

BOISI CENTER INTERVIEWS



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ERIK OWENS is interim director of the Boisi Center and associate professor of the practice in theology and international studies at Boston College. His research explores a variety of intersections between religion and public life. He spoke with Boisi Center program coordinator **Suzanne Hevelone** about what it means to be a citizen during the Trump era and his vision of good citizenship.

HEVELONE: Donald Trump has been president a little over eighty days now. Should we normalize him? Has he been normalized?

OWENS: Over time there is no question that it will seem more normal than it does now to have a President Trump in charge of things. But accepting that he's our president isn't normalizing his erratic or bad behavior so much as it is recognizing the legitimacy of the office. The office of the presidency deserves respect, which sometimes has to be shown by holding the current occupant to the standards of that office. I have no interest in delegitimizing Trump as president; just the opposite, really—I want to hold him to the normal standards that office demands.

That being said, there is a risk that we'll become inured to the outrageous claims (and sometimes straight out lies) that Trump makes if he continues at this pace for another 1,300 days. We don't want to normalize those things by turning away from them or tuning them out, but it's a long time to sustain a sense of outrage.

HEVELONE: In your talk yesterday at the Boisi Center, you said that citizenship shouldn't simply be equated with nationality in a legal sense. Instead, you suggested we seek a more normative conception of citizenship—one that sustains

institutions of our democracy. Is there one core component of this normative citizenship that you would identify as the crux?

OWENS: A normative conception of citizenship is what we mean when we say



you can be a good citizen or a bad one; it refers to the norms or values that determine good and bad in this context. In my talk, I critiqued several normative conceptions of citizenship that I feel are leading us down the wrong path. One was ethno-nationalism, the idea that citizens are defined by their ethnic and racial profile, such that (in the most worrisome cases) white Christians are identified as the ideal type of good citizens. I also

critiqued liberal notions of citizenship in which politics is primarily a means to protect and promote private life. Contrary to a widely-held view, politics isn't simply about protecting our private property or our family. It's also about promoting the common good, which is rooted in the reality of our interconnectedness. This is what some have called citizenship as shared fate. That's the crux of it.

HEVELONE: Yesterday you raised the question of whether oppositional politics like the Women's March provides enough constructive direction, and you talked about the need for a more generative ethics. But can't ethical and civic renewal spring out of this sort of oppositional protest?

OWENS: Absolutely. Standing against injustice is a responsibility we all bear as citizens. Oppositional politics can lead to a constructive project for the common good, and/or it can be the result of a vision of the common good. But neither is necessarily the case. People at these marches say they are there for many different reasons; some are simply there to protest particular policies, while others are there to make counter-arguments or provide counter-examples on behalf of a deeper notion of citizenship. The popular hashtag #Resistance is the call sign of a certain kind of coalition, but a very diverse one. When I've been out at these

marches or protests, I've heard speakers and seen posters that express anger, scorn, and sadness, as well as love and respect.

I just don't want the next four years to be purely about opposition. We've seen what that looks like, and it's politically self-serving, not generative of the common good. Any real opposition ought to be based on a vision for the common good.

HEVELONE: Is there something different about the radical polarization of the electorate as compared to the radical polarization of the government? How does oppositional politics work in both arenas?

OWENS: Government actors, whether in Congress or the executive branch, have particular roles and responsibilities that have a greater direct impact than any individual citizen. The Senate is a place where one member can wield enormous power in opposition to the majority. Republican Senator Jesse Helms used to call it "porcupine power." And even if some opportunities to filibuster have been removed, many remain. When a polarized Congress can't reform health care legislation, or pass any meaningful legislation, the system can stagnate and people suffer.

Polarization in the general public is a messier thing; we see it in all sorts of decisions, rooted in all sorts of reasons. There are axes of cultural polarization around religion, race, economics, education, immigration, and more; it's bigger and broader and messier. But I think we're seeing that popular protests in opposition to the Trump administration's immigration policies have been pretty important in expressing the will of large segments of the population, and in building coalitions of opposition for other issues as well. Despite the scary part of the polarization, this is also democracy at work. As one of the common chants at these rallies says, "This is what democracy looks like!"

HEVELONE: I want to push you a little bit on some of the harder issues. There are some really troubling things within the Trump administration—Islamophobia, white nationalism, and misogyny. Do you have any suggestions about how we try to ethically deal with the hateful rhetoric that has now been instantiated into the government?

“Government officials who use hateful rhetoric are violating their responsibility to represent every person in this country, and to treat everyone fairly. They have enormous power and influence because their voices are amplified and their actions taken as representative for millions of Americans.”

OWENS: Government officials who use hateful rhetoric are violating their responsibility to represent every person in this country, and to treat everyone fairly. They have enormous power and influence because their voices are amplified and their actions taken as representative for millions of Americans.

Consequently, I think citizens are obliged to call out hateful rhetoric, and to provide counter-examples of respectful speech (and respect for speech) that others can

follow. Public pressures matter to this administration (as they should), and when a wide array of public voices—elected officials, party officials, public opinion polls, protests in the streets—signal their discontent with hateful rhetoric, that makes an impact. Democratic pressures will eventually shape policy and tone, I think, but we need to be extraordinarily vigilant in the meantime.

One other thing: I want to be clear that talking about immigration or terrorism isn't hateful. It's not the choice of topics that rankles me about the current administration, it's the gleefully cruel tone of some of the president's rhetoric, tweets, and public comments that is so hard to see.

HEVELONE: During the first weeks of the Trump administration, I could not get away from the political news, which was both wonderful and devastating at the same time. What do you see as the pros and cons of the public being saturated with political news?

OWENS: There are people who have made the argument that we ought to ignore President Trump's tweets, for example—that they're not newsworthy—and to focus on his policies. It's not necessarily news when the president tweets something, but at the same time, I do not want to let him off the hook for his incautious or outrageous rhetoric. I don't want CNN to put every Trump tweet on a ticker across the bottom of their screen, but we should still be holding him to account for those tweets.

In terms of having the news overwhelm you, I sympathize. If you take the president's language seriously, as I do, you've got to pay attention to little things to see where they're going. My advice would be to stay informed and engaged for civic reasons, and to try to broaden your circle of social media, if you use social media, to include people who aren't like you—not as an anthropological experiment so much as a recognition that, if you only hear one part of a story, it's not the right

thing. We all need affirming and sustaining narratives that we get from our people, whoever “our people” are. But the sort of echo chambers that social media is famous for are really destructive of democracy, in my view. We need to cultivate practices of listening to other people, in person and online. Widen that circle just a little more to the friend-of-a-friend, and you’ll start to hear other reactions to what’s going on. Things won’t seem as cut and dry, at least in the moment.

HEVELONE: What is your take on the Trump administration’s decision to bomb Syria in response to chemical weapons by the Assad regime this week? Does this decision give us any insight into Trump’s priorities as president, or do you think it’s another impulsive reaction on his part?

OWENS: As someone who thinks, in principle, that it’s possible to use military force for moral ends, I’m not automatically opposed to the idea of responding to a chemical weapons attack using military force. But your question really wasn’t whether that was a legitimate act of war, but rather what this says about Trump.

In that sense, I’d say that this situation—the president’s decision to launch the cruise missiles, and the way he talked about it afterward—reveals a complicated psychological and political context within the White House. We know that Trump is a malleable person; he doesn’t have deeply seated, principled outlooks on things like this. This means he’s pragmatic, which can be a positive trait, but can also mean that he’s untethered and easily swayed from principle or policy.

Having argued against U.S. intervention in Syria for so long, it was notable that he seemed to be genuinely moved by a particular set of photographs or videos of children who suffered and died in the chemical attack. God knows we’re all moved by such things; these are horrifying images that should traumatize any human being with a heart. And yet it is troubling to reorient American policy around a single image; action should be



taken as part of a broader understanding of the situation. Many children are killed violently outside of camera range, and those children should be taken into account as well. The idea that Trump was spurred to action by one moment, when hundreds of thousands of people have died in Syria in recent years, and that didn’t move him, is troubling in some sense.

When President Trump gave his statement about God’s babies being choked

to death by this poison, and how he hopes that God blesses all peoples of the world—that was a dramatic change from his prior rhetoric and way of speaking. I’m honestly not sure where this is going, because Trump goes with what works, and this was a very meaningful and popular change of tone for him. I wouldn’t be shocked if we see more of both the religious language and the military interventions.

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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

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