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**Seminaries and the Building of Interfaith America**

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## Seminaries and the Building of Interfaith America

**Eboo Patel**

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### **The 28<sup>th</sup> Surjit Singh Lecture, 2019 Graduate Theological Union**

The GTU has been a leading center for ecumenical and interreligious studies, a spirit reflected in the Singh Lecture. It is named after Surjit Singh, who was professor emeritus of Christian philosophy at the San Francisco Theological Seminary and a member of the GTU's core faculty. The 2019 lecture was delivered by Dr. Eboo Patel, who is founder and president of Interfaith Youth Core and was a member of President Barack Obama's Advisory Council on Faith-Based Neighborhood Partnerships. Since receiving his Ph.D. in the sociology of religion from Oxford University on a Rhodes Scholarship and on top of the many lectures he has given and initiatives he has led, he has authored many books, including *Acts of Faith* (2007), which won the Louisville Grawemeyer Award, and most recently, *Out of Many Faiths* (2018).

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My friend Rabbi Josh Feigelson, the first Jewish Dean of Students at the Divinity School of the University of Chicago, recently found himself flipping through mid-twentieth century editions of the Divinity School administrative handbooks—as one does at the University of Chicago. The book from 1934-35 contained the following: “The purpose of the Divinity School is primarily and chiefly to fit men and women to serve the Christian

church in (1) the pastorate; (2) the mission field; (3) Christian teaching; (4) other religious vocations.”

This was probably a pretty standard self-narration for most Christian seminaries in the United States from their founding until the late 20<sup>th</sup> century. The worldview likely went something like this: Western Civilization / Christendom required intellectuals, evangelizers, bureaucrats and educators. The purpose of the seminary or divinity school is to prepare a steady stream of graduates—often the best and the brightest—for service in colleges, churches, government and the many related institutions of Christian Empire.

Actually, you could make the argument that this is the original vision of much of higher education in America. Here is a line from a document written by the founders of Harvard on the purpose of what is the oldest University in the United States:

After God had carried us safe to New England and we had builded our houses, provided necessaries for our livelihood, reared convenient places for God’s worship, and settled the civil government: One of the next things we longed for and looked after was to advance learning and perpetuate it to posterity; dreading to leave an illiterate ministry to the churches, when our present ministers shall lie in the dust.<sup>1</sup>

In a book called *The Soul of the University*, George Marsden underscores that a similar vision to the one that inspired Harvard’s founding animated much of American higher education well past colonial times. Our current system of residential universities, Marsden writes, was “founded and defined ... by men who came of age during the earthshaking national conflict (the Civil War) and who inherited a sense of calling to serve God and nation in a cultural mission ...”.<sup>2</sup>

I imagine no one here wants a return to that world. Even most of the Christians amongst us are not interested in the reestablishment of Christian Empire—by which I mean nothing more nefarious than the assumption that the symbols, norms, language and processes of our society ought to be

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<sup>1</sup> Harvard University, <https://hds.harvard.edu/about/history-and-mission>.

<sup>2</sup> George M. Marsden, *The Soul of the American University: From protestant Establishment to Established Nonbelief* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1994), 4.

Christian in nature and run by Christians. Frankly, this is what most human societies have been able to assume for most of human history—cohesiveness based on a majority-shared religious identity.

While the deficiencies of this order are readily apparent to us—its exclusions, its bigotries, its oppressions—I think, following my friend Robert Jones of the Public Religion Research Institute, it is worth offering a few words of praise as a eulogy.<sup>3</sup>

The first is that a certain degree of homogeneity is consistent with the way most religious communities have thought about faith formation for most of human history. The great social theorist Peter Berger called this a plausibility structure.<sup>4</sup> When everybody goes to church on Sunday mornings, when all of the institutions of the society send the same signals, people experience their identity as fate. Diversity—some people praying differently, some people not praying at all—breaks down the plausibility structure. People no longer experience their identity as fate, but as choice. We moderns are of course accustomed to cheering for diversity and for choice, but faith communities who view their ways of being, believing and belonging as connected to salvation may well, when pressed, confess that they prefer the old ways.

And of course it's not just Christians. My own Ismaili Muslim community attempted for many generations, at least in South Asia and East Africa, to build the kind of network of institutions that effectively formed a sealed bubble around its members. The line went something like this: "I was born in an Aga Khan hospital and I knew I would be buried in an Aga Khan cemetery. In between, I was educated in an Aga Khan school, played sports in an Aga Khan gymkhana and formed alliances with other Ismailis in Aga Khan business associations." Even though the Aga Khan, the leader of the Ismaili community, speaks often of the sacredness of pluralism in his addresses to the public and in his private communications to the Ismaili community, I have heard more than one elderly Ismaili grumble about how

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<sup>3</sup> See Ch. 6 of Robert P. Jones, *The End of White Christian America* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 2016).

<sup>4</sup> Peter L. Berger, *The Heretical Imperative: Contemporary Possibilities of Religious Affirmation* (New York: Anchor Press/Doubleday, 1980), 16.

difficult it is to raise Ismaili children in this modern age, and how much easier—and better—it was to live within the bubble of Ismaili institutions.

There is a certain telos and social coherence when a community, or a society, operates in this way. Andrew Delbanco opens his remarkable book *The Real American Dream* with the following lines: “human beings need to organize the inchoate sensations amid which we pass our days—pain, desire, pleasure, fear—into a story. When that story leads somewhere and thereby helps us navigate through life to its inevitable terminus in death, it gives us hope. And if such a sustaining narrative establishes itself over time in the minds of a substantial number of people, we call it culture.”<sup>5</sup>

For most of the history of this nation, that sustaining narrative was what *New York Times* columnist Ross Douthat calls a Christian orthodoxy of a relatively generous sort, which means that it managed, over time, to be inclusive of many forms of Evangelical and mainline Protestant belief, and, over the course of the twentieth century, parts of the Black church, Roman Catholicism and even Judaism.

Yes, this Christian orthodoxy was narrow, bigoted, etc. in all the ways we commonly speak of now, but as it passes it seems important to say a word about its contributions. Here is how Douthat describes it:

Both doubters and believers have benefited from the role that institutional Christianity has traditionally played in our national life—its communal role as a driver of assimilation and a guarantor of social peace, and its prophetic role, as a curb against our national excesses and a constant reminder of our national ideals. Both doubters and believers stand to lose if religion in the age of heresy turns out to be complicit in our fragmented communities, our collapsing families, our political polarization, and our weakened social ties. Both doubters and believers will inevitably suffer from a religious culture that supplies more moral license than moral correction, more self-satisfaction than self-examination, more comfort than chastisement.<sup>6</sup>

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<sup>5</sup> Andrew Delbanco, *The Real American Dream: A Meditation on Hope* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1999), 1.

<sup>6</sup> Ross Douthat, *Bad Religion: How We Became a Nation of Heretics* (New York: Free Press, 2013), 16.

One more cheer for the ethos outlined above: it was, for a certain set of people and institutions, highly functional. Seminaries and divinity schools had a crucial service to offer (an intellectual and moral formation in Christian study and leadership), incoming students knew at least the basic outlines of that service, and plenty of colleges, churches and related civil society organizations wanted to hire the graduates on the other end. There were pulpits and professorships aplenty for the individuals who wanted those jobs. And an abundance of other organizations in civil society were hiring as well. One of my earliest mentors served as a YMCA professional for fifty years, a career spanning literally the entire second half of the twentieth century. He would speak often about the days when most senior YMCA professionals he knew were graduates of divinity schools and seminaries. That's just the way civil society organizations with a Christian founding operated. And the YMCA is no small organization. It's the second largest association in the United States, after the AAA. These days, if you go to the YMCA national offices in Chicago, you are more likely to run into someone with an MBA than an M.Div.

Before moving on, let me pause and summarize the argument thus far: for much of American history, a broadly Christian narrative gave significant segments of our society hope. That idea, to borrow a metaphor from Emerson, drew after it a train of institutions that instantiated it into a particular order. Christian-inspired higher education, including seminaries and divinity schools, served as the purest expression of the Christian idea and the primary engine for its advancement.<sup>7</sup> Part of what these institutions did was expand the boundaries of the Christian narrative to include more and more people, as in the idea of "Judeo-Christian America".

Seminaries and divinity schools also graduated students who went on to lead many of the nation's key institutions. There was a smooth functionality to this system. Theological education prepared students for leadership, and they went on to fill the open pulpits, professorships, and offices of Christian Empire. The seminaries had students and tuition, the graduates had jobs, the churches, colleges and related organizations had pastors, professors and staff.

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<sup>7</sup> See A. Delbanco, *The Real American Dream*, 10.

Those days are gone. And virtually no one that I know in progressive theological education, or in any of the progressive social and civic circles in which I run, wants them to return. The twin trends of increasing diversity of all kinds and growing religious disaffiliation, combined with the broader forces of high modernity (fragmentation of media, the rise of expressive individualism, the suspicion of and flight from civic institutions, growing social and economic inequality, political polarization, loneliness and isolation) has brought us, as my friend Robert Jones says, to the end of White Christian America.

What comes next?

The seminaries and divinity schools helped build the old order, one that gave hope to significant segments of the population for significant parts of our history, one that was able to expand to include at least *some* of the groups that it initially excluded (Jews and Catholics come to mind). The curriculum taught in institutions like these helped call that old order into question, to highlight its glaring limitations and the injuries it caused to too many. I view that, too, as a service.

But it does raise a big question: Can progressive theological institutions help build a new and better order? One that doesn't suffer from the bigotries, exclusions and oppressions of the older order, but also isn't content only to criticize or, worse, to be a midwife to chaos. What would be the big idea of that new order—the idea that, to return to Emerson's metaphor, would carry a train of institutions and cities behind it, giving it expression, instantiating it in real life, serving as laboratories for further development and experimentation?

I know that the idea of order is not especially in vogue these days, and for good reason. We live in political and economic times with not just glaring deficiencies but also gross violations of human dignity. I am not arguing for the maintenance of *any order*, and I am certainly not defending this order. I am simply saying that after revolution/resistance/critique has to come, well, some sort of order. Human history is replete with righteous revolutions that ended in orders that were highly destructive. The challenge might be summed up like this: "Be careful how you overthrow the Shah, you could wind up with the Ayatollah."

One of my favorite texts on this is James Baldwin's *The Fire Next Time*. It is essentially the story of a dinner that Baldwin has with Elijah Muhammad in the 1960s. Baldwin accepts the invitation because the corrosiveness of white racism had boiled his blood to the point where he resonates with Elijah Muhammad's rage. But once at the dinner, listening to Nation of Islam leaders talk about vilifying all white people as devils and speaking with seriousness about building a separate black economy, a sense of alarm started to set in for Baldwin. While he understood the anger at the root of Elijah Muhammad's critique, he didn't want to live in Elijah Muhammad's world. In fact, he considered it downright frightening.

*The Fire Next Time* helped me understand the difference between a critique and an order. When a worldview functions as a critique, the best way to approach it is to wonder what it illuminates about the world. But when a worldview functions as an order—when it becomes the world—it has to answer questions at a higher standard: Does this order provide benefits to the widest possible number of people? Does it offer reasonable protections to those who would be at its margins? If you were behind Rawls's famous "veil of ignorance", not knowing your identity before you entered the world, would you choose to live in it? Is this a better order compared to other orders we can imagine? Do you trust the people who propose to run this world?

I think that last question is especially relevant for seminaries and divinity schools—for all higher education, actually. Are our institutions designed to produce people we would trust to build and run a better order, not just to lead the revolution against the current regime?

I think this is part of the genius of Lin-Manuel Miranda's *Hamilton*. Act I is about Hamilton the revolutionary. The man who is "young, scrappy and hungry", who promises to fan sparks into flames, who sees the ascendancy of his name and the independence of his nation as inextricably intertwined, who will "lay down his life if it sets us free." The American Revolution needed that brash spirit, both to inspire it and to win a remarkably unlikely victory against a mighty empire with a mammoth army.

But as the show goes on, we see Hamilton evolving. His mentor and patron George Washington reminds him that "winning is easy, governing is harder." And so, Act II Hamilton needs to cool his hot head, to make



alliances, to negotiate and compromise, to build for the long term. He writes more than he fights, builds more than he protests. Instead of throwing rocks at the windows, he walks through the doors of fancy buildings into “the room where it happens.”

My whole life changed when someone offered me a far more modest version of that same challenge in my early twenties. I was a fierce protester in my undergraduate days at the University of Illinois, and I both believed in the causes I championed and enjoyed the attention that leading a march on the quad brought me. I took that same approach to my civic activities when I graduated. I regularly called out the leaders of global interfaith organizations for attracting audiences that were overwhelmingly white, male, and elderly, and for running conferences that were full of boring panels.

“You need young people!” I shouted from the floor. “You need action!”

Someone along the way played a far-seeing Washington to my young brash Hamilton. “What you say about the need for more young people and more action in interfaith work—that’s a great idea. You know, instead of spending all your energy criticizing other people for not doing enough along those lines, you should spend some of that energy thinking about how to make those ideas reality. You really should go build that.” That was actually said to me in June 1998 at Stanford University, at a conference of the United Religions Initiative.

Building my own institution turned out to be much harder than criticizing the institutions that other people had built. I could no longer advocate for only my favored concerns; I now had responsibility for the whole affair—budgets, programs, staffing, strategy. As an activist, passion and daring were king; as an institution builder, competence mattered most: Did the organization do what I said it would do?

When we get the occasional IFYC staff person who exhibits more of an activist spirit than an institution-builder one, a spirit that criticizes in the name of purity rather than seeking to make imperfect practical improvements, I repeat the line that started me on this path: “That’s a great idea—you should go build it.” I view it as the furthest thing from dismissiveness. Rather, suggesting to someone that they should build a

new order rather than be content to criticize the existing one is the ultimate show of respect.

I bring something similar here today: the suggestion that seminaries, divinity schools and related institutions have a distinct advantage in nurturing the people and ideas that would not only critique the present regime, but help create a humane new order. The core idea of that new order—the analogue to the notion of “Christian Empire” in yesteryear—is the building of a healthy religiously diverse democracy. Let’s call this emerging era “Interfaith America.”<sup>8</sup> One reason that institutions like the Graduate Theological Union have an advantage in preparing the architects of this new order is because you speak about religion and spirituality when so few others who care about diversity do. Samuel Huntington was wrong about lots of things, but the idea that religion plays a central role in human civilizations was not one of them.

This is absolutely the case when it comes to American civilization. Many of our most important thinkers on diversity were either deeply religious themselves, deeply reflective on matters of faith, or very frequently both. Michael Walzer reminds us that the United States is remarkable in being the world’s first attempt at a religiously diverse democracy. He defines the challenge before us in this way: “How are we in the United States to embrace difference and maintain a common life?”<sup>9</sup>

Harvard’s Danielle Allen points out that a democracy requires people to build trust with, and thus talk to, strangers. In fact, the more willing you are to talk to strangers, the more powerful you show yourself to be. Talking to strangers, Allen says, is “a way to claim your political majority.”<sup>10</sup> In a diverse society, Allen insists, the strangers you talk to will likely be different than you. Such a society ought not strive for “oneness.” Allen explains, “The effort to make the people ‘one’ cultivates in the citizenry a desire for homogeneity, for that is the aspiration taught to citizens by the meaning of the word ‘one’ itself. In contrast, an effort to make the people ‘whole’

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<sup>8</sup> See Ch. 4 of Eboo Patel, *Out of Many Faiths: Religious Diversity and the American Promise* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2018).

<sup>9</sup> Michael Walzer, *What It Means To Be An American: Essays on the American Experience* (Venice, Italy: Marsilio Publishers, 1996), 17.

<sup>10</sup> Danielle S. Allen, *Talking to Strangers: Anxieties of Citizenship since Brown v. Board of Education* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2004), 165.

might cultivate an aspiration to the coherence and integrity of a consolidated but complex, intricate, and differentiated body.”<sup>11</sup>

John Inazu points out that not only will the strangers you talk to be different, they will likely disagree with you on significant matters, especially those that deal with religion. We need to cultivate what he terms “a modest unity” amidst these deep disagreements, and create a civic life that allows for dissent.<sup>12</sup>

American political philosophers have long wondered how much disagreement a diverse society can handle before it comes apart at the seams. The great Jesuit thinker John Courtney Murray reminds us that the definition of civilization is people living together and talking together. A diverse democracy is a type of civilization in which the political community holds the divergent views of diverse groups.<sup>13</sup> We should never forget that this presupposes the strength of the underlying political community.

Princeton University’s Jeff Stout says that managing disagreement is the defining quality of our society. He writes, “Democracy takes for granted that reasonable people will differ in their conceptions of piety, in their grounds for hope, in their ultimate concerns, and in their speculations about salvation. Yet it holds that people who differ on such matters can still exchange reasons with one another, and do both of these things without compromising their integrity.”<sup>14</sup>

In addition to helping us think about the shape of our society, religious language has been the key instrument for helping us to correct its mistakes and atone for its sins. It has been the vocabulary we employ when we seek justice, reconciliation and community, simultaneously. Lincoln’s Second Inaugural, for example, highlights the deep offense against God and humanity that slavery is, recognizes it as one of the central causes of the Civil War and yet ends with a call for all of us to move forward together: “With malice toward none, with charity for all, with firmness in the right as God gives us to see the right, let us strive on to finish the work we are in, to

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<sup>11</sup> Ibid., 17.

<sup>12</sup> John D. Inazu, *Confident Pluralism: Surviving and Thriving through Deep Difference* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2016), 15.

<sup>13</sup> John Courtney Murray, SJ, *We Hold These Truths: Catholic Reflections on the American Proposition* (Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield, 1988), 30.

<sup>14</sup> Jeffrey Stout, *Democracy and Tradition* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2004), 298.

bind up the nation's wounds, to care for him who shall have borne the battle and for his widow and his orphan, to do all which may achieve and cherish a just and lasting peace among ourselves and with all nations.”

There is great wisdom in religious traditions for building just, inclusive and reconciled communities. When Jesus was asked “Who is my neighbor?” he responds with a story that elevates a man from a rival religion to a position of moral leadership, and exhorts his own community to follow the Samaritan’s display of kindness and compassion. Gandhi emerges from a South African jail with a gift of handmade sandals for the man who had imprisoned him, Prime Minister Jan Smuts. The Prophet Muhammad, when asked to resolve a dispute between different Meccan clans about who would have the privilege of placing the holy stone into the Ka’aba, suggests that they put the stone on a blanket and insert it into the shrine collectively, thus allowing each clan to claim credit while encouraging cooperation along the way. Religious traditions teem with such stories.

The functionality that served seminaries and divinity schools so well during the era of Christian Empire may well transfer into the era of Interfaith America. After all, we still have all those schools, colleges, hospitals, social service agencies and recreational organizations that Christians built—they are now just populated by people from every religion on the Earth. And just as we needed leaders to run those institutions during the era of Christian Empire, so we need leaders to run the civic institutions in the coming age of Interfaith America. Seminaries and divinity schools educated and supplied those leaders in past generations, why not retool in ways to prepare a new generation of leaders to run the institutions of a religiously diverse democracy.

One advantage theological education has over diversity progressive movements more generally is its experience with the practical challenges of genuine diversity. Diversity progressivism as a paradigm rests on the belief that your favored identities will hold your preferred views. We are accustomed to hearing calls to listen to people of color, follow the leadership of minorities, and center the marginalized when it comes to a whole range of issues: which political candidates to support, what curricular changes to make on college campuses, how the police should

operate. Equally, we are convinced that the bad things in the world emanate from the identities we don't like. White cops beat black people. Men sexually harass women. Rich owners underpay poor laborers.

But the world is far more complicated than any worldview. This is precisely the reality that progressive United Methodists confronted at their recent General Conference in St. Louis.<sup>15</sup> The participants who were the least materially comfortable, the least politically free and most marginalized in terms of their global positioning—namely, the delegates from Africa and Asia—voted against full inclusion for LGBTQ members of the Church. So what do you do when you like someone's identity but not their politics? What do you do when the subaltern speaks and you do not like what she says? It would have been so much easier if all the opponents of LGBTQ inclusion in the United Methodist Church were rich, white, male, arrogant vulgarians.

It is precisely because people in religious institutions come face-to-face with the complexities of human diversity on a regular basis—complexities that belie ideological orthodoxies of all sorts—that positions us to nurture leaders who can build a better order. We have direct experience of being part of global communities where significant segments hold views we find offensive. This is a treasure and an advantage! Unless those views are overtly racist or directly advocate violence, few of us would make the decision to declare our co-religionists apostates. In fact, when the people we disagree with get sick, we visit them in the hospital.

That's not an ideology. That's called being a pastor. That's one of the great strengths of the place we are in; we pastor people, including some of the ones whose views both offend and exclude us. Do we think that a new world order would include *only* the people we agree with, that diversity is just the differences we like? Isn't it a remarkable strength that we, you, have practiced ministering to people with whom you disagree?

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<sup>15</sup> In 2019, the United Methodist Church convened an extraordinary General Conference in St. Louis to ascertain a way forward to keep the Church together amidst different perspectives on homosexuality. Unexpectedly, they passed the Traditional Plan, which retained and strengthened enforcement of the Church's current restrictions on homosexuality, same-sex marriage, and the ordination of LGBTQ persons. See Kathy L. Gilbert, Heather Hahn, and Joey Butler, "2019 General Conference passes Traditional Plan," *UM News*, Feb. 26, 2019, <https://www.umnews.org/en/news/2019-general-conference-passes-traditional-plan>.

This is preparation for leadership in a diverse world, where diversity is understood as not just the differences you like, but rather the differences that actually exist. We who are part of progressive religious communities have a heritage, a vision and a set of experiences that helps us—to borrow from both Edward Markham and Pauli Murray—draw a circle that draws more people *in*. Moreover, we recognize that ethic as not just the building of a better civil order, but as the fulfillment of a sacred duty.

I want to end by quoting at length the greatest American of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, perhaps in all of our history. The Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. famously wrote, “We have inherited...a great 'world house' in which we have to live together—black and white, Easterner and Westerner, Gentile and Jew, Catholic and Protestant, Muslim and Hindu...Because we can never again live apart, we must learn somehow to live with each other in peace.”

America, King believed, was humanity’s best chance at getting that right, because King believed it was written into the DNA of the nation. Here he is again, from a speech given at Drew University in 1964:

America is essentially a dream, a dream yet unfulfilled. The substance of the dream is expressed in some very familiar words found in the Declaration of Independence. “We hold these truths to be self-evident: that all men are created equal; that they are endowed by their Creator with certain inalienable rights; that among these are life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness.” This is a dream. Now one of the first things we notice about this dream is an amazing universalism. It does not say some men, it says all men. It does not say all white men, but it says all men which includes black men. It doesn’t say all Protestants, but it says all men which includes Catholics. It doesn’t say all Gentiles, it says all men which includes Jews. And that is something else at the center of the American Dream which is one of the distinguishing points, one of the things that distinguishes it from other forms of government, particularly totalitarian systems. It says that each individual has certain basic rights that are neither derived from nor conferred by the state. They are gifts from the hands of the Almighty God. Very seldom if ever in the history of the world has a socio-

political document expressed in such profound eloquent and unequivocal language the dignity and the worth of human personality.<sup>16</sup>

I think that those “it’s” in that speech come from the “Reverend” part of the Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King Jr., the person who had as much a right as anybody to declare America a lie and dismiss it, instead called it a broken promise and committed himself to building a better order.

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<sup>16</sup> Martin Luther King, Jr., “The American Dream” (speech, Madison, NJ: Drew University, Feb. 5, 1964).