

NOTRE DAME COMMENCEMENT SPEECH

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by Vartan Gregorian
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President Edward “Monk” Malloy, Chairman Patrick McCartan, Your Eminence Francis Cardinal Arinze, Your Excellency Bishop John M. D’Arcy, Reverend Clergy, President John Jenkins, distinguished faculty, proud parents, *wonderful* students, my fellow honorees, ladies and gentlemen: I am happy to be here today to pay tribute to Notre Dame, your great and extraordinary university. I am not here to extol the *power* of Notre Dame but to praise its virtues: its great faculty, its dedicated staff and remarkable body of students. I have come to thank Notre Dame for giving our nation exemplary academic leaders who have become role models. I am speaking, of course, of the legendary and courageous Father Ted Hesburgh and of Father Malloy. Both Fathers Hesburgh and Malloy have stood for academic excellence, academic freedom and integrity. They have been champions of equal opportunity, social and economic justice, of civil rights, of the right to a better life for the poor and the downtrodden. They have been active in mobilizing the volunteer spirit of our youth. They have stood for the best traditions and values that have shaped both our nation and the Catholic Church.

Since I am at a Catholic institution, let me make a confession. I have given many speeches—only God knows how many! Having looked at the list of previous Notre Dame Commencement speakers, this is the only speech I have ever approached with trepidation. After all, I am not famous for being famous. I’m not a politician in search of votes or in need of yet another platform to “clarify,” once again, my previous positions. I *am* here as an academic, to witness this solemn day of *your* Commencement, *your* new beginning that marks the *sacrifice* of your parents, the *dedication* of your professors and, *most importantly*, your own sustained hard work, faith, determination and accomplishments.

Here is an afterthought: perhaps I was chosen to be your Commencement speaker because the “fighting Irish” needed a lucky charm as a parting gift from Monk Malloy since the last time an Armenian American stood before you it was the legendary Ara Parseghian and Notre Dame had

an unbeatable football team. I'm sure my appearance here today is going to herald the resumption of that tradition.

Commencement speeches mark a rite of passage. While I am honored to be part of your celebration today, I have no illusion about my role because hardly anyone remembers the speech given at *their* own commencement, or even *who* gave it, unless it was the celebrity *du jour*, like Bruce Willis, Orlando Bloom or Oprah Winfrey.

I checked to see what have been the most memorable Commencement speeches ever given so that I would not be off the mark. Looking back half a century, I was astonished to find that, according to *The Washington Post*, one of the most unforgettable commencement addresses ever was given in 1997, by a friend, the writer Kurt Vonnegut. Reading it, I found myself somewhat amazed by the message, which began with a famous line of advice: "Ladies and gentlemen of the class of '97: Wear sunscreen." Other helpful hints included injunctions to "floss," "sing," "stretch" and "don't mess too much with your hair." My favorite line was, "Remember compliments you receive. Forget the insults. If you succeed in doing this, tell me how."

The "Vonnegut speech" seemed to raise the bar on commencement addresses. Happily, I can breathe easy today knowing, as many of you do, that the speech turned out to be an Internet hoax that continues to be e-mailed around the world.

But paying tribute to you at Commencement is a serious business and I'm here to attend to that. I thought I might draw upon a momentous event that occurred in 1605 when Francis Bacon published *The Advancement of Learning*. With this book and his other works, Bacon became a "prophet and protector of the dawning scientific revolution," and the first writer to set out the modern idea of progress, in the sense of a steady, cumulative advance in scientific knowledge. For Bacon, science and knowledge *were* power, and progress had a moral dimension. It provided real benefits for humanity.

Speaking of science and progress, recently, while reading the correspondence of two legendary scientists, Max Born and Albert Einstein, I was astonished to find that Einstein, in his inimitable

fashion, went right to the heart of the matter, asserting that materialists try to explain all phenomena by cause and effect. But, Einstein says, “This way of looking at things always answers only the question ‘Why?’ but never the question, ‘To what end?’ No utility principle and no natural selection will make us get over that [question].”¹

In a famous essay published in 1940, and which created quite a stir at the time, Einstein even suggested that it is the “grandeur of reason incarnate in existence” which “appears to be religious in the highest sense of the word.”²

From Bacon to Einstein and on, scientists, philosophers and theologians have been cognizant of a “twin” issue, the place of faith and religion and their relationship to science and to reason. Over the centuries, while there has been a continuous and rigorous pursuit of scientific research and concurrent breakthroughs in science and technology, many have felt compelled to ask the question that progress always poses: *To what end?* Is existence solely about the welfare of humanity in the here and now? Or is there some transcendent purpose to life beyond mere utility and earthly comfort? Are we accidental objects or part of some great design? These questions have been with us for millennia and will probably never go away. They have captured the imagination of poets, writers, scientists, educators, artists, and clergymen, as well as ordinary citizens.

When I was a student, I read the work of the 17th century French scientist and religious philosopher—and inventor of the first calculating machine—Blaise Pascal. For me, he summed up, in a poetic way, the question Einstein and others have posed: *To what end?* Let me paraphrase what Pascal wrote: *I know not who put me into the world, nor what the world is, nor what I myself am. I am in terrible ignorance of everything. I find myself tied to one corner of this vast expanse of the universe without knowing why I am put in this place rather than in another, or why the short time I have to live is given to me now rather than at any other time in the whole of eternity. I see nothing but infinities on all sides, which surround me as an atom and as a*

¹ *The Born-Einstein Letters 1916-1955* (MacMillan Press Ltd. 1971; 2005).

² *Victory and Vexation in Science*, by Gerald Holton (Harvard University Press, 2005).

*shadow that endures only for an instant and returns no more. The eternal silence of these infinite spaces frightens me.*³

Since Pascal wrote those words, science and its reasoned progress have opened up many of the secrets of the natural world to us, from the DNA of our cells to the depths of the oceans to the vastness of outer space. Still, nothing we have learned has displaced faith and religion, which strive to give meaning to the billions of people who continue to search out answers to Pascal and Einstein's ultimate question, *To what end?*

Down through the centuries, there has been a dialectical relationship between faith and reason, between doctrine and science, between orthodoxy and heterodoxy. Conflicts have often arisen, along with periods of conciliation, reconciliation and even synthesis. But while conflicts have been and will continue to be endemic, one thing is clear: reason is not always antithetical to faith, nor faith to reason, nor religion to science. For example, in the 1950s, Pope Pius XII⁴ accepted the Big Bang theory because it seemed to validate the Book of Genesis, in particular, the lines "And the earth was without form, and void; and darkness was upon the face of the deep." After all, that's what the Big Bang means: first there was nothing, then there was everything. Incidentally, it's interesting to note that Pope Pius was actually more than a decade ahead of the scientific community, which took much longer to accept the Big Bang as a normative theory for the beginning of the universe.

In his 1993 Encyclical, *Pacem in Terris*, Pope John XXIII also took the position that scientific discoveries in no way diminish the status of God or the place of religion in our lives. He wrote, "In obedience to the providential designs and commands of God respecting our salvation and neglecting the dictates of conscience, men must conduct themselves in their temporal activity in such a way as to effect a thorough integration of the principal spiritual values with those of science, technology and the professions."

³ Blaise Pascal, 1623-1662, writing in *Les Pensées*.

⁴ 1876-1958.

The late Pope John Paul II held similar views. In 1988 he declared, “Christianity possesses the source of its justification within itself and does not expect science to constitute its primary apologetic.”⁵ In his 1998 Encyclical Letter he also said, “Faith and reason are like two wings on which the human spirit rises to the contemplation of truth; and God has placed in the human heart a desire to know the truth—in a word, to know himself [or herself].”

The stance of all three popes and others is rooted in the tradition inaugurated by St. Thomas Aquinas in the 13th century. He, too, was concerned about the relationship between faith and reason. While he had no doubt about faith being revealed through the divine, he also held that it was possible—and in some instances, perhaps even desirable—to achieve a deep and genuine knowledge about God and faith through the rigorous application of human reason. After all, he said, reason was a God-given gift, so “to disparage the dictate of reason is equivalent to [negating] the command of God.”⁶ St. Thomas believed that since both the light of reason and the light of faith come from God, there could not be a contradiction between them. And because of this, he saw no problem with including in his arguments for the synthesis of faith and reason, “classical Greek and medieval Jewish and Islamic philosophers, as well as...Christian thinkers.”⁷

In modern times, numerous scientists have attempted to keep the Aquinian tradition of maintaining an equilibrium between faith and reason and occasionally have even sought a synthesis of the two. In this quest they were encouraged by a number of religious leaders including such original thinkers as the French Jesuit scientist Teilhard de Chardin⁸ who noted, “To outward appearance, the modern world was born of an anti-religious movement; man becoming self-sufficient and reason supplanting belief. [We] have heard little but talk of the conflict between science and faith...But, as the tension is prolonged, the conflict visibly seems to need to be resolved...not in elimination, nor duality, but in synthesis.”⁹ Chardin summed up

⁵ Letter of Pope John Paul II To the Reverend George V. Coyne, S.J. Director of the Vatican Observatory, 1988.

⁶ *St. Thomas Aquinas: Philosophical Texts* (Oxford University Press 1951).

⁷ *Religion and Theology*, by Mortimer J. Adler and Seymour Cain (Encyclopedia Britannica, Inc., 1961). See also *The Summa Theologica*, St. Thomas Aquinas.

⁸ 1881-1955

⁹ *The Phenomenon of Man* (Harper, 1959).

these ideas in a simple description of the human condition. He said, “We are not human beings having a spiritual experience. We are spiritual beings having a human experience.”¹⁰

And he’s right. Fifty years later, it’s not surprising that in our complex, modern world, the search for a deeper understanding of life is on the agenda of young people. A recent study¹¹ of over 100,000 college freshmen of many different religious denominations reports that 83 percent believe in the sacredness of life; 80 percent have an interest in spirituality; 79 percent believe in God; and 76 percent are concerned with the search for meaning in life.

Perhaps some of you came here with these same ideals. If so, this was the right place to seek an education infused with faith, science and reason. Not only that, you are lucky that Notre Dame, while being a Catholic institution, has welcomed members of all religious traditions, not just from the United States but also from around the globe, which gave you the opportunity to learn for yourselves that throughout the world, almost all forms of worship emphasize study and learning as a way of deepening knowledge about God and His universe. As the Old Testament, as well as the texts of many other faiths tell us, “the Lord is a God of knowledge”¹² and ignorance is perceived as a curse of God.

Since we are on the subject of God, let me note that while Notre Dame has emphasized intellectual rigor and academic excellence, it has also attempted to hold fast to the ideal of honoring the majesty of God and the dignity of religion, this at a time when instead of remaining the epitome of the highest love, aspirations and devotion of believers, God has been politicized, commercialized, vulgarized, trivialized, consumerized and commoditized. He has been turned into more of an occasional visitor in our lives than an integral part of our being. He has become an arbiter of games of fortune or even athletic competitions. In a sense, nowadays, “religiosity” has been confused with religion, with all its obligations as well as its rewards. Those who are using God to back up assorted political slogans seem to have forgotten the Second Commandment—*Thou shalt not take the name of the Lord, thy God, in vain.*

¹⁰ Attributed.

¹¹ University of California, Los Angeles; Higher Education Research Institute, 2004

¹² 1 Samuel 2:3.

But you, students of Notre Dame, are lucky, because you have been educated at an institution at which neither the sacred nor the profane are ever taken for granted.

This year, Notre Dame is celebrating its 160th Commencement, and its rich history. This is an occasion to take note of how fortunate we are to live in a nation whose founders also understood—and fought for—not only the freedom to practice their own religion, but for all people to follow the faith of their choosing. The founding fathers promulgated the idea of a pluralistic democracy that should not be dominated by one church or one religion. James Madison, a signatory to the Declaration of Independence and the fourth president of the United States¹³ even took the position, during debates about the Bill of Rights, that "declaring that religion should be secure" was unnecessary. Because of the presence of what Madison called a "multiplicity of sects," Americans had freedom of religion, and that was "the best and only security for religious liberty in any society."¹⁴

Madison's prediction has stood the test of history. America has become a microcosm of humanity, where religious and more recently, ethnic diversity, have added much to the strength of our democracy. Yes, there has been discrimination, on an individual, institutional and at times, even national level—against immigrants, against different minorities, ethnic groups, nationalities and followers of various religions. I refer not only to Native Americans, African Americans and Asians but also to women, to the Irish, to Catholics, Jews and many others as well. Nevertheless, throughout all these troubled times, our Constitution has remained the bedrock of our nation and its resiliency has provided for the gradual elimination of barrier after barrier to full participation in our national life.

Let me remind us all that one of the core principles of the Constitution is expressed in the First Amendment, which declares, *Congress shall make no law respecting an establishment of religion, or prohibiting the free exercise thereof; or abridging the freedom of speech, or of the press; or the right of the people peaceably to assemble, and to petition the government for a redress of grievances.* Those are the words that ensure the right of universities with a religious

¹³ 1809-1817

¹⁴ Papers of James Madison, vol. 11, p. 130.

affiliation to freely flourish, they ensure the right of Notre Dame to exist as a Catholic institution—and the right of secular institutions such as Ivy League schools, the Big 10 and countless other colleges and universities, both large and small, to exist without a religious affiliation—as well as the right of all of you to freely debate your ideas and convictions on campus and off, to agree or disagree with your school, your professors and your government. It also protects the academic freedom that allows your teachers to range far and wide in their discussion of ideas in the classroom that may be popular or unpopular with you, with their deans, their provosts, even the presidents of their universities.

These rights have allowed not only for the autonomy of our universities but also for academic freedom. It has become an integral part of the mission of our institutions of higher education. Freedom of speech, freedom of the press and freedom of assembly, all specifically protected by the First Amendment, ensure that American universities have provided, and will continue to provide, a public forum for free inquiry and speech for generations of Americans. Academic freedom can be challenged, but we cannot curb it without crippling free inquiry, free thought and the right to criticize. Clearly, the authority of the faculty and the importance of academic freedom have become a foundational component of the depth, strength and vitality of American higher education, the most enriching, rewarding and challenging education in the world. Academic freedom has been affirmed and reaffirmed by the Supreme Court and its Justices. As early as 1952, Supreme Court Justice William O. Douglas stated that “The strong society is one that sanctions and encourages freedom of thought and expression...When there is that freedom, a nation has resiliency and adaptability. When freedom of expression is supreme, a nation will keep its balance and stability.”¹⁵ In 1957 the Supreme Court itself ruled that: “To impose any strait jacket upon the intellectual leaders in our colleges and universities would imperil the future of our nation... Teachers and students must always remain free to inquire, to study, and to evaluate, to gain maturity and understanding; otherwise our civilization will stagnate and die.”¹⁶ And ten years later, the Court called academic freedom “of transcendent value to all of us,” and described the classroom as the “marketplace of ideas.”¹⁷

¹⁵ “The Black Silence of Fear,” *New York Times Magazine*, January 13, 1952.

¹⁶ United States Supreme Court, *Sweezy V. New Hampshire*, 354 U.S. 234 (1957).

¹⁷ United States Supreme Court, *Keyishian V. Board of Regents of the State University of New York*, 385 U.S. 589 (1967).

By now I think that I have praised Notre Dame *enough*. So let me get back to you, the students, because this is *your* day.

I began this speech with the questions of Einstein and Max Born: *Why?* and *To what end?* Both questions, of course, deal with matters of science and of faith. I'm sure you have learned by now that the quest for knowledge and understanding in both realms is not easy. It is hard work. It demands effort, constant study and questioning. It requires that you undergo the fatigue of lifelong learning because—I am sorry to tell you—there are no Cliffs Notes for life, or for faith, and not everyone is up to the task. When I was president of Brown University, I used to welcome and bid farewell to students by reminding them of a wise saying, namely, “The number of those who undergo the fatigue of judging for themselves is very small indeed!”¹⁸

As you confront the challenges of life, remember that Notre Dame has equipped you to be one of that select number. After all, it has given you the tools—and the obligation—to think critically and analytically, to exercise your creativity, to explore ideas and to search out the depths of your heart and the limitless horizons of your mind—and to do all this in order to find, for yourselves, the eternal truths that every generation has to discover and rediscover for itself. Indeed, that is the purpose for which we, as a society—and as a civilization—created universities: not to inculcate students with packaged truths, but to give you the resources and the teachers, as well as the confidence, the curiosity and the faith to allow you to seek out and acquire the truth for yourselves.

When I was a young instructor at San Francisco State University in the 1960s—which for many of you may well be ancient America—I remember that one of the gurus of that time, counter-culture philosopher Timothy Leary famously called upon *his* contemporaries to “Turn on, tune in, drop out.” Thank God many who followed his advice ended up dropping back *in* again because their quest for the truth about life and faith took them not further away from society and its obligations but back to the core values of being human, such as those articulated in the Sermon on the Mount, which have come to be known the world over as the Golden Rule: *Do*

¹⁸ From *The Critic*, by Richard Sheridan, a play, first produced in 1779.

unto others as you would have them do unto you. This ideal is not confined to Christianity alone; it is echoed by other religions, as well. Among them, Buddhism instructs us, “Hurt not others in ways that you yourself would find hurtful.”¹⁹ Islam teaches, “None of you [truly] believes until he wishes for his brother what he wishes for himself.”²⁰ Confucianism says, “Do not do to others what you do not want them to do to you.”²¹

I know that these are the values that your education at Notre Dame has imbued you with. And I know the university has done everything it can to ensure that you will not go out into the world as professional cynics, or posing as nihilists, or as lazy skeptics uncaring about the needs of mankind and unaware of the wonder and mystery of the universe. Not at all: I know you will always strive to enrich and improve the lives of your fellow men and women because you have been taught and you *know* that you are, indeed, your brothers’ and sisters’ keepers.

And as you—and your brothers and sisters assembled here today—go out into the world, I hope you will remember that it is important not only to be open, always, to new ideas, to welcome new concepts and challenges, but also to have the courage to make public declarations of your commitments and convictions—and the confidence to translate these into words and deeds. After all, let me remind you that your education was not meant to be an end unto itself. It is a means to action. It is your blueprint for engaging with the future. It is the key to living a life of achievement, participation, and even joy. As a great American jurist once remarked, “A life is action and passion. It is required of a man [and a woman] that [they] should share the passion and action of [their] time at peril of being judged as not to have lived.”²²

And here is *my* passionate plea: be aware of those forces in society that will attempt to reduce you to mere socioeconomic or entertainment units, born and destined to be relentless consumers. Remind yourselves that you are, instead, rational, social and spiritual beings. Each one of you is unique. And you are all embarking on a lifelong journey of discovery. I’m sure that your years at this university have prepared you to deal with whatever challenges you encounter along the

¹⁹ *Udanavarga*, Sanskrit Buddhist.

²⁰ Number 13 of Imam Al-Nawawi's *Forty Hadiths*, part of the body of laws, legends and stories about Muhammad’s life.

²¹ *The Analects of Confucius*.

²² Oliver Wendell Holmes, Jr., 1841-1935.

way, because here, you have enfolded into yourselves a deep respect for intellectual richness, tolerance, cultural diversity and spiritual enlightenment, all based on an unshakable foundation of strong ethical and moral values. Therefore, I am confident that you will never fall victim to the fate that a poet²³ once warned us of: "Born originals, how comes it to pass we die as copies?" I am confident that none of you will ever be copies unless you choose the easy way out! In the spirit of Pascal, think of it this way: in all of human history, there has not existed, nor will there ever exist, a single other man or woman who was, or is, *exactly* like you. But with this uniqueness comes the obligation to use your special gifts—*your* mind, *your* ideas, *your* skills, *your* abilities, *your* time and *your* life in a way that will help you to decide if you are to be of any consequence to our society, to humanity, or not.

Finally, let me remind all of us that it is easy to cope with success. Anybody can do that. But it is my hope that your education has given you the strength, wisdom, faith and compassion to help you deal not only with your triumphs but also with the difficulties, adversities and even, unfortunately, tragedies you will face in your life. As one of my favorite authors, the late Isaac Bashevis Singer has pointed out, "Shoulders are from God, and burdens, too."²⁴

Let me remind you also that much of life is about the routine, not the extraordinary, but do not let the routine distract you from your pursuit of the exceptional. Throughout history, artists, poets, theologians and philosophers have borne witness to the fact that the routine and the ordinary can all too often capture your attention and draw your eye—and your heart—away from the big picture. So don't forget to keep focused on that big picture, on what role you want to play in the great human drama. Remember that you are not mere actualities. You were born as potentialities. *Dare* to be and *dare* to know. Good luck and Godspeed.

Our nation and humanity are waiting for you. GO!

Thank you.

²³ Edward Young, 1683-1765.

²⁴ From *Gimpel the Fool*, first published in Yiddish as *Gimpl tan*, 1945. Translated by Saul Bellow and published in *Partisan Review*, 1953.

