

# BOISI CENTER INTERVIEWS



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**ERIC GREGORY** is a professor of religion at Princeton University and was recently a fellow at the Tikvah Center for Law and Jewish Civilization at New York University School of Law. He spoke with Boisi Center associate director **Erik Owens** after participating in a panel discussion on poverty and American national priorities.

**OWENS:** Your current book project centers on the parable of the Good Samaritan. It's a story that is widely familiar and yet its lessons are far from clear. Could you say a bit about what drew you to the parable?

**GREGORY:** I think you're right that the parable in many ways is one of the most celebrated stories of the Christian tradition, especially so today. Unlike other biblical stories, however, I have found less scholarship that you might expect on its ethical and political implications. Many people find in it a compelling story about the need to transcend boundaries—cultural boundaries, religious boundaries, and borders of all kinds—in meeting the needs of others. For example, in recent debates about global justice, it has been hailed as a kind of virtuous model of the willingness to engage distant others who are suffering in the world regardless of their status as fellow citizen or co-religionist. In a global era in which we're more aware of need and we're better able to deliver aid, it seems to be a kind of rich story that might inform how we respond to the suffering of others and the scope of our moral obligations.

Of course, it's also a story that has a fraught history because its celebrated universalism is often posed in direct contrast to other traditions, particularly the Jewish tradition, which despite a ma-

ior influence on Christianity, is seen as having a different way of thinking about the nature of our relationships of charity and justice. So even as it's celebrated for its universalism, it does raise complicated questions about how to negotiate a commitment to the dignity of all alongside



our special relationships to others, like family members. The parable is invoked quite a bit by religious people and secular people, but I've been fascinated by looking at the different ways it has been interpreted. In the early Christian church it was not just a story about ethics but also a kind of allegory for salvation itself. The Good Samaritan in this allegory is Jesus, and the wounded man on the side of the road is humanity, which by the

way has the virtue of casting the reader as the one in need rather than always the Samaritan. Augustine has a very long discussion of the inn as the church and the two dinari as the love commands, and so on. But for most people today, the story is compelling because of its universal implications and also because we find ourselves in so many relationships with what are called strangers.

**OWENS:** Right. It asks whether political boundaries have any moral relevance to us—a question at the heart of those who seek global justice. How do we balance the obvious need to help those around us with the need to help those far from us?

**GREGORY:** That's a really difficult question. Many people in communities of faith are trying to negotiate that balance. There are certain moral traditions that give a very clear answer. Utilitarianism, for example, might give you a calculus by which you can privilege the desperate needs of distant strangers over against the needs of those more immediate to you. While I do think we have more stringent duties to distant strangers than some might suggest, including many Christian authors, I worry about whether or not we can have such a calculus, and I think there is something about the special relationships we have to family members or even to fellow citizens that make the moral life valuable. So, there's a

big debate about global justice, the duties we owe to those beyond our borders, and social justice, the duties we owe to fellow citizens; many find that the bonds we have with fellow citizens do generate obligations that we don't have to others.

I think in a global era the difficulty is that distant strangers are becoming increasingly less distant. We have economic exchanges and historical relationships with them. I know ethicists sometimes just say "Things get complicated," but at the risk of saying it again, I'm trying to complicate the easy reception of the parable as simply "Care about everyone." One of the virtues of borders is that they create finite tasks that might be able to help us in thinking about achieving justice as best we can.

**OWENS:** You picked up on that theme in your talk last night when you reminded the audience that pride is a fundamental sin but that slothful inaction based on a pessimistic or despairing view of the world is also sinful. Could you speak a bit about how you would like to move the bar a bit among Augustinians toward a more action-oriented approach?

**GREGORY:** I'm not sure optimism or pessimism are the best way to think about the human condition. It is true—and I don't want to deny it—that within the Augustinian tradition there is a recognition of the cruel things we human beings do to one another, and the limits we face in trying to live up to our moral ideals. There is also always a danger of imagining that we have arrived, that we are angels, and setting ideals that are not for creatures like us. So, certainly, there's an accent on the fallenness, but that can degenerate into a kind of dour, gloomy pessimism that are not true to Augustine's writings or the later development of Augustinian thought. The Augustinian tradition has recognized the possibilities of our communal life and the ways in which human beings are wonderful, capable of virtue and rationality, and not

just always overwhelmingly fragmented in our loves.

The great modern Augustinians—and I think of Reinhold Niebuhr and Martin Luther King Jr. in contemporary American history—have tried to hold these together by recognizing limits but also possibilities.

**OWENS:** One of the concerns that comes up when we recognize that difficult choices must be made is the subsequent tendency to authorize "dirty hands." We say that things need to be done in a sinful world and that sometimes awful things

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need to be done for some greater purpose. These days torture or new methods of war are the first issues that come to mind, but there are many other examples as well. How do you counsel those who worry about acting amidst the darkness of the world?

**GREGORY:** The focus on the darkness of the world, you're right, can lead to either a kind of other-worldly escapism that we find evident among certain religious communities, or, as you mention, a belief that "Well, if it's so dark, let's just do

the dirty thing and get it over with and ask for God's forgiveness later." It can be done with an appeal to what's called cheap grace, which misses out on the Christian attention to the fragility of goodness but also the need to respect the goods that there are in this world. The dirty hands philosophy has taken over the Augustinian tradition in ways that I think would be at odds with his admitted recognition of the difficult choices we often face. Augustine would hold us to a higher standard than the quick and easy appeal to dirty hands.

**OWENS:** Are the standards by which we might address these questions both theological and civic? You've written about the civic obligations of Christians as Christians, and I wonder if these obligations are understood in relation to secular conceptions of the common good?

**GREGORY:** There may be distinctive and specific virtues or norms that Christians might embrace that they rightly do not impose on others in a liberal democracy. But the richness of the Christian tradition, including its reflection on questions of situations where goods seem to conflict, can also inform a broader public conversation and might have analogies within our civic life. For example, in the contemporary debate about the use of torture, the Christian tradition's recognition of the dignity of the individual strongly resonates with a lot of other secular traditions. The moral repertoire of the Christian tradition should play a larger role than many people think it should; it can inform not just Christians but also our fellow citizens, about how to think about the sort of people we want to be, the sort of society we want to be, the ends we want to achieve and the means we're willing to use to achieve them.

**OWENS:** That's exactly how I wanted to end our conversation, with a question about who we are as Americans. Our panel last night focused to some degree on American national priorities, and you referenced Augustine's meditation in *The*

*City of God* on the nature of our loves. I wonder if you might reflect a bit more on the nature of American's loves today. What do you see that tells you who we are as a people?

**GREGORY:** On the one hand, given Augustine's notions of sin and fallenness, an Augustinian is not necessarily shocked by some of the apparent priorities of America as a nation. Martin Luther King would identify them as militarism, excessive nationalism, racism, and the vast disparities of economic inequality that lead to the marginalization of citizens from our democracy. King would say that a society's policy priorities reveal its loves; this allows us to have a window of possible criticism. One of the things I was trying to do last night was to suggest that prophetic critique has its place in criticizing the apparent loves of America in terms of unbridled consumerism, etc., but that King also loved America and tried to help it achieve its unfulfilled promise of liberty and justice for all. The language of love can be used for social criticism but we also need to use the language of love to help empower the possibilities and imagine alternative ways of organizing our social life and thinking about America's role in the world and to set domestic policies that express the things that America wants to highlight and value and love. The current situation tempts us to despair, but we do wrong to simply mourn and despair; we should organize and imagine a better kind of America.

**OWENS:** Do you see any hopefulness about these conversation as they're wrapped around the discourses of the Affordable Care Act or about limited government or about our economic policies? It seems there are some discourses that have flickers of real conversations about what Americans value, what our country is about; yet at other times they seem buried by politics. I wonder if you see places where we're really talking about things and moving the bar meaningfully, or whether it's all piled on with the



political and rhetorical excess that we've become accustomed to?

**GREGORY:** If you spend your days watching cable television, it can be a source of sadness about the state of our public discourse. On the other hand, I think maybe because of the tremendous challenges we have, both economic and otherwise, there do seem to be emerging sites where citizens gather and raise fundamental questions. It might not be in high-profile political situations but in a renewed kind of interest in and concern for who we are as a society. That happens

in events like you hosted last night and in other spaces around the country, and I think there is recognition that amidst the focus on punditry and politics, the challenges we have are too great. There is a need to have this richer, larger conversation about who we are as a society. This is going to involve empirical discussion about policies, but it might also be helped by being oriented by some of these questions of first principles and the character of the nation.

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