

BOISI CENTER REPORT



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FROM THE DIRECTOR



As usual, we've been busy this spring. To our usual spate of conferences and lectures (lunch conversations with faculty, a very suc-

cessful graduate student conference that drew students from across the U.S., our annual prophetic voices lecture), we added several new events. In February, Boisi hosted a public interview with BC's very successful and widely popular hockey coach, Greg Brown. That interview, which followed on the heels of my interview with BC football coach Bill O'Brien last fall, drew a large crowd of undergraduates as well as a wider audience of alumni and hockey fans who peppered Coach Brown with questions about recruiting, the future of BC hockey, and national competition. You can access that interview on the Boisi website.

We also added two new annual lectures to our list of events. On February 27th, Dr. John McGreevy, a much-respected religious historian and Provost at the University of Notre Dame, delivered the first annual lecture of the Alfred and Melissa Di Leonardo Lecture Series. John's important lecture, entitled "Catholicism Represented: Democracy, Religion, and Global History, 1789 – 2025," was made possible by a generous gift from Alfred and Melissa Di Leonardo, and represented the kickoff of an annual series that will position Boston College among the most visible and respected institutions of

higher education studying Catholicism in the United States. Likewise, Dr. Jeannine Hill Fletcher of Fordham University, delivered the inaugural lecture of the Nancy Marzella Lecture on Women and American Catholicism on March 25th. Dr. Hill Fletcher's lecture, entitled "Enslaved to the Jesuits: What Women of the First U.S. Diocese Can Tell Us about Women in the Church," was supported by a gift by Nancy Marzella, and set a high standard for scholars who will follow her in that series. The Boisi Center is very grateful to both Al and Melissa Di Leonardo and Nancy Marzella for their generous support of Boisi's efforts to study the intersection of religion and public life in America. Both of these superb lectures can be accessed on the Boisi Center's website under the "Events" button.

I'd like to focus the rest of this spring's director's report on a Boisi-sponsored event that I've mentioned in passing for a number of years, but have not spent a great amount of time talking about: the Boisi Interdisciplinary Faculty Seminar. I established the seminar eight years ago when I became director of the Center, and in retrospect I can't help but feel that it's one of the best things I've done in this job. As anyone familiar with higher ed in the U.S. today knows, interdisciplinary study is one of the most important ways in which scholars examine important issues. However, an ongoing faculty seminar that meets across the academic calendar is rare, as faculty are usually constrained by intradepartmental matters, teaching, and service in national academic societies. What that means, on the ground, is that faculty from different

departments and schools seldom have the time and space to talk about *ideas*, not departmental or university politics or procedures. And that is where the Boisi faculty seminar is such a blessing. I think that the Center provides an absolutely essential locus for BC's very talented scholars to meet and get to know colleagues with whom they wouldn't normally interact with.

Boisi's faculty seminar is a blessing in several important ways. First, it is composed of talented faculty from across the university and beyond: from B.C.'s history department (Tom Murphy, S.J.) and School of Nursing (Susan Gennaro); from international studies (Elizabeth Prodromou) and the Center for Christian-Jewish Learning (Dan Joslyn-Siemiatkoski); from the political science department (Kathleen Bailey) and communications (Kristin Peterson and Michael Serazio); from the Dean's Office (Elizabeth Shlala) and the sociology department (Eve Spangler); from the Clough School of Theology and Ministry (Hosffman Ospino and Callid Keefe-Perry); former director of the Boston Theological Institute (Ann McClenahan), and from BC's theology department (Natana DeLong-Bas. Joshua Snyder, and myself). This year it also included one of our smart Newton neighbors who teaches at St. Anselm's College in New Hampshire (Ward Holder).

Our common readings for the spring semester spanned a broad spectrum of topics: from U.S. Catholic involvement in the 19th century slave trade and the rise of Christian nationalism as a political/

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“UNDER MY SKIN:” TATTOOS AND RELIGION

A luncheon colloquium with sociologist Gustavo Morello.



Gustavo Morello, S.J.

The Boisi Center was honored to host Gustavo Morello, S.J., a professor in the sociology department at Boston College, for the first luncheon colloquium of the semester. As a sociologist, he advocates for looking for religion where it might not traditionally be found and asking questions about its cultural expression. One of his research projects involved asking people to send him photos of things that helped them connect with the transcendent. When many of his participants sent in pictures of their tattoos, he decided to take a deeper dive.

Morello found surprising parallels between tattoos and religious practices. Tattoos operate under a sacred system of meaning for individuals, there is an investment of pain, risk, and money, and one has to carefully discern and commit to what tattoo they want for themselves. Tattoos are a particularly important way for the growing unaffiliated population to express their beliefs, since there are not many other non-religious rituals that allow this.

After discussing these parallels, Morello briefly explained the different types and history of sacred tattoos. He distinguished between eight different types of these tattoos, including tattoos that represent foundational experiences, pilgrimage tattoos that prove someone has made that journey and changed from it, and tattoos of resistance to trauma. Historically, Morello mentioned that the oldest sacred tattoos were recently discovered on an Egyptian mummy. Other cultural and religious groups such as Native Americans, Christians, and Muslims also shared in this practice. One report from a 19th-century Redemptorist in the New World even mentioned how the tattoos of Native Americans reminded him of Christians with tattoos from their pilgrimages to Jerusalem. Morello wrapped up his luncheon by reflecting on the lack of research about tattoos, despite their historical and cultural prevalence. The Center was lucky to learn from his journey of discovery about this fascinating and under-researched part of human culture.

TEACHING ISLAM IN AMERICAN PROTESTANT SEMINARIES DURING THE GILDED AGE

Rev. Dr. David Grafton shared his research on Islam in Protestant schools.

On February 25th, the Boisi Center welcomed Reverend David Grafton, an Islamic studies and Christian-Muslim relations professor at Hartford International University. His luncheon, “American Religious Darwinism: Teaching Islam in American Protestant Seminaries during the Gilded Age,” was inspired by his newest book, *Muhammed in the Seminary*. Grafton examined the curriculums and events of Protestant seminaries of a variety of denominations from 1808 to 1836. He found that Islam was regularly addressed in many of the seminaries both positively and negatively. While religious Darwinism existed in the Gilded Age, and Protestantism was understood by many as the pinnacle of spiritual achievement, instruction on Islam was also part of religious education at that time in a number of institutions. In fact, Grafton noted that, before the formation of the modern university system, seminaries were the primary centers for teaching Islam, even before universities. Toward the end of the luncheon, Grafton engaged questions from the audience. One attendee asked if there was backlash in some seminaries when ordered to teach comparative religions, and Grafton noted that opinions were split. Overall, the luncheon offered a rich conversation and gave a picture of how Islam was and is taught in U.S. seminaries.



David Grafton

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For complete information and resources on all of our events, including audio and video recordings, photos, bibliographies, and more, visit our website: www.bc.edu/boisi. Credit for most event photos goes to Christopher Soldt, MTS.

CATHOLICISM REPRESENTED: DEMOCRACY, RELIGION AND GLOBAL HISTORY, 1789-2025

A lecture on the relationship between Catholicism and democracy through the last three centuries.

The inaugural event of the Alfred and Melissa Di Leonardo Lecture Series was a resounding success. Provost John McGreevy, a professor of American history at the University of Notre Dame, captivated the audience with the story of Catholicism's relationship with liberal democracy. At the beginning of the lecture, McGreevy emphasized the complexity of this topic by highlighting the global reach of the Catholic Church and the waning power of nation-states. Whether it be the Nigerian laborers filling the Guangzhou Cathedral in China or the social justice traditions of South America, the Church's universality and diversity is not to be overlooked.

McGreevy began his account of the relationship with the French Revolution. Originally, Catholicism meshed very well with democracy, as priests read constitutions after Mass and congregants wanted a say in who would pastor their parish. Alexis De Tocqueville even described Catholic Americans as the most democratic and republican citizens of the young nation. This changed after the 1848 revolutions, which worried the Catholic Church and led to the seizing of property and attacks on liberal governments. Instead of democracy, Catholics focused on building churches and schools to expand the reach of the Church. Catholic political parties were created in the U.S. to defend the Church from what was perceived as liberal intrusion.

This soft antagonism began to shift during and after World War II. Catholic leaders regretted negotiating with the Nazis to protect Catholics under the Nazi regime, and this sentiment lasted after the war, as well. Jacques Maritain, who was a monarchist at one time, synthesized democracy and Catholicism in his writings, and he even wrote about the democratic tilt that appeared in some of the writings of St. Thomas Aquinas. Maritain influenced the creation of Christian democratic parties around the world, which still hold power in many countries. In Europe, Christian democrats were partly responsible for the quick collapse of communism in places like Poland; in parts of Asia, like the Philippines, Catholics are leading voices in the continued fight for democracy. This legacy has been called into question, however, by certain Catholic responses, or lack thereof, in the United States and in Europe to governments with authoritarian tendencies. Regardless, the Catholic Church has always changed and will continue to change. McGreevy ended his lecture by quoting Pope Francis: "We do not live in an era of change, but a change of era." Another transformation in the Church is coming, and we can only guess



Provost John McGreevy presents the Inaugural Alfred and Melissa Di Leonardo Lecture.

at what shape it will take.

The audience celebrated McGreevy as he finished his brilliant historical account, and they raised a few pertinent questions of their own. One member of the audience raised a question about the roles of capitalism and socialism in Catholic political movements. McGreevy answered by stating that the Church has a history of affirming the value of private property while also being skeptical of the extent to which wealth moves. He cited an example of this in the Irish Jesuits, who urged checks on corporations when drafting the Irish Constitution. Overall, this event set the bar high for future Di Leonardo lectures in the coming years.

A PODCAST CONVERSATION ABOUT CONFLICT RESILIENCE IN A DIVIDED CHURCH, WITH BOB BORDONE

Join us for an engaging conversation between Mark Massa, S.J., and acclaimed conflict expert, Bob Bordone, as they discuss insights from Bordone's recently published book, *Conflict Resilience: Negotiating Disagreement without Giving Up or Giving In*. In the episode, Bordone, a lifelong Catholic, unpacks the ways that these insights might apply to parish life and help us navigate polarization in the Church.

Check out the episode, "Conflict Resilience in a Divided Church," on our [website](#) or by following Religion and American Life [on Podbean](#) or [Apple podcasts](#).

CHRISTIAN ANTIFASCISM IN CHARLOTTESVILLE

Our 22nd Annual Prophetic Voices Lecture discussed the riots and the role of religious leaders in resisting them.

On February 20, 2025, the Boisi Center for Religion and American Public Life welcomed Dr. Eric Martin of Loyola Marymount University to give the 22nd Annual Prophetic Voices Lecture. His talk, “Christian Antifascism in Charlottesville,” reflected on and explored the events at the Unite the Right Rally, a white supremacist rally that took place in Charlottesville, Virginia in 2017.

Martin began by giving the context of the event in Charlottesville, noting that it was the largest white supremacist rally in modern American history. With the election of President Trump as a key motivating and instigating factor, the goal was to bring together in person different white supremacist groups. Members of the rally actively flaunted fascist, racist, and antisemitic views. The rally was met with anti-fascist protesters, many of whom were Christian religious leaders, including Eric Martin himself. In light of his

proximity to the events, Martin’s lecture included both storytelling and theology.

Martin emphasized that Charlottesville was not a one-off event. But in the midst of many hate-motivated gatherings, there are examples of religious leaders gathering for anti-fascist or anti-racist causes. They emphasized to the counter-protestors the uncivil nature of Jesus in the Gospels, encouraging fellow Christians to follow in the steps of Jesus via participation in resisting the hate of the protest. Reverend Osagyefo Sekou also played an important role by leading counter-protestors in combating violence with nonviolence. The group’s goal was to block off the park where the Unite the Right Rally would occur, but a small group was able to get through. At that moment, Sekou began singing – a favorite method for disempowering violence. Many religious and non-religious counter-protestors joined in. Then they actively confronted



Dr. Eric Martin delivering this year’s Prophetic Voices Lecture.

the fascist group by joining together to block the entrance into the park in what Martin called “a sacred offensive.” Overall, Martin’s lecture gave important insight into the theologies and values of those who protested against the Unite the Right Rally, and showed how their faith formed their responses to injustice.

A CONVERSATION WITH BC HOCKEY COACH GREG BROWN

Coach Brown joined Mark Massa, S.J. for an interview about hockey, Boston College, and Jesuit culture.



Mark Massa, S.J. (left) interviews Coach Greg Brown

On February 18, 2025, Boston College hockey coach Greg Brown discussed faith, hockey, and leadership with the center’s director, Mark Massa, S.J. The conversation covered many different topics, including the importance of the hockey team chaplain, Fr. Tony Penna. When asked about the role of faith for the team, Brown pointed to the frequent con-

versations his players have with Fr. Penna, noting that the players never miss their meetings with him. Brown even called Fr. Penna the team’s “secret weapon.” While Brown is not at these spiritual guidance meetings, he observes their grounding impact on his team and the importance of players reflecting and learning to grow as people. Throughout the conversation,

Brown referenced the importance of who these players are off the ice and the character he aims to instill in them once they no longer play hockey. One audience member asked what core values he wants his players to have, and Brown answered with “humility” and “empathy.”

Brown was also asked about how he supports his players, given that so many of them enter the professional league

before graduating. He emphasized the importance of being there for his players regardless of their chosen paths. With many players leaving early, Brown said it is essential to have leaders on the team, which includes players who are excited to share their experiences with younger teammates and help the team win. He also talked about the importance of education for his players and the challenges of balancing hockey with academics.

When asked about handling tough losses, Brown noted that he tries to remember that his players are kids and not machines. They did well if they did their best. He left us with a few wise words about this: “When you know you did everything you could, you can sleep at night.” This was in response to a question about the loss in the National Championship game last year, but it offers insight into who Coach Brown is beyond hockey.

RUSSIA'S WAR AGAINST THE WEST

Ambassador John Sullivan gave the first lecture of the semester about Russia's relationship with Western nations.



Ambassador John Sullivan speaking at the podium during his lecture.

As students and faculty packed into the 4th floor Yawkey Center event space, Boston-area native John Sullivan spoke about his personal experiences and beliefs regarding the war that is currently ravaging Russia and Ukraine. While Sullivan's experiences as Ambassador to Russia, Deputy Secretary of State, and Distinguished Fellow at Georgetown and Columbia offer many stories, he began by talking about his childhood fascination with Soviet hockey. His hockey fandom soon transformed into a love of the Russian people, Russian culture, and Russian history. By prefacing the main portion of the event with these facts, he established that his concerns were not with all Russians, but with Putin and his aggressive regime.

From a legal perspective, Sullivan argued that Putin's attempt to gain absolute control over Russia and Ukraine mirrors the efforts by Hitler in Germany during the Second World War. Putin's career in the KGB saw

the Soviet defeat in the Cold War, much like how Hitler witnessed Germany's defeat in World War I. The beliefs of both dictators are marked by ideals around phony borders, sham diplomacy, dehumanizing their targets, and extreme defensiveness. This comparison segued into a brief biography of Putin and his goals for domination over Ukraine and possibly other countries. Putin was a career KGB man who felt

the losses from the Cold War and what he believed to be betrayal by communists. As a Russian Nationalist, he extends his conception of Russia to include Ukraine and Belarus, both of which he believes are part of the true Russia. Belarus has fallen under his will, and he has propagated the myth that Ukraine is genociding ethnic Russians and Russian culture, even though the International Court of Justice has found no evidence of this.

Rather than acknowledge the truth that Eastern European countries are looking to join the West (the U.S. and Europe) in NATO, Putin relentlessly claims that NATO is conquering Eastern European territory unjustly. Sullivan believes that the United States is in a form of war with Russia already, as Russia believes that in its attack on Ukraine, it is also fighting the U.S. as a supporter of Ukraine. Sullivan noted that he is confident that actions will be taken on American soil to impede America's defense of Ukraine. Putin already revealed that he is willing to murder opponents in foreign countries when he sent assassins to Berlin and Salisbury. Although Sullivan deeply desires a peaceful end to this conflict, he firmly maintains that there is no good faith negotiating with Vladimir Putin. The event wrapped up with an engaging Q&A, and Sullivan reiterating that his love of the Russian people remains.



Ambassador John Sullivan delivers his lecture in front of a packed audience.

TAKE ME TO THE WATER:

BLACK MADONNAS AND THE INITIATION OF POSSIBILITY

Adkins-Jones presented content from her recently-published book, *Immaculate Misconceptions: A Black Mariology*.



Dr. Amey Victoria Adkins-Jones

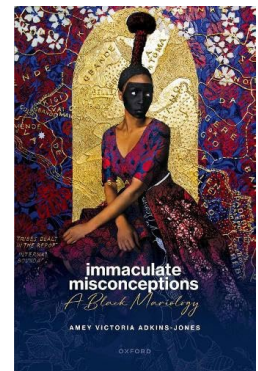
On March 26, 2025, the Boisi Center for Religion and American Public Life welcomed Dr. Amey Victoria Adkins-Jones for a luncheon colloquium titled “Take Me to the Water: Black Madonnas and the Initiation of Possibility.” The conversation was inspired by her recently published book, *Immaculate Misconceptions: A Black Mariology* (Oxford University Press, 2025).

Dr. Adkins-Jones started her presentation by playing a 1969 recording of Nia Simone singing “Take Me to the Water”; the music brought to life the importance of creating joy amid the darkness of grief. Ad-

kins-Jones then gave a brief history of the Black Madonna. Noting that Brazil was home to more African slaves than any other country in the Americas, she told the story of two fishermen in Sao Paulo, Brazil who were failing to catch any fish. After a desperate prayer to Our Lady of the Immaculate Conception, they cast out one more net and pulled in a statue of the Madonna, blackened by the water, amongst an abundance of fish.

Adkins-Jones then shifted to discussing her book, which argues for the power of reimagining the Virgin Mary in a way that expands beyond her typical portrayal as a white idol. She argues that reimagining Mary can be a way to examine different injustices, specifically violence against Black bodies, and Black mothers, in particular. Noting that many of the four hundred Black Madonnas around the world were not initially made Black, Adkins-Jones emphasized the imaginative importance of their transformation. Many people gain value through Mary’s Blackness, but others argue that claiming her Blackness is an issue – a claim

that ties into the perception that Black is impure. In the face of these harmful perceptions, the Black Madonna is a place in which the sacredness of Black femininity and Black motherhood can be uplifted and realized. Adkins-Jones connected and contrasted this to the experiences of many Black mothers in America who have lost their children to racial violence, who can find solidarity in the experience of the Black Madonna as mother of a murdered child. Overall, Adkins-Jones’ colloquium offered a rich discussion that highlighted the theological and social implications of reimagining Mary as Black.



The cover of Dr. Adkins-Jones’ book

CELEBRATING 25 YEARS AT THE BOISI CENTER

The Center’s Administrative Assistant, Susan Richard, offers her reflections on being at the Center for 25 years.



*The Boisi Center’s
Administrative Assistant,
Susan Richard*

I began my journey to Boston College from Boston University, along with Dr. Alan Wolfe, to assist in establishing The Boisi Center for Religion and American Public Life back in September of 1999. So much has changed over the years. Back then, our biggest threat was Y2K! Since then, the American political and religious landscape has been altered significantly. Among other things, we’ve lived and worked through a pandemic and adapted to many significant advances in technology.

From a more personal perspective, Boston College has been an amazing place to work and I’ve always felt supported here, especially when it comes to my family and my education. Spending the last thirty years with my husband has been extraordinary. Raising our children to be conscientious citizens has been a blessing and a challenge. Having grandchildren is the next level of joy — a fabulous gift. Personally, taking advantage of BC’s tuition remission benefit was one of the best decisions I made, as I love to learn. In 2022, I earned my Master’s degree in Leadership and Administration with a specialization in Executive Leadership and Organizational Development from the Woods College of Advancing Studies.

I’ve had the privilege of learning from the many speakers we’ve hosted throughout the years. In particular, we have had panels, lectures, and luncheons discussing the three popes that have reigned during my time at BC, and now I look forward to learning more about Pope Pius XIV in future events. While I won’t be working here for another twenty-five years, I do look forward to engaging and learning from our future guests in the years to come!

CATHOLIC FUNDAMENTALISM IN AMERICA

A panel of experts gathered to share their reviews of Mark Massa's newest book.

After an eventful semester, the Boisi Center's evening lectures culminated with a panel discussing Boisi Center director Mark Massa's newest book, *Catholic Fundamentalism in America* (Oxford University Press, 2025). Members of the Boston College community flocked to this thought-provoking and engaging event. The panel, which was moderated by James Keenan, S.J. (the Vice Provost for Global Engagement, Canisius Professor, and director of The Jesuit Institute), welcomed Randall Balmer, the John Phillips Chair in Religion at Dartmouth College; M. Cathleen Kaveny, the Darald and Juliet Libby Professor at the Law School and Theology Department of Boston College; and James O'Toole, the Charles I. Clough Professor of History Emeritus and University Historian of Boston College, to engage with Mark Massa, S.J. about his novel characterization of Catholic Fundamentalism.

After introductions, the panelists shared their initial impressions of the book. While they each brought in their own perspectives relevant to their respective fields, many commonalities were expressed by the panelists. Each participant in the panel mentioned how much they learned from this book, which dove more deeply into the history of familiar characters and ideas. While they had heard of figures like Mother Angelica, Leonard Feeney, and Gommar DePauw,

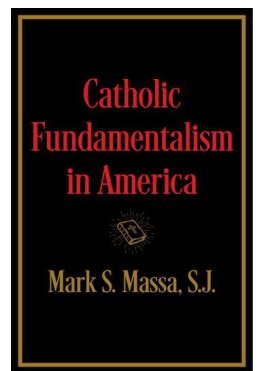


(R to L) Panelists M. Cathleen Kaveny, Mark Massa, S.J., Randall Balmer, and moderator, James Keenan, S.J. offer their comments.

they expressed awe at the new connections made and insights shared by Massa. Balmer asked about Massa's decision to use the term "fundamentalist" to describe these related groups of people, and noted his astute observation that controlling women seems to be a shared fundamentalist practice. Kaveny pointed out the vast differences between these fundamentalists and the Magisterium and wondered what can be done about the two diverging paradigms in relation to dialogue and synodality, especially for Catholic ethicists like herself. O'Toole thought about the larger social, political, and historical contexts when reading the book and noticed the interplay of religion and political forces that sparked these fringe impulses. The esteemed panelists continued the conversation by providing insights into the role of women in these movements, the role of exposure to non-Catholic spaces, and other topics that shed light on some of the larger problems posed by the fundamentalist spirit in our country. Before Massa began responding to the panel, Keenan offered his own comment about the significance of this text, as it seems as though the author may have just

given these groups their genealogy.

The quick wit of Massa was evident when he began his response by noting that, because of this book, he had been denounced by all the right people. Aside from discussing some of the methodological issues when completing his work, he clarified some blurred lines between fundamentalists and other Catholics by listing sectarianism, primitivism, apocalypticism, and other criteria that define this specific impulse. He noted that those who cling to these ideas may be misguided, but nonetheless, the ideas hold power in the minds of many and should be taken seriously. The event closed with a diverse array of questions from BC alumni, faculty, staff, students, and Jesuits. As always, we hope that the success of this event and others can drive the mission of the Boisi Center and spark future conversations that explore the intersection of religion and American public life.



Massa's book cover



Panelist James O'Toole holds up a Feeneyite book he discovered in his childhood home.

ACCESSING THE DIVINE: RELIGIOUS SOURCES OF RESILIENCE IN AN AGE OF POLITICAL TURMOIL

The 5th Annual Graduate Student conference explored sources of resilience for our era of unrest.

On April 5, 2025, the Boisi Center hosted its 5th Annual Graduate Student Conference. This year's conference, which was co-hosted with the Boston Theological Interreligious Consortium, was titled, "Accessing the Divine: Religious Sources of Resilience in an Age of Political Turmoil." Sixteen graduate students from around the country were selected to present their research at the conference. Each presentation lasted around twenty minutes, with a period built in for questions from the audience, which was composed of other students, professors, and interested guests. A hallmark of the event was the religious diversity of the presentations, with Christianity, Islam, Hinduism, and Buddhism all represented. Presenters also came from a wide variety of universities, including Boston College, Notre Dame, Hellenic College Holy Cross, Boston University, Marquette University, the Jesuit School of Theology at Santa Clara University, Harvard Divinity School, Hartford International University, and Princeton Theological Seminary.

In addition to traditional paper presentations, some students presented workshops or art displays. For example, Brother John Baptist Santa Ana presented a stunning portrait series he drew of various spiritual leaders who embodied resilience amidst



Lauren Tassone presents on the artwork of Sister Corita Kent.

political turmoil. Mary Mueller presented her sculpture, "Bleed, Burn, and Bloom," which was inspired by the fragility, tenderness, and resilience of the human heart. There were shared themes among many of the paper presentations. For example, Hayden Shaw and Jack Englemann engaged in interreligious dialogue as they discussed interfaith leadership. Other common themes were the power of mediation in Christian, Hindu, and Buddhist traditions. After the presentations concluded, two workshops took place. Molly Snakenberg led an activity entitled, "Creativity Builds Resilience," in which she talked about the power of creativity for finding calmness, and attendees painted their own works inspired

by conference themes. The other workshop, "Revive the Inner Leader: Recharge the Self with Resilience, Healing, and Empowerment in Chaotic Times," was a meditation session led by Sudarshan Sundar of Harvard Divinity School.

The day ended with an award ceremony. One prize was publication in *America Magazine*, and the other was one thousand dollars. Wing Yin Li

of Princeton Theological Seminary won the cash prize sponsored by the Boston Theological Interreligious Consortium for her presentation, "A Transcendent Interdependence: Syncretic Shinto-Buddhism and Resilience in Minamata Disease Tragedy." Lauren Tassone of Harvard University, whose paper was titled, "Unveiling Political Resilience: The Life and Serigraphy of Sister Corita Kent," won the publication award, and her paper will be featured in an upcoming issue of *America Magazine*. The Graduate Student Conference could not have run without the help of many in the community, and was a success in bringing many voices together to revitalize our sense of resilience in our time of turmoil.

MUSLIM AND CATHOLIC EXPERIENCES OF NATIONAL BELONGING IN FRANCE

Dr. Carol Ferrara presented at the final luncheon colloquium of the semester.



Carol Ferrara

On April 10, 2025, Dr. Carol Ferrara of Emerson College offered the final luncheon colloquium of the semester. She started her presentation by giving an introduction to the French education system and the availability of government subsidies for religious education. While embracing secularism, the government does fund particular religious schools. Catholic schools are widely-funded throughout the country, but Ferrara noted that Muslim schools tend to be much more difficult to open and operate with government funding, as they have struggled to receive the same subsidies that their Christian counterparts received. In recent decades, many Muslim schools (which include some of the best schools in the country) have lost their government funding and have struggled to sustain their operations. While Muslim schools struggle to stay open, highly conservative Catholic schools (including those run by the Society of Saint Pius X, which has been officially condemned by the Vatican) thrive. She connected this to broader trends in France, which tends to see itself as a highly secular country. Nevertheless, the French national imaginary maintains a contradictory sense of its identity in Catholicism, even though the Catholic

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ENSLAVED TO THE JESUITS: WHAT WOMEN OF THE FIRST U.S. DIOCESE CAN TELL US ABOUT WOMEN IN THE CHURCH

Dr. Jeannine Hill Fletcher explored the role enslaved women played in the early American Catholic Church.

Dr. Jeannine Hill Fletcher, professor of theology at Fordham University, set a high bar as the inaugural presenter in the Nancy Marzella Lecture Series on Women and American Catholicism. The event kicked off with Hill Fletcher's son, Owen, introducing the renowned theologian who he calls mom. Hill Fletcher's research seeks to uncover the earliest accounts of Catholic women in the United States, and her lecture focused on the story of one woman in particular, Nelly Mahoney, a Black woman enslaved to the Jesuits in Maryland.

Hill Fletcher emphasized that Nelly's story is not just the story of one of the first 35,000 Catholics in the nation, but also an incredibly important part of how women can begin to be viewed as shapers of Catholic history. Women were partners in the work of the Church, and the male-centered narrative that is often told does not account for this. By taking a critical account of different histories (including that of Nelly) and by reading the writings and silences of the Jesuits, the stories of the past can be more accurately reconstructed.

Though Catholics dominated the early history of the Province of Maryland, Baltimore and the surrounding areas became much more Protestant over time and would no longer allow for the indentured servants on which the Jesuits

relied. The Order then turned to slavery and eventually, the Jesuits operated plantations that were over 1,000 acres large and owned hundreds of enslaved people. Nelly was one of them. During her enslavement, she served as a sacristan at St. Inigoes parish and showed creativity in tending to the holy work of the Church. Nelly is recorded as being an intelligent and religious woman. In a world that denied her humanity, she affirmed it through faith, prayer, and involvement in her parish community.

By the mid-1830's, slavery became less profitable for the Jesuits, and they shifted resources away from plantations to Georgetown. The modern university secured its protection by profiting off the sale of enslaved people to Louisiana. Many of Nelly's family members were unwillingly part of this deal. Nelly serves as a center point of debate between Jesuits about the sale. She was present during some of these discussions and even debated with select Jesuits about the morality of the sale.

Nelly's story serves as an example of the way the histories of these enslaved



Dr. Jeannine Hill Fletcher delivers the inaugural Marzella Lecture.

women can be told, and it represents the beginning of the story of women in the American Catholic Church. The narrow scope of Church history can be expanded and modern issues can be addressed more fully with accounts like these. In her lecture and the engaging Q&A, Hill Fletcher left the audience with this message: a history that erases theft of life and wealth is unacceptable, and it implies that some Catholics are more valuable than others. A full history is needed to continue repairing the damage caused centuries ago. She remains hopeful that Nelly's story will become one of many that uncover the important role that women have played in shaping the American Catholic Church.

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population is decreasing. This is true despite increasing Muslim populations. For some French people, Muslims remain outside of what it means to be "truly French," leading to many forms of anti-Muslim discrimination.

Ferrara shared anecdotes from her field research in France that demonstrated these dynamics. She told the story of Aisha, a young girl from the 93rd in Paris, a predominantly Muslim area, who struggled to find belonging in college. Despite having been reassured that she would fit in and be accepted in her school, Aisha felt marginalized due to her Muslim faith and felt that she was consistently treated as if she were "not actually French." For Aisha, French culture meant enforced uniformity, and her goal is to move out of France as soon as she is able. Ferrara argued that France must decolonize culturally in order to move beyond these harmful constructs and biases that continue to impact people like Aisha. After her presentation the audience asked a number of questions about the role of pluralism, Catholic spaces in France, and the place of Jews in France. Overall, Ferrara's presentation highlighted the complex interplay between religion and national identity in France.

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theological challenge in the 21st century, to Derek Thompson's study of the "epidemic of loneliness" sweeping U.S. culture ("The Anti-Social Century") and Jason Blakely's critique of ideology in the academy and U.S. popular culture more generally (*Lost in Ideology*). The conversations on these important but complex texts were always lively and informed but friendly and cordial. It was not uncommon for me to walk home after one of our seminar meetings realizing that I changed my mind about an argument presented by one of the texts we had discussed as a result of our conversation. I enjoyed every minute of those seminar meetings, and my sense is that my very smart colleagues did as well.

Stay tuned.

~ Mark Massa, S.J.

WHAT'S NEXT FOR THE BOISI CENTER'S 2024-25 UNDERGRADUATE RESEARCH FELLOWS?

After graduation, Joey Monti will be playing golf everyday back home in Connecticut before spending the next three years nearby at Boston College Law School, hopeful that he can continue his relationship with the Center.



Liam Adamczyk will graduate with a Bachelor of Arts in History while minoring in Religion and Public Life and Jewish Studies. Upon graduating, Liam will stay in Boston and take a gap year before law school. He will use that time to study for the LSAT and get hands-on legal sector experience. He will spend his free time with family and friends and looks forward to staying connected to the Boston College community.



FALL 2025 EVENTS

The Boisi Center is committed to creating opportunities where scholars, policy makers, media, religious leaders, and the community can connect in conversation and scholarly reflection around issues at the intersection of religion and American public life. We at the Boisi Center are hard at work planning a fantastic fall 2025 schedule of events.

Please keep in touch with us and look for an announcement about the schedule in late summer/early fall.