Reverend Jim Wallis Speaks on God’s Politics After Hurricane Katrina

My main activities this semester have involved continued efforts to explain American religion to non-Americans. I visited Beirut in October at the invitation of the University of the Holy Spirit, Kaslik, a Maronite institution very much involved in the fascinating mélange of faiths that is contemporary Lebanon. While in Beirut I also spoke at the American University in that city. This visit enabled me to gain first hand experience with professional politics – a political system officially recognized by the state and in which citizenship is tied to a declaration of religious identification. During my stay, the U. N. report on the assassination of former Prime Minister Rafik Hariri was published, and there were a few scary moments in its immediate aftermath. Still, the Lebanese people reacted to the report calmly, and there were even indications that Syria would cooperate, at least minimally, with the investigation. I not only learned a great deal from the visit, but even managed to sneak in some tourism, especially the stunning Roman ruins at Baalbeck.

December 2005 took me back to Berlin for a conference on "Religion and Policy" sponsored by the Heinrich Boell Foundation of Germany’s Green Party, as well as twice to Paris. One of the French trips, sponsored by the French Institute of International Relations, involved politics in the United States and the other, at Sciences Po, was devoted to transatlantic cleavages. In both cases, I talked about religion and politics in the wake of the 2004 election.

Within the United States, I spent an evening in a public discussion between Evangelical-Jewish relations with David Neff, editor of Christianity Today, at the Jewish Theological Seminary, participated in an all-day discussion of the impact of Reinhold Niebuhr at Union Theological Seminary, spoke to a conference on French-American relations at New York University, commented on James Q. Wilson’s Tanner Lecture at Harvard, and delivered a public lecture to the Hebrew Union College in Florida.

This spring looks like it will also be an exciting time at the Boisi Center. But that awaits the next report from the director.

- Alan Wolfe

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European Attitudes Toward American Religion

On September 21, the Boisi Center hosted Professor Thomas Albert (Tal) Howard of Gordon College, Wenham, Massachusetts. Howard shared his recent work on anti-Americanism in Europe under the title, “American Religion in the European Mind: From George W. Hegel to George W. Bush.” He matched his provocative title with an equally provocative discussion of the roots of European anti-Americanism. Contrary to explanations that locate America’s fall from grace among especially “highbrow” Europeans with the end of the Cold War 9/11, and the war in Iraq. Howard outlined a longer history of derision from both the “right” and the “left.” Crucial to this attitude, he argued, is the history of European criticism of the American religious scene.

Howard illustrated his point with a tour through the pantheon of eighteenth and nineteenth-century European intellectuals. On the right, objections from the pantheon of eighteenth and nineteenth-century “right” and the “left.”

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R reverend Jim Wallis

Wallis challenged the left to recall the achievements of progressive Christian reformers in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries—including the abolition movement, women’s suffrage, and the civil rights movement—as a model for left-leaning religious activism.

Wallis, however, proceeded beyond simply laying out the contours of contemporary politics and religion. He maintained, “religion is not supposed to be a wedge that divides us,” but “a bridge that brings us together.” Drawing on the example of Abraham Lincoln’s second inaugural address, Wallis cautioned against “old world” religious forms that block the progressive march of history.

Howard concluded by suggesting that Americans ought to reflect on these longstanding criticisms—whatever their accuracy—as a tool toward greater self-understanding. More importantly, he stressed that to ignore the genealogy of anti-Americanism is to misunderstand the nature of the European mind-set. Without a sense of how deeply embedded anti-American religious prejudice runs in European culture and how closely tied it is to anti-Americanism generally, Howard argued, we underestimate both the intensity of these attitudes and the staying power beyond the administration of George W. Bush.

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Mathew Schmaltz Speaks on Miracles and Meaning

Mathew Schmaltz, professor of religious studies at the College of the Holy Cross, presented “The Silent Body of Audrey Santo” on October 11. Santo is a twenty-one year old woman who, since the age of three and a half, has lived in a comatose state as a result of a swimming pool accident in 1987. Since that time, Santo has purportedly manifested the wounds of the stigmata, and statues have appeared to weep blood and oil in her presence. Five Eucharistic hosts have also reportedly bled when consecrated in her “silent body” speaks within the context of the social construction of bodies, and peddlar may drive here his bungling trade, without passport or license, and sell his false ware at pleasure.”

America was thus a religious wild card, unpredictable and unconnected to the safeguards of a traditional society. On the left, European critics were equally worried about America’s historical trajectory. From their perspective, America’s sin was not ignorance of tradition but that the young nation had preserved premodern religious gnosia all too well. Such diverse thinkers as the Marquis de Condorcet, George Hegel, and Karl Marx, lamented this retention of “old world” religious forms that blocked the progressive march of history.

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Graduate Student Reading Groups

The Boisi Center invites proposals for interdisciplinary and inter-institutional graduate student reading/writing groups on themes related to the study of religion and public life. In order to facilitate interdisciplinary conversations we will offer limited support to reading groups in various forms. Proposals for support should include a brief outline of the group’s theme and reading list, a list of members, and a list of activities it would like the Boisi Center to support (e.g., bringing in speakers, photocopying, book subsidies). To submit a proposal or for further information, contact Andrew Finstuen at finstuen@bc.edu.
Religion and the Academy

I n November, Mark Edwards, academic dean at Harvard Divinity School, visited the Boisi Center to discuss the relationship between private belief and public scholarship. Edwards presented sections from his forthcoming book, Religion on Our Campuses: A Professor’s Guide to Communities, Conflicts, and Promising Conversations. He argued that although religion is viewed as a taboo subject, especially in academia, the time is right for religious and non-religious academics to discuss belief in the context of the university. In earlier decades, believing scholars faced at best dismissive attitudes toward religion or at worst discrimination. For most of the twentieth century, conﬁdence in the scientiﬁc method in both the natural and social sciences relegated belief to the margins. At present, he explained, he emphasized the importance of biographical disclosure as a way of breaking down barriers that obstruct open discussion of religion.

In conclusion, Edwards proposed that allowing religion a place at the academic table bodes well for the overall pursuit of knowledge. Speciﬁcally, he claims, the cautious use of religious perspectives as a warrant in the realm of morality, metaphysics, and anthropology would enrich each of these topics as they arise in various disciplines.

Mathew Schmaltz
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the abortion debates, and the notion of the Catholic Church as the body of Christ. For example, supporters have actively sacralized her body, creating a chapel replete with relics, photographs and videos. Many believers understand Santo as a “victim soul” atoning for the sins of others through her own personal suffering. The plight of Audrey, according to Schmaltz, has also been a locus of empowerment for women. Women, including Audrey’s mother Linda, lead the Apostolate of a Silent Soul—the lay organization formed to publicize and orchestrate the ministry of Audrey. The virtues of motherhood are celebrated and emphasized through the person of Linda and her utter devotion to her child. And Schmaltz further argues that Audrey’s suffering connects to women who live lives of “silent suffering” as under-appreciated care-giving professionals or as daughters and mothers in patriarchal families.

Schmaltz’s vivid picture of Audrey Santo generated a lively discussion. Among their many questions, audience members asked about the ethics of the public “consumption” of the incapacitated Santo, the attitudes of the ofﬁcials in his church toward the ministry of Audrey, and how one might relate the phenomenon’s relationship to the supposedly increasing privatization of religion in America.

Jews of Boston

At the end of October, Jonathan Sarna, a leading historian on the American Jewish experience from Brandeis University, joined us at the Boisi Center. Sarna focused his comments on the Jews of Boston from the mid-1900s to the present, but he began with an outline of the unique history of Jews in the Hub.

Sarna explained that compared to the Jewish population in other major American cities, Jews arrived late in Boston. Toward the end of the nineteenth century, Boston had a smaller Jewish population than such cities as Baltimore, St. Louis, and Cincinnati. As a consequence of their tardiness, Jews experienced greater discrimination in Boston than in any other American city during the ﬁrst half of the twentieth century. Without a population of “pioneer Jews,” Boston’s Jewish community retained their “alien” status longer. Another distinctive feature of Boston’s Jews was that less tension existed within the Jewish community than in other cities. Boston was most affected by the Eastern European, particularly Polish, Jewish populations that immigrated in the late nineteenth century. By comparison, in other cities earlier waves of German Jewish immigrants clashed with later arriving Jews from the East.

As a consequence, the story of Boston’s Jews is the story of relationships with their Protestant and Catholic neighbors. Through the ﬁrst half of the twentieth century, the relationship was tense and occasionally violent. Yet after World War II, relations improved. As Jews came of age in the city, they targeted education as a major community goal. This stress on education, Sarna argued, has never been more apparent than in the last decade.

The increasing stability of Israel and the dissolution of the Soviet Union helped spark efforts to improve Jewish education. Sarna stressed the immense ﬁnancial signiﬁcance of these events. Funds previously slated to assist oppressed Jews in these regions were available to assist educational endeavors at home. At all levels of education, Jews have made important advances.

Seven new private Jewish day schools, such as the successful Gann Academy, strived in adult education, and the dozens of Jewish studies positions in Boston-area universities headlined the list of accomplishments. These educational achievements, along with other important markers of Jewish presence in the city, have fueled what Sarna described as a Jewish cultural renaissance within Boston.

Staff Notes


Susan Richard serves as Boisi Center’s administrative assistant. When she’s not at work, she keeps herself busy with her family.