From the period when education at Wake Forest became an enterprise clearly distinct from evangelism—the work of the University thus being separate and not subordinate to the mission of the church—we have struggled with the question of our religious identity and responsibility. The issues arising from this question have been vexing, often controversial, and something in our common character is doubtless owed to the fact that we were often at odds with North Carolina Baptists over issues as large as academic freedom and as trivial as dancing.

The question of Wake Forest’s religious identity has now assumed an unprecedented character. We no longer have any official or formal ties to the North Carolina Baptist Convention. Last year, in response to criticism of our campus alcohol policies and the University’s posture regarding the Wake Forest Baptist Church—an independent congregation that worships in our chapel—the Convention severed our remaining relationships, referring to Wake Forest as an “historically-related” institution.

This means that Wake Forest must decide the significance of our religious heritage without the constraint or the requirement of any external condition or relationship. Thus, will we be a better university—academically and in the environment provided for students—if we seek to integrate this Christian heritage into our future or if we, in time, come to disregard it? That most important question is before Wake Forest now and in the years ahead.

Based upon the work of historian George Marsden and others, we can reasonably predict what, left to the prevailing norms of the academy, the answer to the question would be. Marsden documents the broad intellectual forces—scientism, objectivity, academic freedom, cultural pluralism, and others—which caused many elite universities in America of Protestant origin to repudiate the principles of their founding and of their distinguished histories. Christianity in these schools is not only “peripheral” but also “absolutely alien”
to the academic enterprise.\textsuperscript{1} Woodrow Wilson regularly preached at mandatory chapel at Princeton. Founding documents proclaiming “the external union of knowledge and religion as set forth in the teachings and character of Jesus Christ” would have been typical in some of our best schools well into the 20\textsuperscript{th} century. Noah Porter, president of Yale, was also president of the Wellesley board whose founders asserted Wellesley to be “Christian in its influence, discipline, and course of instruction.”\textsuperscript{2}

What is to be our future with respect to our own religious identity now that the question is in our hands and that of our governing board?

I want to suggest that our religious heritage is a source of strength and vitality, and that the Lilly program which we are inaugurating today provides an important opportunity to incorporate this heritage into our present work and life.

\textit{I}

Charles Kimball remarks in his new book that religion “is arguably the most powerful and pervasive force on earth.”\textsuperscript{3} The ebb and flow of history and the rise and fall of cultures and civilizations demonstrate the truth of his claim in an historical sense. In contemporary terms as well, religion is definitive for culture, and provides the conceptual framework by which human beings around the world interpret their lives and their experience, and the terms by which humans ask and answer basic existential questions of meaning and destiny. In a comprehensive sense, therefore, religion is both the metaphysics and the moral foundation of humanity. The events of 9/11 brought matters of religious culture to the world’s attention in a way not soon to be forgotten.

This almost universal influence of religion is not merely an historical or sociological matter, it has profound implications for the intellectual architecture, the conceptual systems, upon which all knowledge—and thus all teaching and learning—rests. Because of religion’s reach across history and culture, and the centrality of religion to the psychology of human understanding, it could be argued that religion is the discipline most basic to liberal education.

On the face of it, therefore, it would not seem wise for institutions that value liberal education—and not just specialized knowledge—to follow the path which Marsden’s work would suggest for an institution with a history and foundation like ours. Unless we understand religion—and approach it as religion, as lived and practiced—we shall

\textsuperscript{1} George M. Marsden and Bradley J. Longfield (eds.), \textit{The Secularization of the Academy} (New York: Oxford University Press, 1992), 11. See also Marsden, \textit{The Soul of the American University}. I strongly suggest that persons interested in Christian higher education study this body of work. It is a cautionary tale.

\textsuperscript{2} George M. Marsden, \textit{The Soul of the American University: From Protestant Establishment to Established Nonbelief} (New York: Oxford University Press, 1994), 22.

understand neither our own worldview nor, just as urgently, the worldviews of others. Kimball’s book, *When Religion Becomes Evil*, is a forceful case in point.

Religions make claims about the world—claims that are conceptually basic and fervently disputed. These disputes pose the most basic questions about epistemological limits. In our tradition, this matter has taken the form of a long and important debate about the domains of faith and reason. In the modern era, this debate is more acutely focused as a result of the intellectual stature achieved by the empirical sciences. What is at issue is not merely religious knowledge—or lack of it—but the larger claim that all knowledge is confined to the limits of empirical science.

This claim—one of the most powerful forces at work in the academy and in culture—has profound implications for teaching and learning. For what shall we say about art, literature, philosophy, or the social sciences? Do these disciplines, as well as religion, contribute to human understanding or are these subjects merely highbrow human entertainments? The claims of religion, along with those of the arts and humanities, require that we explore questions upon which much about the entire academic enterprise depends.

We are a better university—a richer and more diverse educational culture—to the extent that these matters are at issue in our classrooms and residence halls.

Let me provide another local example of how matters of religion are fundamental to education and culture. Wake Forest’s Michael Perry is a leading legal scholar whose work deals prominently with the role of religion in legal and political matters.

The moral foundation of democracy resides in the idea that human beings occupy a unique moral status. Regardless of individual differences, persons—merely as persons—possess natural, inalienable rights. Immanuel Kant argued that persons are ends in themselves—possessing inherent dignity and worth.

No idea has been more powerful and important to democracy than the notion of human rights—from the fight over abolition, to establishing the moral and legal basis of the Nuremberg trials, to the extension of freedoms and opportunities to minority populations in America and around the world.

Michael Perry and others claim that the idea of human rights is an essentially religious idea, the suggestion captured in the formulation of rights which asserts that human life is sacred. In an intriguing series of arguments, Perry suggests that no secular version of the notion of human rights can be sustained.4

This is a striking and important conclusion. Arguments about rights, their extension and their limits, fill our policy debates, not to mention the political media.

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I dare say that few, if any, of the partisans to these debates recognize that their moral claims have led them to the realm of theological discourse.

II

The Wake Forest story begins with Samuel Wait traveling through eastern North Carolina in 1827 collecting funds for Columbia College. As the result of a spooked horse and a damaged wagon, Reverend Wait was detained for a week in New Bern where he preached in the local congregations. The worshippers were impressed, and he was called to the pulpit of the New Bern Baptist Church.

Dr. Wait’s concern for education and the cultivation of the ministry, however, took a new form. With the support of other leaders in the North Carolina Baptist Convention, the Wake Forest Manual Labor Institute was born, soon to become a college and, not until 1967, a university. Our subsequent history reflects an ongoing concern to be respectful of this founding religious commitment, while at the same time pursuing our developing understanding of our responsibility as an institution of higher education.

Our Board of Trustees was self-perpetuating from the founding of Wake Forest until the early part of the last century when the power of election was ceded to the North Carolina Baptist Convention. In the 1970’s, Wake Forest was given the right to nominate a small number of non-North Carolinians and non-Baptists to our board, reflecting the fact that we were no longer exclusively a North Carolina institution—though these nominees were actually elected by the Convention and there remained a religious qualification for service.

In time, the Convention came to exercise virtual veto power over the appointments of non-North Carolina Baptists by insisting on the right to make an independent and religious judgment of their fitness to be elected after our trustees had nominated them.

In the 1980’s the trustees, responding to increased tension over the election process, were able to reach an arrangement whereby the board again became self-perpetuating, ending the roughly six decades of control by the Convention. In return, Wake Forest surrendered all claims of support by the Baptist Convention. That agreement was described as “fraternal and voluntary,” and Wake Forest retained associate membership on various educational councils and was listed as a North Carolina Baptist institution until the changes of last year.

Today, our governing board is self-perpetuating, and there are no longer any geographical or religious requirements for membership.

Throughout this long and often controversial series of developments, our mission statements have affirmed the importance of our Baptist heritage and the centrality of our religious identity to our academic life and work. Indeed, it was after our formal separation from the Convention that the trustees established the Divinity School. The School affirms that we should provide leadership for the church as we do for the other
great professions and vocations, thus making our relationship to our religious heritage a part of our academic mission. We serve the church as we serve law, education, medicine, business, and the other avenues of public service.

In ways we did not altogether anticipate, the Divinity School has already forged important links with the Winston-Salem community, facilitating religious dialogue and service through internships and mentors. Its ecumenical efforts have extended or strengthened our connections with Presbyterians, United Methodists, Moravians, Roman Catholics, Lutherans, Quakers, Pentecostals, and members of the Jewish community. The Divinity School will facilitate summer programs funded by Lilly and offer high school students an opportunity for service learning and exploration of ministerial vocation.

III

For the present and for the foreseeable future, I do not believe that our trustees will permit the repudiation or erosion of our religious heritage. But the fact is that as long as we were a small regional institution, the academic world little cared what Wake Forest did. Now that we are Page One in the U.S. News and other rankings, the forces of academic conformity and uniformity are much more in evidence. There is a widely shared notion that academic excellence has a univocal meaning defined often by those very institutions Marsden’s history describes.

Part of our board’s outlook is simply the debt which we owe the past. Wake Forest would not exist, nor would it have survived the perils of an often turbulent history, especially the Civil War, without the resolve and commitment of North Carolina Baptists. Many of the benefactions we received—such as the Bostwick gift from a Standard Oil founder that created our modern endowment—were given because we were a Baptist school serving the needs of a Baptist people in a then remote location. Despite the formal separation from the church which has been effected, that history with its contributions and inherent obligations does not disappear. Who and what we are is inevitably a function of who and what we have been.

But there are other elements of our corporate personality that owe much to the Baptist tradition. Our history of contention with the church, sometimes friendly and sometimes fierce, was itself a reflection of the very Baptist idea of freedom, and freedom has been a central tenet at Wake Forest. Perhaps few of us now know that Wake Forest was awarded the Alexander Meiklejohn Award for the defense of academic freedom from the American Association of University Professors in 1978 because of the stand Wake Forest took against the church’s opposition to federal involvement in higher education.

I believe there is a consensus on our board that just as Brandeis affirms its Jewish and Notre Dame its Catholic identity, Wake Forest should not deny its heritage in the Christian and Baptist communions. The corporate entity that is Wake Forest is as tangible a reality as those of us who are individual agents in the drama that is its life.
across the generations. Wake Forest—the collective reality—has a particular religious identity.

I hasten to add that this religious posture is compatible with our respect for religious pluralism and the desire, even the necessity, that we hear and heed different and dissenting voices. At one level, this is because we are devoted to learning from others the alternative ways in which transcendence has been construed. But in purely religious terms, the Baptist insistence that there is no prescribed orthodox code of belief—no creed—means that we must all posit the propositions of faith with humility and the recognition that we cannot contain divine truth in human formulations. Each person being a priest means that no one person can affirm his or her own faith formula as divinely ordained. We live and we walk by faith.

This is the Baptist outlook—radical and antinomian as it is—and not some version prescribed by the ideas of political correctness and diversity. In fact, Wake Forest lived this creed. When the Jewish Artom family fled Italian fascism, they came to old Wake Forest where they were so loved that when Professor Artom became an internationally-recognized scientist and might have served at any number of more prestigious medical centers, he would never leave the place that gave his family a home when they had none. The Artoms arrived by train in old Wake Forest speaking no English. Bianca Artom loved to tell that her introduction to America was to be given a milkshake and taken to a basketball game! Our academic center in Venice, Casa Artom, honors this Jewish legacy at Wake Forest. Baptist freedom at Wake Forest embraced the Jewish Artoms, not with tolerance, but with love.

Thus, contrary to what contemporary stereotypes suggest, being a Baptist school did not mean that Wake Forest was closed or rigid. The famous advocacy of William Louis Poteat for the teaching of evolution meant that North Carolina—alone of the Southern states—did not adopt an anti-evolution statute. So signal was his achievement that he was given honorary degrees by Chapel Hill and Duke! Dr. Poteat drew deep from the well of the Baptist tradition in his insistence upon individual freedom and responsibility. Freedom of religion has a strong parallel in the venerated tradition of academic freedom on this campus.

Though all America has much to be ashamed of in the matter of race relations, Wake Forest was the first private Southern university to integrate. When the Communist scare of the 1950’s brought a speaker ban to the public universities of this state, Wake Forest brought a perennial Communist political candidate to speak on our campus. We opened our forums to Norman Thomas, the socialist, as well as George Lincoln Rockwell, head of the American Nazi party. Reflecting on this heritage, I fear we may now be less free in our willingness to hear all positions on all topics than we were when those freedom-worshipping Baptists ruled these halls.

So in honoring this religious heritage and in claiming this part of our corporate personality, Wake Forest acknowledges an element of our past which directed us at critical moments to choose freedom—academic freedom, freedom of expression, and
freedom of religion—with all of the controversy that freedom engenders. This is not a history to be overcome or set aside. This is a history to be prized and nurtured.

IV

If this assessment of the centrality of religion to liberal education and the significance of our own heritage be granted, the importance of the religious environment extends as well to campus life and culture. The ideal of liberal education concerns human wholeness and directs reflection toward questions of meaning and destiny. Most of our students arrive with explicitly religious commitments and concerns, and we can hardly provide for their intellectual and moral maturity without providing an atmosphere hospitable to religious deliberation and practice.

An educational institution is not a church, but a university is a place where beliefs, perhaps especially religious commitments, are examined and considered in the process of developing a mature religious and intellectual outlook. Perhaps no feature of the Wake Forest experience has been so persistently and appreciatively reported to me by alumni over the years than accounts of a youthful religious faith and practice being transformed here into a sustaining and mature religious life.

Much of this religious activity, of course, belongs in the domain of practice presided over by our chaplains and campus ministers. But much religious development has a more explicitly academic foundation, and not just in religion courses. An academic program where religious questions and issues are subjected to historic and systematic study is calculated to inform and, at times, to reform faith, as well as to extend understanding of ourselves and others.

Much has changed on the nation’s campuses since the repudiation of in loco parentis in the late 1960’s and 1970’s. As a young professor in the late 1960’s, I regularly chaperoned student parties on weekends. They pretended, at least, that they were glad to see me! Campus social life, student organizations, personal advising, and mentoring were, I think it is fair to say, matters which the faculty regarded as part of our academic responsibility.

The narrower definition of the academic program resulting from the “cultural revolution”—to substantially exclude student life and culture—has tended to separate and isolate the campus experience of students from engagement with faculty. So we worry, as we perenniatically do, about the intellectual atmosphere on campus beyond the classroom and the social lives of our students left to their own devices. That worry comes, in part, from changes in how academicians now define their professional responsibilities.

Parenthetically, I should add that growing concern about alcohol and substance abuse on America’s campuses is prompting a reexamination of the wisdom of this departure from in loco parentis. There is, of course, an immediate and obvious connection between the environment in which students study and learn, and the environment in which they live and play.
To the extent that we integrate living and learning—I believe this to be the lesson of the remarkable outcomes of our foreign study houses—we strengthen both the academic program and the social experience of our students. Much the same can be said for many of our service learning trips. Many students experience on these pilgrimages of study and service a moral and intellectual transformation.

Immanuel Kant said that the overriding questions of human life are the existence of God, the freedom of the will, and the immortality of the soul. No one can navigate life’s journey without serious consideration of questions of purpose and destiny. Wake Forest should always be a place where these topics are reflected in how we study, how we live, and how we worship.

This background will explain the importance of this occasion, and why we are so pleased and honored to have received this grant from the Lilly Endowment under its Programs for the Theological Exploration of Vocation. The resources provided by this grant offer us many ways to build upon the best of our heritage. In the area of institutional identity, it affords us a structured way to engage in sustained conversations within and among the many constituent parts of our community: faculty, staff, students, alumni, trustees, parents, and friends of Wake Forest University.

I hope that each of you here tonight—and many, many more who are not with us—will seize the opportunity to engage this process of discussion over the next five years. You will hear more in coming weeks and months as, together, we endeavor to nurture and shape our institutional identity in the 21st century, a course that both honors and builds upon the values that have distinguished Wake Forest and, at the same time, fully embraces the rich diversity, pluralism, and interdependence that characterize our community, nation, and world.

I want to thank all those responsible for the planning and preparation of this proposal, and congratulate Betsy Taylor who will direct the Pro Humanitate Center that was created under the grant.

The Pro Humanitate Center, honoring the Wake Forest motto, implies that we will be permitted to consider the meaning of our religious heritage, to have a broad discussion on the relationship of vocation to career, and to continue our efforts to integrate the ideal of service into the Wake Forest experience.

As our students are in the process both of the formation of mature values and the establishment of their professional aspirations, it is essential that we provide avenues to consider vocation as the intersection of work and meaning.
As Robert Frost said at the conclusion of “Two Tramps in Mud Time”:

My object in living is to unite
My avocation and my vocation
As my two eyes make one in sight.
Only where love and need are one,
And the work is play for mortal stakes,
Is the deed ever really done
For Heaven and the future’s sake.⁵

The *Pro Humanitate* Center should assist and support our community in seeking that union of avocation and vocation, love and need, so that the work we undertake here will be for heaven and for the future.

**CONCLUSION**

Finally, let me tell you a Wake Forest story. Last September, in the aftermath of 9/11, filled as all Americans were with grief and a sense of helplessness, our Alumni Office decided that we should telephone our alumni and friends living in the affected areas to ascertain their safety and to extend our concern.

All of us who made these calls will never forget those moving and often disturbing conversations. One alumnus to whom I spoke had been to five funerals in one week and did not even know how many more friends for whom he had yet to mourn.

Those phone calls said much about that agonizing moment for Americans as well as the personal experiences of those to whom we spoke. But the calls also said something about Wake Forest, about the remarkable attachment members of this community feel toward each other and toward the school.

As this sad anniversary approached this year, those same thoughtful souls in Alumni Affairs decided that we should send a short letter of concern marking the day. Let me confess that I was hesitant about this suggestion, thinking perhaps a letter too small a gesture to acknowledge such a burden of memory.

I could not have been more mistaken. Again, the numerous responses to the letter were gratifying and reassuring. People were glad that we remembered, and that we were marking the day on campus with solemn ceremony.

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One young alumnus, in reply to my letter, shared his harrowing 9/11 experience. He was in a building facing the World Trade Center, evacuated to safety on foot through the ordeal which left him, by his own account, an “emotional mess.”

His recovery was made possible, he said, by strong community support: “This community is made up mostly of Wake Forest graduates. It is made up of Wake Forest graduates because of the sense of community that Wake Forest breeds.”

Finally, he described for me his concluding reflection from this life-altering experience:

I intended this email to be a short response to express my gratitude, but it seems it took a longer form. This seems to be a theme of September 11th, that plans are ever-changing, and that life never ends up the way we thought it would. This, in essence, is why building a foundation for response is so vital. My foundation was built at Wake Forest.

May we always be a place that nurtures the building of secure foundations for the living of these days.