



THE KING'S COLLEGE
NEW YORK CITY

The following address was delivered by Dinesh D'Souza on August 22, 2011, at the Convocation Ceremony for The King's College's Class of 2015.



Trustees, members of the faculty, parents, friends and new students:

Two hundred years ago, the American Founders gathered around a table in Philadelphia, and what they put together was a recipe for a new kind of society. The Founders believed that if this recipe were adopted, then, over time, America would become the strongest, most prosperous and most successful society on the planet. The Founders also believed that their recipe was unique. Although it was rooted in human nature and the principles of the past, they believed that no other society had, to date, actually adopted such a recipe. This notion of American uniqueness is sometimes called “American Exceptionalism”. While we gather here in this auspicious setting on this very important day it is worth asking, “What is exceptional about America? What really does make America different?”

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I want to highlight two points that I think are the distinguishing marks of American exceptionalism. The first is that this is an entrepreneurial society. A society that is focused on creation, business, trade; this is a capitalist country. It was Calvin Coolidge who said, “The business of America is business.” Now this may seem a little obvious to us, but from a historical point of view, it is quite strange. For most of history, the entrepreneur has been viewed as a low-life. In most societies the businessman has been reviled. If you pick up the Analects of Confucius he says, “The virtuous man knows what is good, but the low man knows what is profitable.” In India, we have the caste system, and at the top are the Brahmin, then the warriors, the kings, and down and down you go until you reach the bottom. Just above the untouchable is the merchant or the trader.

I was reading an essay some time ago by the Muslim writer Ibn Khaldun from the Middle Ages. He has an essay on the subject of what is the more moral way to gain possessions: trade or looting? Pondering the relative merits of both, he says that the best way is clearly through looting. Why? Because he says trade is kind of effeminate. It's kind of low: you're taking advantage of the wants and needs of other people. By contrast, looting is manly. Why? Because you have to beat a man in open contest to grab his possessions. So looting draws, he says, on the virtue of courage.

I mention this to give you the sense that our society is unique in that it takes the historical totem pole with the business man and entrepreneur at the bottom and flips it. America becomes a society based on entrepreneurship. The Founders believed that this was one of the secrets to America's success.

A second distinguishing feature of American exceptionalism is that ours is a society whose core principles are rooted in Judeo-Christianity. We are built on a transcendent foundation. That doesn't mean we are a Christian nation in the sense that all the Founders were devout—they weren't. Jefferson was very much a man of the Enlightenment and science. However, when Jefferson was asked to sit down and think about the source of our rights—our equality and dignity—he could think of only one: our Creator. We have a society whose core principles are anchored on a Christian foundation.

Even though the Founders' dream has been realized and we are in some ways on top of the world, the fact of the matter is that we are the shortest-lived super power in world history. America has only been on top of the world for about twenty years. Yes, America has been a super power since WWII, but not until the Berlin Wall came down and the Soviet Union collapsed has America been the sole super power.

This is a country built on ideas, and ideas have huge consequences.

And even now, there is wide spread anxiety—warranted I believe—that America's perch on top of the world is very precarious. At the same time, there is a great debate in America about that very exceptionalism that the Founders believed made her great. For example, we have huge arguments today about the morality of free markets. We have a challenge posed to Christianity from outside and within. From outside, the challenge is from a kind of militant or radical Islam that does not seem to have lost the force of its original revelation. This radical Islam still acts with the same enthusiasm that moved Muslim armies centuries ago to go south into Africa, north into Europe, and east into Asia. And here within America, we have an emergent radical secularism that seeks not only to fence Christianity in—to move it out of the public square—but in some degree to discredit it, to deride it, to identify the social norms based on Christianity and root them out. All of this is happening now in America. Which is another way of saying that this is a country built on ideas, and ideas have huge consequences.

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I came to America 30 years ago as a student from India. I was raised in a Christian family, but my Christianity was a social Christianity—not very devout. It was a Christianity that unfortunately didn't last very long, and the reason it didn't last very long is because I set foot on a secular college campus. In some ways, when I found my faith under attack, I didn't know how to defend it—I found myself pulling away from it. And so I flung myself into a type of political conservatism to challenge the reigning liberalism that was entrenched on the Dartmouth campus (as it is on most campuses today). In fact, Dartmouth represents much of the secularism and political liberalism that critiques American exceptionalism.

Many years ago, William F. Buckley spoke at Dartmouth. He asked, “How can one be conservative in a liberal society?” Buckley’s point was that normally the job of a conservative is to conserve: to hold on to what’s there, to hold on to what’s good. But Buckley was trying to ask, “What if you happen to be a conservative in a liberal environment? Do you conserve?” IN that case you’d be conserving liberalism. In that situation, then you have to do something different. In some ways, you have to stop being a conservative. Yes, you have to be philosophically conservative, but in the way you think, you have to be something of a radical. You have to be a radical in the sense of going to the root of the matter—questioning assumptions and overturning the prevailing apple cart of ideas. I mention all this because, years later, here we are at The King’s College. We’re not Dartmouth—we are very different from Dartmouth. In some sense, we have the original mission of Dartmouth, which was founded as a Christian college as were most of the other Ivy League institutions. Dartmouth was founded by a Yale minister who went up into the woods of New Hampshire, convinced that he was to Christianize and educate the Indians. Sometimes I wonder how I got there; I think I might have misread the catalog.

But nevertheless, the mission of King’s is unique in America today. We are different from the secular colleges in that we take the life of the mind, spirit, and soul seriously. Very often those other dimensions are completely ignored. But we’re also different from other Christian colleges in that we are in the middle of things. We are in the middle of New York City very deliberately. Why? Because we want to educate young Christians and students to be citizens who carry the Christian outlook into the world and to be a transforming influence in the world. King’s is rooted in the great ideas of the Bible. But for us, the Bible is not just a religious text. It is ultimately a great book of life. And it speaks to the great questions of life—even those questions which we would normally consider secular.

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I’ve been thinking recently about the issue of God and suffering for a book I’m writing on the subject of theodicy. Reading the concluding passages in the book of Job, it seems that God is just pulling rank on Job. He asks, “Where were *you* when I laid the foundations of the earth?” For the atheist this is just a naked display of divine power: God merely wows Job and overwhelms him. It would appear that poor Job has to humbly submit to God after having raised some really good questions that God makes no effort to answer. Upon reflection, however by asking Job “Where were you when I laid the foundations of the earth,” is really raising a very reasonable question. He’s raising question about reason itself. In fact, God is saying to Job, “Your perspective on the world and on suffering is bound to be very limited.” It is the human perspective. It is necessarily perspectival—it comes from an angle. It’s not a God’s eye view of things. And unless you have a God’s eye view of things, how can you evaluate creation as a whole? That is the question being raised in Job.

My point is that the Bible is a perennial source of wisdom, in discussing matters of war and peace, human nature, wealth, poverty, ethics and so on. Ultimately, The King's College is anchored in ideas: the ideas of economics, politics, philosophy, but also the world of business, finance, media and the arts. Since I came to King's, my mission has been not only to foster an excellence among our students and faculty, but also to advance an intellectual Christianity in the public square. To me it's a little tragic that when you look at America the Christian intellectual argument is often missing. We have strong churches and good Christian schools, but there is no Christian argument in secular culture. I think King's can be the vanguard in advancing that kind of argument.

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Parents, I know that you are excited and perhaps a little bit anxious. This is a city in which it would not be unusual to encounter a Sikh that is wearing a Mets t-shirt in a lesbian bookstore. But don't be scared of him, he's probably just a professor of romance languages at New York University.

New students, this is an incredible and rare opportunity that your parents are giving you—a true gift. You are being given the chance to come to the most exciting city in the world and the opportunity to sit in front of bright scholars while devoting four years to learning. What a great opportunity! I truly do envy you. You should be so thankful to your parents for making this possible for you.

In conclusion, I want to say that the search for truth should drive us as Christians for our whole lives. College is an open-minded place, and we encourage a certain kind of skepticism. We encourage taking assumptions and turning them into questions. At the same time, we should not lose sight of the ultimate quarry—and the ultimate quarry is truth itself. I like what GK Chesterton once said: “An open mind, like an open mouth, exists for the purpose of closing it on something solid.” In other words, open-mindedness is a means to secure the end of truth. Many years ago, President Ronald Reagan, who I had the privilege to work for, said that America is the only country whose national anthem ends with a question. “O! say does that star-spangled banner yet wave, O'er the land of free and the home of the brave?” I think Reagan's point was that ultimately every generation will have to answer that question. And now it is your turn. Welcome to The King's College.

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