
The Boisi Center Report

THE BOISI CENTER FOR RELIGION AND AMERICAN PUBLIC LIFE AT BOSTON COLLEGE

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From the Director



When we began our work at the Boisi Center ten years ago, we had high hopes that the Prophetic Voices Lecture would become our signature event each year. The idea was to invite a prominent person who has demonstrated usual moral courage, and who has thought publically about his or her faith in ways that inspire action in the world. Many distinguished individuals have joined us for this purpose, including Sr. Helen Prejean, Fuller Seminary's Richard Mouw, and Muslim scholar Abdullahi An-Na'im. This year, though, may have been the best we have hosted. Committed to intellectual diversity, I wanted a conservative thinker for the lecture and immediately thought of Professor Robert George, of Princeton University. No sooner did he accept our invitation than the New York Times Magazine ran a major profile of him.

Professor George's talk on natural law and human dignity was deeply nuanced and fascinating. Rarely have I seen so many pay attention for so long. I am enormously grateful to Robby George for joining us, and for saying such gracious things about us afterwards on the Mirror of Justice blog.

This semester the Boisi Center also hosted a lecture by our benefactor and friend Geoff Boisi, who enthralled a large audience with his candid and extremely interesting talk on the Wall Street financial crisis. It was terrific to have this visit from Geoff, his wife Rene, and their son John, a student at BC.

As for me, I recently completed a rough draft of a book on political evil that will be published by Knopf in 2011. I also accepted a position as the John G. Winant Professor of American Politics at Balliol College, Oxford University for the period January to June 2011. Those interested in John Gilbert Winant, who replaced Joe Kennedy as our Ambassador to the Court of St. James may be interested in a recent book about him called *Citizens of London*, by Lynne Olson.

I am off on my first trip to the Holy Land in June, sponsored by the Combined Jewish Philanthropies of Greater Boston. No doubt I will have much to say about the trip in my next director's letter.

One last word: This past year we were blessed with really remarkable help and support from four students who are graduating from BC this year: Kitsy Smith, who will be studying in Paris at Sciences Po next year; Celso Perez, who will spend next year in Ecuador as a volunteer with Rostro de Cristo; Joe Gravellese, who will be working in state and local politics from his home base in Revere, MA; and Harry Jean Conte, who will be studying in New York next year at Parsons The New School of Design. They are all wonderful people and it has been a delight to have them working here.

— Alan Wolfe

CAUSES OF THE FINANCIAL CRISIS

Geoffrey T. Boisi, chairman and C.E.O. of Roundtable Investment Partners and founding patron of the Boisi Center, spoke on the causes of the crisis and the future of the financial services industry on February 4. While recognizing the complexity of the issue at hand, Boisi pointed to the rapid breakdown in trust between major actors in the U.S. government and the financial sector as the proximate cause of the crisis. He identified this breakdown, in turn, as the culmination of longstanding problems in social policy, innovations in the financial services industry, and monetary policy.

U.S. government social policy has encouraged home ownership since at least the 1930s, Boisi said. The creation of Federal National Mortgage Association (Fannie Mae) and the Federal Home Loan Mortgage Corporation (Freddie Mac), for example, increased liquidity in the mortgage market, particularly for low-income homebuyers. However, both institutions were created with poor oversight and dysfunctional governing structures. By the early 1990s increased pressure from the federal government to expand home ownership began to exacerbate deficiencies in the governance and regulation of these institutions.

The evolution of services and investment strategies in the finance industry in the latter half of the twentieth century compounded these problems. For instance, the application of securitization to mortgage (and then to non-mortgage) assets tied the American housing market more closely to the financial sector. These innovations were accompanied by what Boisi called a



Geoffrey T. Boisi

reckless “casino approach” to finance, which focused on short-term trading perspectives and increased profits. The combination of increasing securitization and risky investment strategies led to the widespread acceptance of new rules such as mark-to-market accounting that were hard to apply to securities and other financial products. Rather than relying on seasoned judgment, securities firms began to develop esoteric mathematical models for valuing assets, leading to dangerous capital ratios.

Finally, said Boisi, monetary policy adopted by the Federal Reserve further contributed to existing strains in the system. Lower interest rates, for example, eased credit and helped form bubbles in the market. Cheap credit increased the amount of household credit from 40% of disposable income in 1952 to 133% in 2007. Over-borrowing on the part of individuals—combined with risky practices in the financial sector and structural inadequacies on the part of government institutions—contributed to the building up of the housing bubble and to the eventual crash of the housing market. As housing prices declined, the U.S. government tried to regain control of the market by nationalizing Freddie Mac and Fannie Mae. This action only led to greater instability and lack of trust in the market, and the subsequent collapse.

Boisi concluded by pointing to several hopeful signs in the recovery process, but noted that it will take households two to four more years to recover the wealth lost in the past year. In order to avoid future crises, Boisi pointed to the importance of correcting dysfunctional regulatory structures and of encouraging greater prudence in the finance industry. ■



Geoffrey T. Boisi

A PROPHETIC VOICE ON NATURAL LAW

Robert P. George, recently described by the *New York Times Magazine* as “the country’s most influential conservative-Christian thinker,” presented a talk entitled “Natural Law, God and Human Dignity” as the 9th Annual Prophetic Voices Lecture on March 25th before a large crowd in Higgins Hall.

George, the McCormick Professor of Jurisprudence at Princeton University, is a leading scholar in the largely Catholic “new natural law” movement that grounds its understanding of unchangeable moral principles solely on the foundation of practical reason. In other words, we can understand the right thing to do—and indeed the moral principles that make actions right, as well as the “basic goods” that determine the moral principles—by reflecting on the nature of our human capacities and the ways in which we can flourish or languish.

George began his argument with the example of friendship, which he considers an intrinsic, basic human good. Friends act in ways that make sense to us, he said: they give without expectation of receiving, they help one another simply because they are friends and not for future gain. Friendship makes sense to us as humans because we recognize it as a good in itself. We don’t need any other reasons to explain

it; our natural capacity for friendship yields a natural understanding of its merits. Conversely, a purely instrumental friendship—one based solely on the likelihood of mutual advancement of individual goals—is not a friendship at all, because it fails to contribute to our well-being as social creatures. When we have true friends, and are true friends to others, we flourish as human beings.

Like friendship, health and the pursuit of intellectual knowledge (in any field of thought) are basic human goods, George argued. We can flourish or languish depending on our actions with respect to any of these intrinsic goods. Among the implications of this argument is that there are numerous basic goods that we should pursue, and that they sometimes come into conflict. This means that “the human good is variegated,” not singular. Natural law, George said, helps us to choose among competing moral claims in ways that move us closer to “integral human fulfillment,” to a balance of human goods that fulfills our human capacity to flourish physically, morally and intellectually.

After explaining his conception of natural law at some length, George discussed its merits over competing ethical theories—primarily those like utilitarianism that focus on consequences rather than intrinsic values—and spoke in broad terms about the moral implications of his position. The “master moral principle” that natural law highlights is a familiar one, George argued, for it is expressed in such norms as the Golden Rule (do unto others as you would have them do unto you), the Pauline Principle (don’t do evil even if good might come of it) and Immanuel Kant’s principle of humanity (treat humanity, whether in the person of yourself or another, always as an end and never as a means only). Using these broad moral principles, we can then derive more specific moral norms that apply to particular cases like adultery or lying in specific situations.

George ended his lecture with remarks on human rights as moral principles. With a nod to Harvard law professor and former Ambassador to the Vatican Mary Ann Glendon (who was present at the lecture), George argued that while rights language is sometimes employed in inappropriate contexts, it is ultimately a “useful, supple way of conceiving and expressing the moral principle that guides our action conclusively away from” choices that might otherwise be understood as acceptable. There are other ways to argue for the intrinsic value of human life, including “the straightforward language of justice,” he said, but human rights offers a particularly powerful and important form of argument. On this point, the audience was in complete agreement. ■



Robert P. George

CULTURAL IMAGES HURT AMERICA'S REPUTATION ABROAD

According to Martha Bayles, cultural critic and lecturer in the Boston College Honors Program, America's image abroad has suffered mightily in recent decades. Speaking at the Boisi Center on March 10, Bayles discussed past and present trends in American cultural exportation. Although the quantity of contacts between the United States and the rest of the world has increased, the quality of these contacts has not. In fact, she said, foreigners' esteem of the U.S. has diminished as a result of three major kinds of interaction: religious missionary work, study abroad programs, and American media.

While the number of American missionaries has increased, these trips are frequently being taken for short-term work, rather than life-long vocations. American missionaries are increasingly perceived as "gospel tourists" who bring paternalistic attitudes to local communities, said Bayles. Additionally, by sharing material affluence, such short term missionaries may actually subterfuge values of self-sustainment that long-term missionaries have built in underdeveloped countries.

Studying abroad has been another way Americans

increasingly come into contact with the rest of the world. Unfortunately, Bayles noted, for some students such experiences have become an excuse for reckless behavior, as young Americans in foreign countries feel exempt from responsibility for their actions. Such behavior inevitably leaves negative impressions abroad.

Finally, Bayles pointed to the growing exportation of American popular culture since the end of the Cold War. Foreign box offices provide American film studios with twice the revenue of domestic box offices. While Americans usually recognize when films reflect or distort American popular culture, foreigners who know little of the U.S. cannot make that distinction. Pop culture frequently misrepresents religion in the U.S., for example, by omitting it entirely or portraying it as overly puritanical. As a result, Bayles, said, religious freedom and tolerance are given a bad name, and American credibility suffers even as we seek to engage in religious dialogue abroad.

Overall, Bayles said, Americans need to be more mindful of the United States' image abroad. Failure to do so will have destructive consequences for dialogue and cooperation with other countries. ■

HIV/AIDS AND GLOBAL ETHICS

On April 8 James Keenan, S.J., Founders Professor of Theology at Boston College, spoke on the importance of public information and education in addressing the HIV/AIDS crisis, and how the epidemic has informed the ethical responses to contemporary global challenges.

Keenan argued that HIV/AIDS prevention and treatment efforts cannot succeed without concurrent attempts to rectify existing structural inequalities in the developing world. HIV/AIDS disproportionately affects women, migrants, and impoverished people, all of whom also have less access to preventative care and treatment options.

To illustrate some of the problems of gender inequity facing the developing world, Keenan shared a story from Costa Rica in which a woman learned that her husband was HIV positive three days before he died from AIDS-related complications. Her husband (who contracted the disease from extramarital affairs) had known he was HIV-positive for five years but both he and the family doctor neglected to tell her or their eight children. Paternalistic medical professionals in many parts of the developing world refuse to share information or effective treatments with women, Keenan noted, which quickens the spread of the epidemic.

In the industrialized world, where people have access to health care and preventive techniques, AIDS is a chronic but treatable illness. In the developing world, however, AIDS is widely considered terminal. If we have the capability to prevent and treat HIV/AIDS in the West, Keenan concluded, we have capability to treat it in the developing world as well. But, he argued, ethicists won't be able to truly address the issue of HIV/AIDS and other global epidemics until they deal with the structural social and economic inequalities exacerbating the problem. ■



James F. Keenan, S.J.

A MATTER OF CONSCIENCE

On April 13 the Boisi Center hosted a panel discussion on the rights and duties of conscience among healthcare providers and patients. In particular, the panel explored the implications of allowing exceptions, grounded in religious objections, to laws and regulations that would otherwise apply to everyone. The issue has been growing in importance in the medical community, even as the recent healthcare overhaul in Washington has put religious objections in the forefront of the news. Leading the discussion in front of a packed lecture hall were Rev. J. Bryan Hehir, Dr. Michael Greene, and Melissa Rogers, experts on this question in the religious, medical and legal communities.

Leading off the panel was Rev. Hehir, a professor at Harvard University's Kennedy School of Government and Secretary for Health Care and Social Services in the Catholic Archdiocese of Boston. Conscience clauses, Hehir said, are a standard of civil law meant to help the individual citizen negotiate in his or her social context. On the one hand, conscience clauses are expected in a pluralistic society where different individuals have different moral obligations; on the other hand, devising coherent and effective public policies that exempt certain people is challenging. Regarding the current healthcare debate, Hehir pointed to the need to protect the autonomy of individuals in the medical profession, and the profession as a whole. The law, he noted, must grant individuals a space to develop their consciences—hence the need for exemptions. If these exemptions are eroded, the law will risk driving a wedge between individuals and society.

Dr. Greene, professor of reproductive biology at Harvard Medical School and Chief of Obstetrics at Massachusetts General Hospital, spoke from his experience as a physician, identifying the goal of medicine and healthcare as the prevention of disease and care for the dying. Based on this goal, he articulated several key ethical and moral principles: respect for a patient's autonomy; the right of patients to refuse care; and a commitment to beneficence, non-maleficence and justice. These principles, Greene noted, are



Dr. Michael Greene



Panelists Melissa Rogers, Dr. Michael Greene, Erik Owens and Rev. J. Bryan Hehir

implemented through mechanisms such as informed consent and the physician licensing. While doctors should not willingly put themselves in a situation of moral uncertainty, he said, sometimes conflict is unavoidable. To illustrate his point, he recalled a recent case of a Jehovah's Witness patient who requested a cesarean section without blood transfusion. Despite his reservations, Greene successfully performed the surgery according to her wishes. Sometimes, he said, unforeseen circumstances may arise and a physician might have to adjust to the patient's desires.

The final speaker was Melissa Rogers, director of the Center for Religion & Public Affairs at Wake Forest University, and advisor to the White House Office of Faith-based and Neighborhood Partnerships. A lawyer and long-time advocate for religious freedom, Rogers noted that the conflict between personal and civic obligations has always been addressed in American law. While the First Amendment's Free Exercise clause protects individuals' rights to religious practice, the Establishment clause guards against the government's promotion of one faith over others. Recent laws and judicial decisions have specifically linked conscience exemptions and the issue of healthcare. The recent healthcare mandate, for example, is subject to exemptions on the basis of membership in a religious group. Looking forward to the implementation of new healthcare legislation, Rogers called for acceptance of "common ground principles" for religious exemptions, including the need for greater disclosure among providers about what services they make available (and do not); the importance of distinguishing between a lack of access to care and mere inconvenience to patients (when, say, a pharmacist refuses to provide the "morning after pill"), and the need to ensure that healthcare does not become a means of coercion or proselytization. ■

POLITICAL DIFFERENCES IN THE CHURCH



Lisa Sowle Cahill

In recent years the political efforts of U.S. Catholic bishops have focused primarily on “life questions” while Pope Benedict XVI has brought attention to broader questions of global poverty, the environment, and the global economic crisis. On January 27 Lisa Sowle Cahill, the J. Donald Monan Professor

of Theology at Boston College, addressed the differences in political priorities between the Vatican and the U.S. Conference of Catholic Bishops, and explored their possible explanations.

While the pope and U.S. bishops hold similar ethical positions on these issues, they emphasize them differently in the public sphere, Cahill noted. On the one hand, American leaders such as Bishop Joseph Martino and Cardinal Francis Rigali have recently stressed the need to oppose abortion as a matter of public policy, sometimes going as far as to deny communion to certain pro-choice

Catholic politicians. On the other hand, in his recent encyclical *Caritas in Veritate* and in his 2009 and 2010 World Day of Peace messages, Benedict XVI has drawn attention to the need for greater Catholic involvement in issues of war, poverty, and the environment. What accounts for these different emphases?

Cahill proposed examining the respective social contexts in which the pope and the U.S. bishops function. A number of U.S. bishops hail from an older generation of immigrants, she said, who find shared identity in traditional Catholic pro-life values. In the wake of the sexual abuse crisis, the U.S. bishops may also be trying to gain the moral high ground by appealing to orthodox issues, said Cahill. Benedict XVI, however, has been more concerned to retrieve Europe’s common Christian identity than distinguishing Catholics from other Christians; he has focused on articulating a cohesive social ethic that reflects his position as head of the global church.

For better or worse, said Cahill, theologians and Church leaders (in the Vatican and the U.S.) have little impact on the political concerns of Catholic laity. Citing recent studies by the Pew Forum, she noted that most American Catholics share the concerns of neither the pope nor the bishops as expressed in Episcopal statements. The challenge, said Cahill, is to find ways to engage Catholics at the local level. ■

ROUSSEAU’S PARADOXICAL LEGACY

On February 10 the Boisi Center welcomed Ourida Mostefai, associate professor and chair of the Boston College Department of Romance Languages and Literatures, for a presentation of her recent research on French philosopher Jean-Jacques Rousseau. One cannot fully appreciate Rousseau’s discourses, she said, without understanding the the paradoxical life and fame of man behind them.

In eighteenth-century Europe the growth of publishing, rise in literacy, and development of gazettes and newspapers made access to new ideas and opinions more accessible. It was in this setting that Rousseau established himself as a public thinker par excellence. Yet his rise from obscurity to fame was as much due to his personal conduct as his written *oeuvre*. Rousseau broke with the convention of his day not only in his thoughts and radical writings, but through a distinctive lifestyle that has particular resonance in our own celebrity-driven era.

Unlike his contemporaries, Rousseau rejected pseudonymity and claimed authorship of even his most controversial his writings. While he was educated and protected by the elite, he wrote for the masses. Rousaseau eschewed the noble status and preferences of fellow writers, defy-

ing convention and provoking the ire of academics and nobility alike. His writings were frequently banned, an act that ironically fueled his popularity and name recognition. Rousseau also balked at the common style of dress, choosing instead the unique dress of Armenian peasants, for example, and refusing to wear a wig as was the custom of his time. He was conscientious of his public persona, and enjoyed his celebrity status, which was enhanced by his peculiar style.



Ourida Mostefai

Rousseau’s legacy remains both important and paradoxical, Mostefai argued. His writings have influenced major academic and political figures from Napoleon to Kant, yet his distinctive lifestyle also made him a notorious and marginalized figure during his own time. ■

PHILANTHROPY AS SPIRITUAL EXERCISE

Paul Schervish, professor of sociology and director of the Center on Wealth and Philanthropy at Boston College spoke of “philanthropy as spiritual exercise” at the Boisi Center on February 24. Properly understood, he said, giving is a productive and spiritual enterprise, not simply a distributive one. In fact, he argued, a modern spirituality of allocation is available if you listen for it in generations of wealth holders. At root is the “Holy Trinity” of spiritual exercise: the union of soul, relationships and society.

Humans are both receivers and givers, Schervish said. Just as breathing entails both inhaling and exhaling, wealth entails both receiving and giving. Though we begin our lives as receivers, giving develops later. Children receive the gift of life from parents and other caretakers. “Children do not need to learn how to love; they need to learn how to be loved,” Schervish stressed. Inner development leads to care and compassion for others through relationships. In society, there is a moral citizenship of care for others, which creates mutual nourishment rather than a commercial relationship. By giving, individuals pay attention to the person in need, not the medium of expressing this need. Being able to address another’s need builds relationships, and daily life is a way to experience spiritual life by giving to others, and therefore, to God.

Sociologist Emile Durkheim said that to be fully human requires a unity of worldly and inner tasks. A healthy inner life is important for entering in community with others. Saint Thomas Aquinas promoted love of self, and we must not forget to give ourselves love as well.

Schervish noted that Americans give five times more to their family and friends than they do to formal charities, when giving is properly understood to include non-financial goods and services. Shoveling a neighbor’s driveway in addition to your own is a form of care-giving because it focuses on the needs of the person, not the ways in which this is achieved. As a result, the act of giving strengthens communal relationships. Generosity is not an end virtue, but wisdom is, according to Professor Schervish. Philanthropic expressions of gratitude such as these foster the individual inner life, communal bonds through societal engagement, and one’s spiritual life with God. ■



Paul Schervish

OBAMA AND THE CULTURE WARS



John Dombrink

In the shadow of the Tea Party movement, angry town hall meetings, and an increasing level of polarization in American politics, John Dombrink spoke about the future of the culture wars at the Boisi Center on February 17.

According to Dombrink, while predictions that Obama’s election would signal a new age of bipartisanship and unity in

American politics were off base, certain culture war issues of the early 2000’s will in fact fade in coming years. New conflicts, however, will also arise.

Dombrink discussed four main themes: the broadening and moderating of the role of religion in politics; the drop in importance of certain concerns such as same sex marriage; continued ambivalence surrounding the question of abortion; and the rise of an angry culture war backlash which

came out during the town halls of the health care debate.

Regarding religion, Dombrink said that while churchgoers still mostly vote Republican, there has been a change in some evangelicals in recent years, as the focus moves away from hot-button issues like gay marriage, and toward more “common ground” concerns like HIV/AIDS, the environment, and human trafficking.

One thing Dombrink believes will continue to persist is what he calls Americans’ ambivalence on the question of abortion. Abortion is a gray area for most Americans, despite the heated passions on both extremes. Dombrink pointed to polls by the Pew Research Center which indicate that most people believe abortion should be legal in either some or most cases, but have various restrictions. Only around 20% on each side think it should either always be legal or always be illegal.

Finally, Dombrink spoke about the angry backlash toward Obama and the Democrats in 2009, calling it the remnant of past culture war battles that are probably already fought and settled. He quoted Michelle Goldberg, who said the tea parties and the Christian right “[share] a sense of furious dispossession, a conviction that the country that is rightfully theirs has been usurped by sinister cosmopolitan elites.” ■

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