intellectual historians happen to share with him). In this case, we’ve learned about the developments surrounding the Rhodes Consultation, a major event in the institutional history of concern with the church-related college and university idea. (Part of that concern took the shape of an edited collection that emerged from the consultation: *Professing in the Postmodern Academy: Faculty and the Future of Church-Related Colleges* (Baylor, 2002)).

As Haynes tells it, the idea for the consultation grew out of the increasing unease that some scholars felt about expressing their Christian identity in academic settings. Out of that
discussion, the group developed some immensely useful ways of thinking about degrees of church-relation in colleges in universities, considering various dimensions of the institutions: things like sources of funding, character of faculty, form of governance, nature of religious life on campus, curriculum and ethos, degree of agreement between church and college, and the various embodiments of the respective church tradition on campus. After sorting through various typologies others have used for degrees of church relation, Haynes offers his own very useful one, placing the faculty at the center of the equation. As he sees it, faculty play the critical role. Some universities or colleges feature a majority of faculty concerned with the religious identification of their institution, others feature an activity minority who care about the identification, still others an inactive minority, and at the bottom of the scale, few if any faculty who evince much concern for such issues.

For Haynes, the institutional history of the church-related idea takes place against the backdrop of a rather cautionary tale. Despite a great deal of external support from the Lilly Foundation for the Rhodes Consultation, and the deep and fruitful discussion that emerged from those meetings, over a decade later faculty at some church-related colleges and universities like Rhodes, for example, continue to feel marginalized despite their institution’s stated church affiliation. If the affiliation is to remain meaningful, faculty must keep discussions about church relation alive, must model possibilities for religious affiliation for their students, and pose critical questions for those in power, pointing out the mixed messages that tend to characterize church relation at certain college and universities.

Considerations/Reflections in Light of our Discussions

I’ll offer four considerations. First, as I reflected on our discussions, I wondered whether the religion we heard about
seemed disturbingly familiar. One wonders whether the prescriptions that we’ve listened to for church-related colleges and universities have been expressed in the paradigmatic language of a certain kind of liberal Protestantism in academia, the victory of which at the middle of the last century ironically proved the recipe for the loss of Christian thinking that some at this symposium have lamented. In other words, have we been speaking in terms of a midcentury liberal Protestantism trapped in amber? What good does that do?

One of the eminences of my own field, David Hollinger, has recently written a big synthesis of liberal Protestantism called *After Cloven Tongues of Fire*. Hollinger distinguishes there between evangelical Protestants and those denominations he calls “ecumenical” Protestants. He points out that “ecumenists” were better institution builders: “If you were in charge of something big before 1960, chances are you grew up in the white Protestant milieu.” So, “while evangelical leaders were trying to foster collective pride and were protesting against patronizing and dismissive remarks often made about evangelicals by elite religious and secular intellectuals, many ecumenical leaders were giving themselves hell.”¹ His larger point is that a dialectic between evangelical and ecumenical Protestantism developed so that the move by liberals to embrace diversity opened up the space for evangelicals to resist that diversity and thus rise in public standing. For Hollinger, evangelicals won the market. The center didn’t hold as ecumenists lost their grip on institutions. Clearly, the fragmenting of church-related colleges and universities reflects this larger trend. Deep self-interrogation, in other words, has most often meant institutional losses.

In this sense, I wonder whether some of our prescriptions sound an awful lot like the ecumenists: Reinhold Niebuhr (an emphasis on fallenness and critical self-reflection) or Wilfred Cantwell Smith (the importance of meeting with the other) or Harvey Cox (God isn’t confined to the ecclesial sector).
In that sense, arguments about “distinctiveness” don’t necessarily mean indispensability. Of course, considering that I began this piece by mentioning Hannah Arendt, we might as well consider another intellectual development, namely the influence of European Jews in American intellectual life. People like those listed above could seem less than indispensable in the institutional life of American universities once people steeped in a German intellectual tradition picked their American ideas apart for weak reasoning and lack of sophistication. There were sharks in those waters that evangelicals could simply avoid by virtue of swimming in a different pool.

It’s possible then, that the “fuzzy spectrum of religio-spiritual-secular-lifeways” that the Jacobsens describe, this tolerant, “pluriform religion,” merely represents the success of midcentury liberal Protestantism. Hollinger’s ecumenists may have largely lost their institutions, but they won the battle of ideas. Today’s religious revivalism speaks their tolerant sort of language, or at least my students tend to, even those from evangelical or “low church” denominations. Robert Putnam and David Campbell, in their recent study *American Grace* suggest that political affiliation is actually a clearer determinant of religious affiliation than anything having to do with doctrinal matters. Political liberals aren’t in church, but political conservatives are. Arguably there is more tolerance for different religious perspectives but far less for political ones. In this sense, the irenic tone of the Jacobsens and others here could seem strange or at least could be interpreted as papering over very real disagreements about political matters, which in many cases amount to religious matters.

Second, the developments we’ve discussed have to do with larger transformations in what Daniel Rodgers has called *An Age of Fracture*. There has been lots of discussion over the past two days about the academic “marketplace” and the extent to which church-related colleges and universities offer a good “brand” and so on, but we haven’t addressed all that well the full
implications of market metaphors in our own time. What do these metaphors mean for how we encounter the world and one another? According to Rodgers, starting in the 1970s weak metaphors for society replaced formerly strong ones. Words like society, history, or power were replaced by words like individual, contingency, and choice. The market, in other words, became the dominant cultural metaphor, “self-equilibrating, instantaneous in sensitivities and global in its reach, gathering the wants of myriad individuals into its system of price signals in a perpetual plebiscite of desires, the ideal market marked off the sphere of exchange as a separate world, perfectionist in its possibilities.”

To take this further than Rodgers does, we’re all choice-optimizing, free rational actors in an impersonal market. Everyone is a buyer or seller. To borrow a phrase from Jonathan Franzen in the novel that arguably summed up the age, we’re all “dollar-sign-headed” whether we like it or not. (In that novel, The Corrections, filial relations exist as a vast market metaphor amidst a jumble of signifiers—and like the impersonal stock market, relationships are subject to occasional and inevitable correction.) So yes, universities do exist in a market, and no, we shouldn’t be afraid of that as a matter of course, but we should be radically empirical enough to question the nature of our questions. We might think more carefully about the language that we use to talk about things like faith or belief, considering whether or not it sets limits on what can be said in epistemic terms, whether it sets certain rules, in Wittgensteinian terms, for our language games.

Third, and related to the previous point, we’ve deployed languages of space, procedures and values but haven’t conceptualized them all that explicitly. This question gets at the heart of the problem of worldliness and speaks to my sense of ambivalence. There has been lots of discussion about church-related colleges and universities providing tolerant, “safe spaces” for different ideas and “the big questions,” but very little attention to precisely how we might construe that space. How do
we open it up? What are the rules and procedures for it, and to what extent do these rules and procedures in themselves inculcate values? This is probably the most important issue of all, because how we choose to open the space tells us a great deal about whether we’ll admit novelty, allow people to change their minds, and if we value that sort of thing. Here I think the question and answer session with Beau Weston, given his consummate skill as an interlocutor, was perhaps the most revealing and sophisticated on this issue, coming closest to what I mean to say here. He suggested, without saying as much, that something like a blank procedural space would not be nearly thick or rich enough. I was thinking here of someone he didn’t mention, namely John Rawls, who spent a career working through this problem of how we open political space, whether in the form of an original position or an overlapping consensus, etc. Weston argues instead that as a beginning point, a clear, distinctive perspective backed by a tradition is absolutely necessary. Openness in itself is no virtue.

Unfortunately, this discussion came just after talk about what the market would admit and didn’t go deep enough into the epistemic dimensions of that idea, about how we know when a space is really good or not. I would encourage us to think more explicitly about this, including a deeper consideration of the metaphors we use to discuss it. In particular, I wonder what this perspective from distinctive traditions does to reciprocity and mutual respect. At what point do we mean to dictate moral instructions and at what point do we allow ourselves to be changed and transformed in our encounters with our students? Where is the line to be drawn? The Jacobsens argue for “nudging,” which sounds suspiciously like market language yet again, pace the likes of Cass Sunstein. (My sense is that irenic perspectives are often market perspectives, because everyone in the academy can speak that language effectively already.) All we need do to “nudge” is merely rearrange ideas not unlike we might rework the layout of a cafeteria, so that as free, rational,
choice-optimizing actors, our students will make the right choices amidst the set of offerings they see there. (Sunstein argues that we can rearrange the layout of a cafeteria so that a schoolchild will choose healthy options.) So what about those of us who think radical despair should be an option, or that cynicism has its place in the work of wondrously disturbing thinkers like Theodor Adorno, for example? What if the ideas are so powerful that no matter how I arrange them, I take the risk that students take a presumably “destructive” path? Do I now censor those ideas or try to obscure them? How do I open the space then? I don’t claim to have answers to these questions, but I should admit that I found it odd that we at this symposium left these questions alone for the most part. I asked a couple of others these kinds of questions outside of our formal discussions and found a remarkable amount of variation in practice.

Finally, at some risk (I looked over our academic freedom statement in the handbook before writing this), I’d like to finish by reflecting, as a scholar, on my own institution, because a few years before I arrived there it ceased its church-affiliation to become an “ecumenically Christian” university. In this capacity, I don’t speak for Belmont as an institution or represent it in any way. Rather I’d like to discuss the Belmont model as a way of expressing my ambivalence and confusion over this larger question of church-relation. As I mentioned at the start, I’m mixed up on these questions. What can the Belmont case, in other words, tell us about church-related colleges and universities?

I’m not sure where Belmont falls on Stephen Haynes’ scale, but for public relations purposes, it’s number one, a majority of faculty are concerned with the religious identity of the institution. I say this because I doubt that one could get honest answers if one were to poll faculty. So the “real” answer is that I have no idea. This is part of the problem. I can think of few if any instances where one would worry, with Haynes, that one can’t be open about religious identity. Belmont has made
Christianity a central part of its mission, vision, and values, and it does consider such matters when it envisions the future. Yet, it casts something of a pall over things, because it’s not always clear what Christianity means at Belmont. There are several kinds of Christians and Christian practice at Belmont. Some are very conservative, others very liberal, lots fall somewhere in between, and this tracks both in theological and political terms. (There is also probably a silent minority who wish it would all go away, but this isn’t a perspective that can be expressed openly.) This has meant some painful and difficult episodes in recent years as the university tries to be both tolerant—generous hosts—and recognizably Christian in a way that still satisfies more orthodox or conservative believers. In conversations with senior colleagues, I’ve come to understand that religion has become a greater object of concern in recent years, more so than in the past. In departing from its church-related status, a new worry has emerged over a slippery slope toward liberalization or secularization.

In other words, Belmont is rather divided, but it somehow works. The default position that tends to satisfy many is growth and the market. Belmont has also grown remarkably in recent years and our campus has been transformed, especially in terms of infrastructure and increase in student population. It’s a beautiful campus and more and more students come every year. Belmont has an attractive “brand” in the academic marketplace arguably because its affiliations aren’t demonstrably rigid in one direction or another and because it has found a niche among similar private schools. Liberal and conservative parents alike send their children to Belmont. Some faculty wonder when and if the other shoe will drop, if the type of learning they’ve committed themselves to with students, particularly in the liberal arts, could come under scrutiny for ideological or economic reasons at some point down the road. (Like lots of schools in its cohort, professional education has been Belmont’s greatest area of growth in recent years.) Others worry over whether the
university is as committed to its Christian mission as it should be in the way they view such things. I’ve heard some argue that classrooms should be spaces for getting students to come to God, and I’ve heard others argue that the last thing that should happen in a college classroom is proselytizing. The upshot is that students get a mix of both perspectives.

Belmont has found a modus vivendi, but it hasn’t engaged very deeply in a discussion about how and according to what principles a space for discussion about its shared values should be opened. It hasn’t worked out how to manage its diversity of ideas and practices yet, so it muddles through with some success. Ideally, of course, a discussion about how to talk about shared values should happen beyond the standard surveys and occasional focus groups. Absent church affiliation though, it’s difficult to know where it might start. To be sure, as a certain kind of Catholic, the idea that Southern/Tennessee Baptists might supply the tradition is less than encouraging. They haven’t always been that kind to folks like me. So I remain ambivalent about whether the space should open at all. Perhaps this is a matter best left for scholars and symposiums. Thank God for them.

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Founded by leaders of the Presbyterian/Reformed tradition, Maryville College is related to the Presbyterian Church USA in a voluntary covenant. In an atmosphere of freedom and sensitivity, Maryville College bears witness to God’s revelation in Jesus Christ who challenges all human beings to search for truth, to work for justice, to develop wisdom, and to become loving persons. Continuing in this vital faith, the College believes that it must listen attentively and humbly to all human voices so that it may hear the call of God no matter how God may speak.

—from the College’s Statement of Purpose