

# BOISI CENTER INTERVIEWS



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**DAVID DECOSIMO** is an assistant professor of theology at the Boston University School of Theology. After his November 2 lunch colloquium at the Boisi Center, entitled “What’s Wrong with the New Genealogy of Religious Freedom?”, Professor Decosimo spoke with Boisi Center associate director Erik Owens, graduate research assistant Jack Nuelle, and undergraduate research assistant Susan Kourtis about the problems and arguments surrounding current conceptions of religious freedom, while offering a potential way forward. The conversation has been edited for clarity and content.

**OWENS:** What’s not to like about religious freedom?

**DECOSIMO:** There are some things not to like about it, and the work of those in the politics of religious freedom project have called our attention to some of those. Two things stand out in particular. One is that in many cases, religious freedom is one face of a particular liberal vision of freedom and politics. This brand of liberalism is marked by a failure to acknowledge its own situated, particular, and contextual character and a tendency to prize individualistic or even hyper-individualistic conceptions of what it means to flourish or what it means to realize justice. To the extent that religious freedom is a face of something like Rawlsian liberalism, it has all of the vices that are typically associated with Rawlsian liberalism. So, that’s one big thing not to like.

The other big thing – and this is another thing those studying the politics of religious freedom have done a good job of alerting us to – is that, fairly often, religious freedom, as it’s pursued by the U.S. in other places, is sometimes obviously and sometimes in a more veiled way, a face of U.S. foreign policy. Sometimes it is used as an instrument to exert U.S. control. When those things intersect – a kind of Rawlsian liberalism and the use of religious freedom as a tool of political power – religious freedom becomes an

export product that threatens to infect and infest communities with the worst vices of hyper-individualism, neo-liberal market sensibilities, and a prizing of instrumental reason over other forms of reasoning and other kinds of goods.

**OWENS:** Is the problem the particular



type of religious freedom that we export or that we claim to embrace here and abroad, or is it the construction of the very possibility of religious freedom that these critics are worried about?

**DECOSIMO:** I think, to the extent that religious freedom is a version of Rawlsian liberalism, it’s problematic full stop. It is more problematic still when it is also a tool of U.S. imperialism or colonialism.

But I think it’s almost silly to think that all religious freedom would need to be a kind of Rawlsian liberalism, and I don’t think that there’s something necessarily wrong with the U.S. or some other government caring about and supporting movements for religious freedom else-

where. Just as I don’t think it’s problematic for the U.S. to care about civil rights in some regime, even if it’s true that the U.S. fails in a lot of ways to realize those ideals, I don’t think it’s necessarily problematic for the U.S. or some other authentically democratic regime to see and want for the kinds of goods that are worth calling religious freedom or civil rights or human flourishing.

I think, in contrast, it can sometimes seem like those associated with the politics of religious freedom project can only imagine religious freedom as an expression of a vicious sort of liberalism on the one hand, and, on the other, as a tool of the worst sort of Western or U.S. imperialism. If you thought that were the case, you could understand why you would think that religious freedom would need to be resisted. But we needn’t understand religious freedom in that way.

**OWENS:** These powerful deconstructions of the conceptions of religious freedom, and even of religion that underlies it and of freedom that underlies it, and concepts like rights, are parts of a very powerful academic project. Yet how can these constructions, as they’re intended to be used perhaps by good-willed people, be redeemed, if at all? What is the constructive project that follows this deconstruction?

**DECOSIMO:** That’s a great question. I see the move forward involving at least

two kinds of considerations and happening on at least three different axes. First, there's movement to understand and critically examine and correct our ideals. Ideals serve our ends and our aims. They give us something to pursue. They allow us to rule certain things out, to make judgments between alternative options. Let's do the best we can in getting those things right.

But let's say we do have some of the right ideals. The question remains of how we actually go about realizing them in some community. Those are both equally important, and I think they also do have to be held together. That is, I don't think that it's enough just to have the right ideals or just to have some ideas about implementation. Instead, a thorough, complete constructive project is going to have to recognize that ideals and their implementation are dynamically, dialectically related – our efforts to implement some ideal can transform our understanding of the ideal itself and a revised ideal can alert us to practical consequences we hadn't noticed before. At the same time, we can and must reason and reflect about each of these, and both together. Those are the two considerations.

The three axes I see are along the lines of thinking about freedom, thinking about power, and then thinking about what we're caring about when we care about something like neutrality. On the freedom front, thinking about freedom in terms of non-domination is a promising way to think about it. And if we think about domination as being power without accountability, to paraphrase Jeff Stout, then we can realize that not all power asymmetries need to be dominating or oppressive. Power differentials – even the power differential between a state and a citizen – can be dominating or liberating, bad or good. To the extent that we can make power accountable and that we can identify good reasons for somebody to be holding it, we can avoid it turning into something dominating. By the same token, to the extent that we can make

the political implementation of religious freedom track that kind of accountability, we're on the right track, as well.

On the neutrality front, realizing that we're not going to necessarily be able to escape our own situation or identity, or be able to ground our efforts on some pure and perfect foundation doesn't mean we can't identify practices that do better at being even-handed between competing goods and taking those goods seriously. Rather than prescribing what

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one scholar called “talking theology,” we realize that talking theology may well be an ingredient in achieving the kind of neutrality and freedom we care about – or should care about.

**OWENS:** Thank you. I'm interested in further pursuing the freedom as not domination alongside a project I know you're working on around submission. How would you align or un-align the two constructions of freedom – of freedom through submission and freedom as non-domination?

**DECOSIMO:** Alongside non-interference or liberal ideals or conceptions of freedom on the one hand and conceptions of freedom in terms of non-domination on the other hand, there are also what have been called, positive conceptions of freedom that see freedom as consisting in something like realizing the right and good human end, or participating in the right way in the right sort of political community. Those positive conceptions of freedom are especially associated with

religious traditions like Christianity and Islam, but they've been criticized for the ways in which they can tend to be paternalistic or can presume to know an agent and what is good for her or him better than her or himself.

One thing for me in working on this is acknowledging the ways in which religious traditions have been, and sometimes are, dominating – that is, the ways in which they sometimes, while claiming they're seeking freedom or prizing it, are in fact subjecting both members of the tradition and those outside of it to ideals and practices that outsiders and even certain members don't have reason to see as being good for them or as tracking with their ideals of what the best kind of human life is. So, think of the experience of the unbeliever having legislation that she has no reason at all to endorse, regard as good for her, or see as anything other than arbitrary simply being told that this will be so because divine revelation says such and such – full stop. That's a place where this ideal of submission intersects and stands in tension with ideals of non-domination or of freedom. Of course, this is hardly particular to or distinctive of “religious” communities or traditions. Plenty of secular traditions relate to outsiders – or even certain insiders – in just this way too, only it's not revelation but reason or science or an original position that authorizes the legislation.

**OWENS:** Do you see a place in which religious commitments offer different modes of freedom than are available with other ways of conceptualizing freedom? If, rather than being confining, they open up something in a different way?

**DECOSIMO:** I do think that, and one of these is the ways in which religious traditions have wanted to say things such as “no matter what it is that you are experiencing in your social world or in your community, in virtue of standing in a certain sort of relationship to God or the sacred or the holy or the ultimately real,

you can experience a kind of flourishing or happiness that is worth caring about, even when things are genuinely bad.” Of course, it’s that line of thought that Marx and other critics see as being something that’s really dangerous about religion, if religion says be happy with just that and don’t do anything to change your circumstances. And I’m sympathetic if that’s all that a religion is saying. But if a religious tradition is also saying here’s one kind of freedom and one thing that is good in even the worst and most oppressed human life, and here is another thing – namely, trying to make your political community more just or equitable or inclusive – it doesn’t have to be an either-or. One thing I would add there is that if you think about Christianity, Judaism, and Islam in particular, these are, I think, places where these positive conceptions kind of mingle in interesting ways. To step back for one moment, one of the claims that I want to make is not all power differences are problematic or dominating. The teacher-student relationship doesn’t have to be dominating. The parent-child relationship doesn’t have to be dominating. The political community-citizens relationship doesn’t have to be dominating. All of those can be if certain things go wrong in them, but they don’t have to be. That’s what we’re getting at when we say something like, “He was a father in name only” – we’re recognizing that we tend to regard as a good relation has gone bad, maybe by becoming dominating.

Similarly, in Christianity especially, Christians have understood human beings as being children of God, and because of that, they understand it as being appropriate that God exerts a certain kind of control or legislative power over them. At the same time, they, or at least many Christians, want to say and understand God in terms that are not dominating.

I think one really important theological challenge that is common in Christianity and Islam is related to this very issue, namely when it seems like God’s commands or God’s legislation or the divine law is entirely out of touch with or



divorced from all of our ordinary ideals of goodness or justice or rightness. That puts even the believer in a situation of doing something like submitting purely on the basis of power.

This is really what the argument is, at a certain level, between voluntarist and rationalist theologians in these different traditions. Their arguments about the extent to which God’s goodness or justice are related to God’s authority and power and how all of those things intersect with our ordinary practices of reason giving and justice seeking and our ordinary conceptions of what’s fair or right or good. When there’s no connection between those ordinary practices or conceptions, it can seem, even to the insider, but certainly to the outsider to a religious community where that religious community is in power, that God, God’s self is dominating. I think that is a big challenge for these traditions.

**NUELLE:** You spoke briefly in your presentation about the importance of genealogy as a historical form and process. You mentioned Frederick Douglass and Sojourner Truth as potential examples of genealogists who are doing it better than those you call the “new genealogists”. I’m wondering if you can speak more to that?

**DECOSIMO:** What I said distinguished the new genealogists, was that what

they found in history and in the world was something like what a Nietzschean variety finds, namely only will to power all the way down, and yet unlike the Nietzschean variety, the new genealogists want to say that that is bad, that domination is a bad thing, and they themselves certainly don’t want to be doing it. They don’t think other people should be doing it, but they’re caught in this difficult place of their diagnosis falling on their own heads, and then the question that raises about that diagnosis itself. If all there is for the genealogist to find is will to power everywhere, then that would suggest that the very diagnosis is itself an act of will to power. But this puts the new genealogist in an awkward position. Where the Nietzschean variety is perfectly fine with saying “You’re right, I mean to dominate you – but at least I’m being honest!” the new genealogist wants at once to reject domination but can’t seem to find anything else operating in the world or history than the will to it. Thus, you get hesitancy on the new genealogists’ part about giving a full-throated condemnation of what it’s quite clear they reject, or about making fully explicit their normative commitments and normative claims. To do that would be inconsistent with the inescapability of the will to power – and would thus require revising what their genealogy purports to show about the modern world, the secular, and the state,

let alone religious freedom. All things, by the way, that a more thoroughgoing genealogy would actually say should not be essentialized in the way they are.

What I think is valuable about Douglass or Truth, in contrast, and what I wanted to lift up about them, is that, unlike maybe a purely historical form of genealogy that only means to uncover how things came to be as they are, that seeks maximal truthfulness, but isn't throwing in for certain normative aims, they do have explicit normative aims – liberation of the oppressed – and aims for which they take full responsibility. Then they're using something like historical genealogy as a tool for those aims. They want to uncover the ways in which – in Douglass's case – white racist Christianity talks this rhetoric of love and then is, at the same time, engaged in incredibly vicious forms of domination. They want to say there is something actually worth calling love and friendship and justice that is different than this other thing that is oppression and domination.

Fundamentally, what matters is the recognition that there is a difference between simply seeking the upper hand over the oppressor versus seeking mutual accountability, and that those things are different motives. Their brand of genealogy tracks that difference and is oriented ethically toward realizing not the turning of the tables, nor a kind of hand-wringing that can't finally go anywhere, but toward mutual recognition and friendship, which does involve bringing the oppressor down, but not bringing the oppressor underneath. At it's best – and in one particular and important zone of human life and community – that is what religious freedom is about. And that's the religious freedom I care about and think worth pursuing.

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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](mailto:boisi.center@bc.edu)

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