

BOISI CENTER INTERVIEWS



NO. 109: SEPTEMBER 16, 2015



PHILIP GORSKI is professor of sociology and religious studies at Yale University. His research focuses on secularization, nationalism and the interaction of religion and politics in the United States. He spoke with Boisi Center program coordinator **Suzanne Hevelone** and graduate research assistant **Kyle Logan** before his presentation on the American tradition of civil religion at the Boisi Center.

LOGAN: Your early work is all on early modern Europe, but your forthcoming book, *A Republic of Prophets: Civil Religion and Culture Wars from Winthrop to Obama*, is on modern America. Why that switch?

GORSKI: I guess two things happened. The first was that I set out to write a book that would have been a comparative study of secularization in the United States and a number of different western European countries. I was gearing up to write that book and doing background reading on American religious history that was already on my mind. Then along came 2007 and the Obama campaign, and I suddenly felt like maybe I could actually make some sort of a public intervention.

I convinced myself at some point that I would write this book in a year. That was the way that I persuaded myself. I think I probably did know better. I certainly should have. But it just felt like the right thing to do at that time. I was at the point in my life and in my career where I wanted to do some scholarship that might possibly engage with the wider public, or at least speak to public questions.

HEVELONE: You talk about American civil religion, a type of prophetic republicanism, as being a middle tradition between liberal secularism and religious nationalism. Please talk a little more

about that prophetic nature of it in the United States and how you see it evolving – particularly in light of Obama’s response to the massacre in Charleston and the eulogy he gave there for Rev. Pinckney.



GORSKI: The first thing to say is that I draw a pretty sharp distinction between prophetic religion and prophecy belief. Often when I mention prophetic religion in a public setting, people imagine that I’m thinking about *Left Behind* and the end times. Of course, I’m not. I’m thinking about this very different tradition, which is basically transplanted onto American soil by the Puritans and be-

comes part of America’s broader religious culture. You can still find the influence of this even within secular progressives of various kinds, particularly in its more public forms. But certainly the central values that most secular progressives would hold up – freedom and equality are one set – have their historical roots in the Judeo-Christian tradition. Not solely, but importantly in the United States.

One of the crucial changes that has happened is the degree to which the idea of prophecy and prophetic religion really has come to be equated in the public mind with various forms of apocalypticism. That is a rather fateful turn. It was something that was always possible. You can find foreshadowings of it already in the late 17th century. But I don’t think it really reaches full bloom until probably the 1920s or 1930s, as pre-millennial apocalypticism, via Pentecostalism and evangelicalism, becomes really central to the way many American Christians understand Christian orthodoxy. That is an unfortunate turn of events.

But I don’t think that the prophetic tradition is by any means gone. It lives on in other currents of American Christianity, such as in certain parts of secular progressivism. Someone like Obama understands this at a very deep level and is able to touch on it. It was quite stunning, that Charleston eulogy, to see the uniform

praise that this very explicitly – basically a eulogy in a kind of black homiletic style – just moved so many secular Americans so deeply. I think that shows the way in which our civic poetry still is written in a kind of King James, Old Testament language. There are some public figures that know that, understand that and are able to summon that, and others who think that they have to stay away from it, unfortunately.

LOGAN: You write about Martin Luther King and the way that the Civil Rights Movement used the civil religious language and tradition. We were curious whether you think the Black Lives Matter Movement at this time can use that language and that tradition to their benefit, if at all.

GORSKI: That really is an important question. I haven't been following this movement quite as closely as I probably should have been. I've been busy working on other things. But I do think you see the same tension that you saw in the Civil Rights Era between a separationist, black nationalist understanding, and then there's another understanding more in the Martin King tradition, which seeks to reclaim certain central American values as a way of making their case. Myself, I'd much prefer the latter. The country is already so diverse, it has to have some kind of integrating language or tradition if it's to remain viable politically.

HEVELONE: I'm curious about your choice of exemplars in your book. It's an interesting group of people that you've chosen to represent the American civil religion tradition. I wondered if you'd speak about how you picked them, and then also how race plays into that. Clearly, race is an underlying concern within prophetic republicanism. I'm also curious how gender and also sexual identity might play into that as well.

GORSKI: I don't want to make it sound like it was more systematic as it was. My point wasn't really to do an exhaustive intellectual history of the civil religious

tradition where I would really have to catalogue all of the voices. The theme of the book was much more modest than that. It was really just to show that there really is this tradition, that you can see it being recuperated and elaborated by successive generations of people. In that sense, I was left with quite a bit of latitude, and

“The [American civil religion] tradition included an increasing range and diversity of voices, so what began as a relatively narrow Reformed Protestant project gradually expanded to include Catholic, Jew, female, as well as ... a wide range of African American voices.”

frankly often just gravitated towards the people who spoke to me.

The other thing I wanted to show was that over time, the tradition included an increasing range and diversity of voices, so what began as a relatively narrow Reformed Protestant project gradually ex-

panded to include Catholic, Jew, female, as well as – and of course, at least from Frederick Douglass on – a wide range of African-American voices. In many ways, the Black Church and the African-American community have been probably the most important carrier of the prophetic thread of this tradition, and frankly probably remain so even today, as evidenced in some of these recent events.

Regarding the debate about gender, I'm trying to show that there are both progressive and secular voices, such as Hannah Arendt, for whom gender was a central concern.

On sexual identity, I think that's something that's playing out right now. Maybe as I'm looking back 15 or 20 years from now, I'll be able to say something more about that, about who the critical figures are. But I think it would be fair to say that the movement, for example for gay marriage, has been centrally premised on the idea of equality and the values of civic inclusion. Those are classically civil religious values, in my view. I can see how you would work that into the story. I just don't know yet who the key figures are.

LOGAN: Do you think there are any candidates that are firmly within the civil religious tradition? We wanted to ask specifically about Bernie Sanders, because he's Jewish, but a few days ago he spoke at Liberty University. He's trying to speak to multiple different groups using this language of the Bible and how it influences our moral values and things of that nature.

GORSKI: I certainly did see that headline about Sanders visiting Liberty, which I think is a good and courageous thing to do. It made me think back. Actually, Rick Santorum came and visited the Yale Political Union during the last campaign, which impressed me in that way, too. He was willing and able to engage with an audience that was mostly quite hostile, as you can well imagine, and did that in a civil way, even though there were real



disagreements – also quite impressive. So there’s hope. There’s hope.

LOGAN: We wanted to ask if the way you work is project to project. If so what’s up next?

GORSKI: I’m doing this completely different topic. But I have a grant about rethinking the philosophical foundations of the social sciences. It’s a three-year project. It’s conferences and seminars, as well as writing. The first big cycle of events was in August, and that will

continue for a couple of years. I expect that’s going to consume a lot of my time over the next couple of years. But I have thought about some sort of direct follow-on project from this, too. It depends a little bit on whether it has any kind of public resonance or not.

One thing, which is certainly relevant to your concerns here, is trying to think about how social science can be publicly relevant again. In part, that for me at least involves questioning the idea of the axiological neutrality of the social

sciences, the idea that the social sciences have to be value-free or that there’s some sharp distinction between fact and value. But on the other hand, not simply turning social science research into a vehicle for some set of commitment that you already have that are going to be completely off the table and unquestionable in the course of your research.

I my current thinking about this is that the key bridging concepts are human well-being and the common good. If we are the sorts of animals or creatures that we are, we are going to flourish or falter depending on how our lives go well or badly. And how our lives go well or badly partly has to do with the social context that we live in, the relationships we have, the kind of resources and affordances that come our way. Those, again, are questions that can’t be adjudicated in a final way by the social sciences, and shouldn’t be, but they’re nonetheless questions in which social sciences can help contribute to broader public conversation. That’s one very important piece of it that is relevant to the work here.

[END]



Visit bc.edu/boisi-resources for a complete set of the **Boisi Center Interviews** and audio, video, photographs and transcripts from our events.

The Boisi Center
for Religion and
American Public Life

Boston College
24 Quincy Road
Chestnut Hill, MA 02467

tel 617-552-1860
fax 617-552-1863
boisi.center@bc.edu

 [boisicenter](https://www.facebook.com/boisicenter)

 [@boisi_center](https://twitter.com/boisi_center)

 [@boisi_center](https://www.instagram.com/boisi_center)