

# BOISI CENTER INTERVIEWS



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**ELLEN MESSER** is an anthropologist specializing in cross-cultural perspectives on the human right to food, sustainable food systems and cultural history of nutrition, agriculture and food science. She spoke with Boisi Center program coordinator **Suzanne Hevelone** and undergraduate research assistant **Connor Farley** before her presentation on “Pope Francis’ Initiatives: Effective Action on Environment, Hunger and Human Rights.”

**FARLEY:** What is the human right to food?

**MESSER:** The human right to food refers to a legal system, based in the United Nations, that asserts that every individual human being has a basic right to adequate food. Adequate food is defined, increasingly, as food security, which means that individuals have access to nutritionally adequate food in a way that protects their human dignity, and also allows for food security for upcoming generations.

There’s now a sustainability component as well. One of the important aspects of this evolving definition is the clash between a rights-based approach that says every individual has a right to adequate food and a needs-based approach that says we have an obligation to feed people.

According to the needs-based approach that’s what takes precedence, not whether they have rights. Those two perspectives are being brought together by saying every individual has a right to adequate food with dignity, which then includes all these aspects of food security, as well as sustainability.

**FARLEY:** Given that evolving definition, how would you describe the current state of global hunger levels compared

to previous decades or even centuries? Have we made any progress?

**MESSER:** Progress is not as rapid or thorough as we would desire, given how



much effort is being expended. What I try to do, in conjunction with many different kinds of scholars, advocates and activists, is look very hard at the numbers. Do those numbers adequately represent or misrepresent the numbers who, at some point in a given year, may go hungry, may not have access to adequate food, principally for economic reasons, which also overlap with climate, environmental and health reasons?

The international agencies, who are led by the UN Food and Agricultural

Organization, report most years that the numbers who are undernourished are diminishing, but not as rapidly as desired. The Millennium Development Goals that concluded in 2015, and the Sustainable Development Goals that are supposed to extend through 2030, are also disappointing in that the proportion of undernourished is not diminishing as rapidly as expected.

Many of us look not only at why these numbers not going down, but also how these international agencies are changing their statistical concepts of hunger to count the hungry, to perhaps make things look better than they actually are.

A couple of years ago, a group of us were upset with the way the metrical standards had been changed. We got together in a Small Planet Institute virtual working group to really examine, scrutinize the numbers and to point out that more attention should be paid to countries that seemed to be doing better in cutting their hunger numbers.

A huge challenge, which I find also in Pope Francis’s documents, is to reconcile the desire for economic growth with the well-being of tens of millions of small farmers who may not be able to connect on fair terms to the market. Then what happens to them? Economic growth indicators are based on increas-

ing market participation, but economic growth is not necessarily a solution for poverty and hunger. It sometimes clashes with solutions for small farmers who are disadvantaged by those policies in the interim.

That's where some combination of economic perspectives, that are looking for efficiencies, and religious perspectives, that are looking at the well-being of every human being, on human rights comes in.

**FARLEY:** Who do you view as the most vulnerable populations, geographically or otherwise? What types of people or regional demographics are most affected by hunger?

**MESSER:** Statistically the numbers are greatest in South and Southeast Asia, and next greatest in Sub-Saharan Africa. What I have found throughout the last twenty years of my research is that those who are affected tend to be also predominantly those who are in areas that have been affected by violent conflict. It's important not to forget to figure that into the equation.

Catholic assistance agencies, such as Catholic Relief Services and Caritas, rightly identify small farmers in developing countries as the most vulnerable. But as farmers become vulnerable to these market integration policies, they move to cities where they have no jobs or they don't have clear access to jobs that will provide them access to adequate food. These rural to urban populations also become extremely vulnerable to hunger. To train one's sight only on small farmers misses this dynamic where increasing proportions of populations are moving to non-rural areas to try to escape the poverty in the countryside.

**HEVELONE:** That brings us to religion. We want to talk about Catholicism, in particular. What steps you see the Vatican as having taken in order to combat global hunger? Also what steps would you like to see them take?

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**MESSER:** What I find quite impressive is that the words of not only Pope Francis, but also his immediate predecessors, look at the underlying structural causes of hunger, as well as the obligation to feed hungry people, and especially to feed hungry people in humanitarian situations. That's an important call to

action. In both Pope Francis's first initiative on ending hunger and this most recent initiative on the environment, I see a very basic connection being made in looking at the structural causes of both hunger and environmental violations, along with human rights violations.

Very positively, these pronouncements and directives from the Holy See are looking at the structural causes, and through the principle of subsidiarity, calling forth national, community and household voices to help address social inequalities and suffering at every level. Responders are being called to think about their responsibilities as human beings, as members of religious communities, or as members of secular humanist communities if they don't have a religious persuasion. From local to global perspectives, they are being challenged to think about themselves as members of communities that are responding to the basic human needs and demands for rights, not only to what's efficient or what's politically expedient.

I find this a very powerful, very important, very necessary message that's appreciated by Roman Catholic communities, but also by religious communities everywhere. I've been quite surprised



at the way in which Pope Francis is being cited as a basis for other religious leaders trying to rethink what their role in the world could be. The focus on the principle of subsidiarity says that all human beings have responsibilities to think about issues of human dignity, and how to protect, to connect and to care for those who are less advantaged around us. Finally, the principles of looking at the common good and affirmation of human dignity as a value in itself communicate a powerful message that everyone, regardless of religious persuasion or connection to Roman Catholicism, can find a useful point of reference for thinking about their anti-hunger and sustainable environment activities going forward.

**FARLEY:** In a country like the US, which typically prides itself on the separation of church and state and the mutual exclusivity of religion and politics, how does religion play a role in the US anti-hunger policy?

**MESSER:** I looked at the evolution of the food banking movement in the US, which meets basic needs, but also increasingly enters into conversation with state and national government about the entitlement programs that are available for hungry people. In 2001, 75% of the anti-hunger agencies were engaged with religious communities, who hosted food pantries and soup kitchens in churches or other religious-based community establishment. Hosting didn't necessarily mean proselytizing guest, client populations. What it meant was the faith community was taking the lead. That's important. Back in the early '90s there seemed to be a disconnect between the people who generously served the hungry through working with religious-affiliated food pantries and on food banking activities, and those voting or advocating for government food and nutrition entitlement programs like food stamps (now called SNAP). The challenge for anti-hunger advocates was to bring these

charitable and social-justice interests together.

One of the people who did the best at bringing this together was Sister Christine Vladimiroff (OSB), the inspirational head of what became America's Second Harvest national food-banking network, now called Feeding America. She understood politics, that acting against hunger wasn't just an obligation to feed the hungry and care for the needy from her religious perspective. She understood there was definitely a role for her to play on the human right to food, vis-à-vis US government policies.

The other faith-based group that was active in food, nutrition and anti-hunger politics and in US policy negotiations centering in Washington DC was Bread for the World, which is an interdenominational Christian lobby against hunger. Lobby is the key word there. Bread also has a nonprofit arm that produces an annual hunger report. Their origin and intent was actually to try to connect the faith community who were concerned about the hungry in their midst and around the globe to their roles as active citizens. Bread's supporters continue

to play an important role in convincing their governmental representatives at all levels that hunger issues are of great concern for them and for the country as a whole. They work on both national and international food and hunger issues.

Individuals in the US operate in many different capacities. They operate as citizens, as members of civil society. They operate as members of congregations and small-scale organizations. There are many different ways in which they can enter into not only conversation, but also into service and action. I do firmly support a separation of church and state, but that doesn't mean that religious leaders shouldn't be speaking out on what they see as the failures of government to respect, protect and fulfill the right to food. It also doesn't mean that every citizen who is taking part in congregational discussions and taking part in rituals that build solidarity, can't also be an active citizen. They don't have to think of these as completely exclusive roles.

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**The Boisi Center  
for Religion and  
American Public Life**

Boston College  
24 Quincy Road  
Chestnut Hill, MA 02467

tel 617-552-1860  
fax 617-552-1863  
boisi.center@bc.edu

 boisicenter  
 @boisi\_center  
 @boisi\_center

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