

THE

BOISI CENTER REPORT



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FROM THE DIRECTOR



I know I'm biased on this, but the Boisi Center sponsored an extraordinary spectrum of events during the Fall 2021 semester.

After a two-year hiatus due to the

Covid pandemic, the Center could finally offer the 19th Annual "Prophetic Voices Lecture," (originally scheduled for March 2020) featuring the Reverend Dr. Jonathan Lee Walton, currently dean of Wake Forest University Divinity School. Walton's lecture on October 6 entitled, "Blessed Are the Rich: The American Gospel of Success," drew a lively audience response. On September 20, Boisi's hard-working grad assistant, Zac Karanovich, convened a superb panel of speakers in an event entitled "'Seventy Times Seven': Abuse, Exclusion, and Forging the Church." Participants included the public intellectual James Carroll, Professors James Bretzke, S.J. of John Carroll University and Jeannine Hill Fletcher of Fordham University, and Boson College Ph.D. candidate Laurel Marshall Potter. The four panelists opened an exciting and important conversation with the audience. On November 4, the Boisi Center sponsored an event that comprised both the showing of the PBS film "Flannery: The storied life of the writer from Georgia" and a discussion of the film with one of its co-producers, Mark Bosco, S.J. of Georgetown University, and noted O'Connor scholar Angela O'Donnell of Fordham University. All three of these events can be viewed on the Boisi Cen-

ter's website and our YouTube channel.

We also experimented with a new type of public event this fall: on October 6 a capacity crowd of graduate and law school students attended an event entitled, "Academics as Public Intellectuals: A Conversation with Professors M. Cathleen Kaveny (Theology Department and Law School) and Heather Cox Richardson (History Department)." I moderated a fast-moving conversation between the two faculty stars about balancing academic commitments with public commentary on contentious political and cultural issues, then the conversation was opened to the graduate students present. Quite frankly, we ran out of time before we could field all the questions from the students present.

The Boisi Center also continued its revered tradition of Luncheon Colloquia in the Center's conference room. On September 16, we hosted James Reding (currently a student at BC's School of Theology and Ministry), who led a vibrant conversation about "LGBTQ Advocacy at the Intersection of Faith and Public Policy." Every seat was taken, and the conversation following Reding's presentation spilled well over the time allotted. And on November 10, we welcomed back an old friend, Professor Ward Holder of St. Anselm College, who offered a fascinating recount of an online course, half of whose students were in the U.S. and half were present via Zoom from Africa. Holder's presentation, "Race, Theology, and Pedagogy: Conversations between Africans and Americans," drew many participants both from BC and from

neighboring institutions.

Last, and by no means least, the Religion and Public Life minor, which was started two and a half years ago, is up and running, and has attracted very talented students. We currently have 22 students in the minor, majoring in a broad spectrum of areas, although International Studies, Political Science, and Theology seem to dominate. After taking the required "Religion and American Public Life" course (taught every spring) students work out concentration clusters with the program director, such as "Religion and Public Health," "Religion and International Affairs," "Religion and Science," etc. This past summer an opportunity presented itself, and three rising juniors volunteered to work with the Boston home office of the Teamsters on voter registration and the demographics of recent immigrants. We're currently strategizing about making more internships available. If you're willing to help in that strategy, please let us know. As I always tell the dean when reporting on the minors, "I serve the easily loved: smart, disciplined, and generous."

All of these events and activities are made possible by my extraordinary team: Susan Richard, Boisi's administrator, Zac Karanovich, our trusty graduate assistant, and Ann McClenahan, special volunteer assistant to the director. To all of them, I offer sincere thanks for their hard work and creativity.

Stay tuned: more good things are on the way this spring.

~ Mark Massa, S.J.

“LGBTQ Advocacy at the Intersection of Faith and Public Policy”



On September 16th, the Boisi Center hosted James Reding, a graduate student at BC’s School of Theology and Ministry, who discussed the attempts at collaboration on public policy matters between the LGBTQ community and the Catholic Church. Reding, a gay, Catholic man, situated the discussion in his own work with the Human Rights Campaign (HRC) and their outreach to church leaders in 2021.

He expressed a fundamental concern for the disconnect between the remarkable reach the Church has in education, healthcare, and politics and the negative consequences of their action when lobbying against the Equality Act, which would have expanded protections for LGBTQ persons. This betrays a shallowness to the theological rhetoric of all being created in God’s image and likeness, he argued.

In an effort to connect with decision-makers, Reding and the HRC Office of Religion and Faith reached out to nearly half of the U.S. chanceries. Only 25% responded to their meeting request. While changing the Church’s teaching was off the table, Reding was pleasantly surprised by the responses they did receive in these conversations.

Reding was also grateful that, in a letter published by the HRC at that time condemning violence against transgender persons, Archbishop John Wester, Bishop John Stowe, OFM (who also endorsed the Equality Act), and other clergy were signatories.

Reding’s advice to both the LGBTQ community and the Church was to presume good will on both sides. The temptation is to demonize the other side, but they are actually much closer than one might think. However, he noted one distinct difference: the LGBTQ community reached out to the Church, and it was the Church that walked away.

R. WARD HOLDER

“Race, Theology, and Pedagogy: Conversations Between Africans and Americans”



R. Ward Holder, a theologian from St. Anselm College, returned to the Boisi Center on November 10th to discuss a course on race and theology he co-taught with his sister, Cynthia Holder-Rich, a professor at Makumira in Usa River, Tanzania. Students from both universities were invited to participate.

The course was created in response to the tragic events in 2020 that led to the deaths of Ahmaud Arbery, Breonna Taylor, George Floyd, and others. The course, “Race and Theology,” saw good enrollment from both universities. And while challenges existed (e.g., time zone differences, electricity and internet access, etc.), the benefits were abundant. Central among them was the opportunity for St. Anselm students to grapple with race and for Tumaini students to speak honestly about their own experiences in a fruitful dialogue across boundaries.

Holder argued that it was crucial to have a space for dialogue as it was an overwhelming benefit to the students. It was this aspect of the course and not the readings or guest lecturers that was of greatest import and impact for the class.

In the future, he looks forward to recreating the course with other universities, either abroad or at an HBCU (Historically Black Colleges and Universities) in the U.S. Alternatively, he could also envision the course exploring the Latinx community’s experiences and theologies.

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‘SEVENTY TIMES SEVEN’: ABUSE, EXCLUSION, AND FORGIVING THE CHURCH

An interesting conversation among Catholic thinkers explored the possible future of the Catholic Church, including the challenges and opportunities it still faces twenty years after the Boston Globe first reported clergy sex abuse.

What does institutional forgiveness look like, if it’s even possible at all, for the Catholic Church? This question and more were explored in a panel discussion on September 20th, featuring James Bretzke, S.J., John Carroll University, James Carroll, author and former priest, Jeannine Hill Fletcher, Fordham University, and Laurel Marshall Potter, Boston College. R. Zachary Karanovich, the Boisi Center’s graduate research assistant, moderated the discussion.

Hill Fletcher emphasized the processual nature of forgiveness, reflecting on the work of global truth and reconciliation commissions, the work of Dr. Maria Yellow Horse Brave Heart, and the recent report published by Gonzaga University on the sex abuse crisis. She argued that forgiveness is only possible by rooting out the negative ideological influences in Christianity.

Bretzke’s comments reflected his time in seminary education. When teaching the course that trains seminarians to hear confessions, he was persistent in teaching them that confession absolves one from sin, not guilt. As well, the therapeutic nature of the sacrament in recent years has only added to the individualized view of sin and an inability for the Church to accept social sin—a particular problem for the Church’s role in sex abuse.

Potter turned to scripture, reflecting



James Carroll (R) takes notes on the comments given by Laurel Marshall Potter (L).



James Bretzke, S.J. (R), offers his remarks as R. Zachary Karanovich (L) and Jeannine Hill Fletcher (C) look on.

that the titular passage, in context, was not just forgiveness, but forgiveness that followed repentance and accountability. In *Fratelli Tutti*, Pope Francis affirms something similar: love of the oppressor means seeking ways to get them to stop the oppression, not letting them continue.

Carroll remarked that forgiveness cannot take place without—as in sacramental confession—a “firm purpose of amendment.” He gave *Nostra Aetate* and *We Remember* (church documents) as examples of institutional change—in those cases it was the Church’s relationship to the Jewish people. They stand as the Church’s acknowledgment of its complicity. Such an admission, enhanced by the ultimate prohibition by the Church of evangelizing to Jews, is an illustration of significant ideological change. The new challenge is the “caste system” that the current priesthood imposes, he said.

Karanovich then asked whether the ecclesiology of the Catholic Church makes this a particular challenge for that communion. Hill Fletcher began by wondering whether the Church is actually a structure of vice, the evil of which Catholics can no longer see. She pointed to *Lumen Gentium*’s teaching about the

“various ranks” of the people of God and that bishops “preside in the place of God” and how such a teaching is largely ignored.

Bretzke believes the Church is in a transition between models (a reference to Avery Dulles’s book, *Models of the Church*). He said we are in an “institutional” model, which Dulles saw as unsustainable, and transitioning with Francis to a synodal model. Francis is, however, getting resistance, he acknowledged.

Potter reflected on hope, saying that if we are relying on human effort, it is unlikely that the Church will change. Instead, it must be hope in God. Our hope in the resurrection of the dead, she said, will be fulfilled only when God raises up history’s victims and confronts us with our bad acts and complicity in them.

Carroll concluded with some warranted pessimism, pointing to the history of Church leadership unwilling to acknowledge the failures of the Church (e.g., Pope John Paul II’s resistance to structural sin as a concept) as well as the laity’s unwillingness to demand structural and ideological change, at least *en masse*. But in light of the way the Church dealt with antisemitism, he noted the Church can change, and he has seen it.

FLANNERY O'CONNOR DOCUMENTARY

The Boisi Center screened the documentary *Flannery* and discussed the film with Mark Bosco, S.J. and Angela O'Donnell.



Angela O'Donnell (L) responds to questions as Mark Bosco, S.J. (R) looks on.

On November 4th, the Boisi Center hosted the screening of the 2019 documentary, “Flannery: The storied life of the writer from Georgia,” a film about the life of acclaimed American author Flannery O’Connor.

Flannery, who died at the young age of 39, led an interesting life. Born in Milledgeville, Georgia, she lived with her parents and was supported in her creative endeavors by her father, who died when she was only 15 from lupus. This was a major turning point in her life.

In 1942, Flannery began her studies at the Georgia State College for Women. She was a gifted caricaturist and her cartoons were published in the student yearbook. She was shy, but ambitious, and quite independent. In 1945, she was accepted to the Iowa Writers’ Workshop where she obtained her Master of Fine Arts degree. There she honed her craft, committing not just to being a writer, but a faithful, Catholic writer. Soon thereafter, she went to Saratoga Springs, New York to be a part of the Yaddo artist community, eventually moving to Redding, Connecticut with Robert and Sally Fitzgerald. She would publish her first novel, *Wise Blood*, there.

In the final years of her life, she began to experience profound pain and lethargy in her limbs, which was eventually diagnosed as lupus. Her mother decid-

ed not to tell her, however, fearing the shock would be too distressing. Flannery moved back to Milledgeville and began cortisol therapy. She continued working in the mornings, but was often too weak in the afternoon. Her struggle with lupus was certainly the inspiration for the dark view of bodily experience in her writing.

Following the documentary, a panel discussion took place between Mark Bosco, S.J., co-director of the film and a respected scholar of Flannery from Georgetown, and Angela O’Donnell from Fordham University’s Curran Center for American Catholic Studies.

Although she was beloved for her writing, Flannery had a complex stance on certain aspects of public life. Being from the South, she was reared in a community that was deeply racist. She used racist language in her novels. When her racism was posed as a question to the panel, Bosco noted that she was aware of racism’s sinfulness. In her novels, he said, the reader can see her struggle with racism as a sin, but “she [was] embedded and implicated in it.” O’Donnell illustrated this struggle with her decision not to meet with James Baldwin in Milledgeville, saying “I have to abide by the rules of the society I feed on.” She was an integrationist by belief, O’Donnell argued, but a segregationist by choice.

Bosco and O’Donnell also discussed

Flannery’s support of same-sex relationships, evident in her close, accepting friendship with Betty Hester. O’Donnell noted that Flannery had always had close relationships with female friends, but that her relationships with men had been tumultuous and disappointing. When Hester revealed her sexuality to Flannery in a letter, Flannery responded by saying that she loved her and that it did not bother her in the slightest. This was especially progressive for a woman in the South at that time, but it reflects her commitment to friends.

The panelists were also asked about Flannery’s preference for the short story. Bosco said that the Biblical parable is similar to the short story and that Flannery’s parable-resembling narratives worked well in that specific form. Even her novels were episodic, he said.

When asked whether he would consider making a second film on Flannery, he explained that there was much left on the cutting room floor—forty-two hours of material. If he did proceed, it would focus more on her struggle with racism and her commitment to Catholicism as well as her experiences of feminism and disability.

“While making the documentary, we just fell in love with Flannery,” Bosco concluded. O’Donnell nodded in agreement.



Film co-director, Mark Bosco, S.J. (R) answers audience questions.

19TH ANNUAL PROPHETIC VOICES LECTURE WITH JONATHAN LEE WALTON

Walton took to the podium for his lecture, “Blessed Are the Rich: The American Gospel of Success.”

After speaking about the prosperity gospel at a leading Protestant seminary, Rev. Dr. Jonathan Walton, dean of the Divinity School at Wake Forest University, was asked the following question: “What does this have to do with faith in God?” The answer to this question formed the basis of Walton’s talk at the Boisi Center’s 19th Annual Prophetic Voices Lecture on October 6, 2021, “Blessed are the Rich: The American Gospel of Success.”



Jonathan Lee Walton discussing the problems with the prosperity gospel.

The prosperity gospel originated in the late 19th and early 20th centuries, emerging from mind science and positive thinking traditions. It developed at the margins of American Protestantism, particularly among working-class Whites and charismatic Blacks in the South and Midwest. The theology of the prosperity gospel—better understood as theologies—emerged from certain biblical texts (e.g., “Beloved, I wish above all

things that thou mayest prosper and be in health, even as thy soul prospereth.” [3 John 1:2, KJV]) and theological strands that understood Jesus Christ as the key to life, death, and abundance. Abundance in the context of the prosperity gospel could well include a new car and great financial wealth.

Walton noted that when he provides this brief overview, it is not uncommon for his listeners to shake their heads, wondering how anyone could fall for such ideas. Their response is not unlike that of the gentleman who asked him, “What does this have to do with faith in God?” Walton argued that all communities of faith distinguish themselves by the symbols and accoutrements they adopt, whether they are fancy cars or beautiful stained glass windows. Religion organizes in part through aesthetic markers and consumptive behaviors that point to who we seek to become. Further, these symbols and behaviors reflect an undeniable hierarchy of taste and consumption in American culture that Walton illustrated by contrasting Broadway productions, *Harper’s* magazine, and the Ivy League versus Tyler Perry’s movies, *People* magazine, and Alabama football. One community’s cars and planes are another’s Brooks Brothers and sublime hymns.

Walton highlighted the Depression era writings of James Truslow Adams, who popularized the concept of the “American

Dream,” and Alfred Whitney Griswold whose dissertation examined what he dubbed the American Gospel of Success, informed by his brief stint on Wall Street. Their conception of the Dream did not have to do with social mobility per se, but with the idea that the elite establishment carries values of social stability and continuity that could inspire the masses. By embracing, consuming, and digesting the elite view of society, strivers who were sufficiently industrious and intelligent could assimilate and thus serve to reinforce the existing structures of hierarchy.

In a somewhat similar vein, Walton argued that there are epistemic and cultural biases in the academic study of religion in that moral judgments and values are actually at play in what is often thought of as a critical and objective discipline. Categories of good and bad religion get produced in scholarship, and historically communities of color have become the “gutter in which all bad religions collect.”

Walton concluded that most of us have blinders to our own social position, blinders that obscure from us elements of gross inequality in society. He urged compassion for those who appear “other,” but who actually share our aspirations and, like us, are always competing for status in society.

FACULTY SEMINAR:

TEACHING FIRST-GENERATION BOSTON COLLEGE STUDENTS

During the fall semester, the Boisi Center collaborated again with the Center for Christian-Jewish Learning (CCJL) in a series of faculty seminars on Zoom. Planned with Dr. Ruth Langer, interim director of CCJL, three online seminars focused on “Teaching First-Generation Boston College Students,” aimed at both faculty and graduate students teaching in the Core. Rossanna Contreras-Godfrey, director of BC’s famed Learning to Learn program, Yvonne (Ms. Smiley) McBarnett, program director of Montserrat, Andy Petigny, associate director of the Thea Bowman AHANA and Intercultural Center, Burt

Howell, executive director of Intersections, and Dacia Gentilella, assistant director of Outreach and Support Services at Learning to Learn, walked seminar participants through the spectrum of support services, special programs, and academic counseling available to BC’s “First-Gen” students. The program offered information that is crucial for all faculty and classroom instructors, as most of the 1500 students who are first generation college students at BC remain “invisible” to their instructors in the classroom. All three of these seminar meetings can be viewed on the Boisi website.

TWO ALL-STAR ACADEMICS

Graduate students were hosted at an exclusive dinner event, “Academics as Public Intellectuals: A Conversation with Professors M. Cathleen Kaveny and Heather Cox Richardson”

On September 28th, the Boisi Center hosted a graduate student dinner event, co-sponsored with the Morrissey College of Arts and Sciences Dean’s Office, “Academics as Public Intellectuals: A Conversation with Professors M. Cathleen Kaveny and Heather Cox Richardson.” Mark Massa, S.J. facilitated the conversation with the two professors-turned-public intellectuals and more than thirty graduate students representing J.D. and Ph.D. students and candidates from the history, political science, and theology departments and the law school.



M. Cathleen Kaveny

Massa began by asking the relationship between their lives as academics and as public intellectuals. Kaveny said that she considers herself primarily an academic. Only after she had a passion for a particular topic or encountered some-

thing that someone got wrong did she take her teaching beyond the classroom. Richardson agreed, noting that she is a teacher, and her blog, the Substack entitled, “Letters from an American,” has the same teaching goal but with a different audience.

Massa asked Kaveny and Richardson whether they are comfortable being called public intellectuals. Kaveny said she did not mind as long as it is defined literally—she is an intellectual offering her services in a public forum. She does not want to be confused with a journalist or op-ed columnist, and she maintains the distinction by only intervening when she feels she has something to offer from her expertise. Richardson was apathetic about the title, thinking it sounds more like a job description for an old, white man spouting his opinion on various matters. She calls herself a teacher and historian, and technology just happens to be changing the look of those roles.

Kaveny noted that her move to the broader audience happened organically—she wrote a piece for *Commonweal* that connected Buffy the Vampire Slayer to theology, which turned into a regular column. But once she began writing for that audience, she was challenged with

discerning what she could assume they knew or what needed to be explained—the word count was demanding. Richardson added that her move into the public was her responsibility: “Part of being in the world is being in the world.”

They both acknowledged drawbacks. For Kaveny, she feels scattered by the many interventions she is asked to make and rarely has the opportunity to “linger” on a particular question. Richardson considers the blog “very tiring” (sometimes writing until 4am) but the silver lining is that when one is forced to write every day, they will become a good writer. Other drawbacks include angry emails and even death threats (in Richardson’s case). But one makes the necessary adjustments to protect themselves and their work.



Heather Cox Richardson

FACULTY SEMINAR:

MODELS OF CAPITALISM: ECONOMIC JUSTICE AND THE CRISIS OF CAPITALISM

During the Fall 2021 semester, the Boisi Center hosted a monthly dinner seminar of very talented faculty from BC and from further afield on the topic of “Capitalism.” Convened by Frank Garcia from BC’s Law School and Jim Henle from Harvard, the group included Sanjay Reedy from the New School in New York, Susan Sibley from MIT, Tim Barker from Harvard, and Alan Shapiro from the Boston law firm of Sandulli Grace. The seminar was lucky to have such talented BC faculty participants as Kim Garcia (English), Candace Hetzner (Political Science), Ken Himes (Theology), Micah Lott (Philosophy), Chandini Sankaran (Economics), Laura Steinberg (incoming director of the new Schiller Institute for Integrated Science and Society), Eve

Spangler (Sociology), Vlad Perju and Katherine Young (both of BC’s Law School), and Boisi Center director Mark Massa. Readings included a broad spectrum of authors and ideas, from Adam Smith’s *Wealth of Nations* to the multi-authored *The Anthropocene: Are Humans Now Overwhelming the Great Forces of Nature?* (Crutzen, McNeill, and Steffen), and “How Capitalism Saves the Environment,” from Shi-Ling Hsu’s *Capitalism and the Environment: A Proposal to Save the Planet*. That humming you hear on Thursday nights from 6 to 8pm is coming from the Boisi Center, where sharp intellects are tackling important texts and ideas. The Boisi Center is looking forward to continuing these dinner conversations in the Spring 2022 semester.

MEET THE BOISI CENTER'S 2021-22 UNDERGRADUATE RESEARCH FELLOWS

Karina Kavanagh is a senior in the Morrissey College of Arts and Sciences, double-majoring in International Studies and English with minors in French and Religion and Public Life through the Boisi Center. She attended Loyola Academy in Wilmette, Illinois before coming to BC, and so is now in her eighth year of Jesuit education! When not working at the Boisi Center, she can be found working as a stage manager in the Boston College Theatre Department.



Emily O'Neil is a senior in Morrissey College of Arts and Sciences, majoring in English with minors in Biology, Medical Humanities, and Religion & Public Life. As part of her minor through the Boisi Center, she is interested in investigating the complex relationship between religion and science in the United States. In her free time, she has enjoyed singing in the University Chorale of Boston College and exploring the city of Boston with her friends.

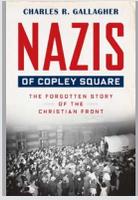


A PRESIDENTIAL DINNER

This fall, the Boisi Center's Religion and Public Life minors enjoyed dinner and conversation with President William P. Leahy, S.J.



SPRING 2022 EVENTS



JANUARY 27, 2022 | 5:00 - 6:30PM

“Nazis of Copley Square: The Forgotten Story of the Christian Front”

Charles Gallagher, S.J.

- This event is co-sponsored with the Center for Christian-Jewish Learning, the BC Jesuit Community, and the History Department •



FEBRUARY 3, 2022 | 6:00 - 7:30PM

“Race and the Religious Right: White Evangelicals, White Supremacy, and Their Consequences”

Randall Balmer, Anthea Butler, and Adrienne Jones, moderated by Susannah Heschel

- This event will be a Zoom webinar •



FEBRUARY 26, 2022 | TBD

2nd Annual Graduate Conference, “Religious Activism and Political Change; Political Activism and Religious Change”

- This conference will be held exclusively on Zoom •



MARCH 1, 2022 | 1:00 - 2:00PM

“Islam in the U.S.: Issues of Race and Diversity”

Abdullah Bin Hamid Ali, Sahar Aziz, and Omid Safi

- This event will be a Zoom webinar •



APRIL 5, 2022 | 2:00 - 3:00PM

“How Secularization Impacts Religion: A Conversation with Nancy Ammerman and José Casanova”

- This event will be a Zoom webinar •

**FOR MORE INFORMATION ABOUT THESE AND ALL OUR
EVENTS AND TO REGISTER, VISIT: [BC.EDU/BOISI](https://bc.edu/boisi)**