

The BOISI CENTER Report

Vol. 1 No. 1 The Boisi Center for Religion and American Public Life December 2000

[back](#)

Table of Contents

From the Director

Boisi Center Kicks off the Year with E.J. Dionne and David Brooks on Election 2000

Dr. Sherwin Nuland Discusses "Dying Well"

Michelle Dillon Discusses Catholic Identity

Center to Hold Conference on the Moral and Normative Aspects of School Choice

Alan Wolfe Addresses Anti-Defamation League Conference in New York

Boisi Center Staff

From the Director

Now that we at the Boisi Center are halfway through our first real year of activity, I wanted to share some thoughts on our undertaking. The Boisi Center for Religion and American Public Life was created to help fill the gap between the obvious importance of religion in American life and the relative neglect of religion as a serious subject of study in the modern academy. Boston College has been the perfect venue for this undertaking. The Jesuit tradition of religious commitment and humanistic scholarship creates an atmosphere in which social scientists need not confine their attention to what C. Wright Mills once called abstract empiricism. We are rather encouraged to address real world issues in ways sensitive to the meaning-producing capacities of human beings.

The way we hope to address such issues was illustrated during one week in November. On a Tuesday night, we co-sponsored a meeting in Boston featuring two physicians, Jerome Groopman and Sherwin Nuland, both of whom spoke about the role faith (or the lack of it) played in their medical experience. That same week, on Thursday night, two Washington journalists, E. J. Dionne and David Brooks, shared their thoughts on the 2000 election, particularly the role that that religion played in deciding its outcome (or lack of one). These events illustrate the kinds of activities that we believe can enrich the life of Boston College, the city of Boston, and the nation.

We also will sponsor, as the core of our program for spring 2001, a conference devoted to the question of whether it is proper for government to provide direct aid for parents to enable them to choose the appropriate education for their children. Issues involving school choice have generated a flurry of controversy, but much of it has been confined to measurement issues: does school performance improve when school choice is allowed? Does school choice siphon off support for public schools? Does it make a difference in educational effectiveness if the private schools supported are religious or not? We hope, by contrast, to address some of the normative, theological, and philosophical questions raised by school choice: Should society have common schools to help achieve a common morality? For which

institutions is choice appropriate and for which institutions is it not? Can choice and authority be reconciled? Is choice in conflict with equality? To help address these issues, we have invited a number of distinguished scholars to come to Boston College on March 9 and 10 to share their thoughts, including Amy Gutmann, Richard Mouw, Sanford Levinson, Martha Minow, Nancy Rosenblum, and Glenn Loury.

In addition to these highly public events, the Boisi Center is sponsoring a course on economic freedom, social justice, and religious liberty; a College-wide prize for the best paper on religion and public life written by an undergraduate and a graduate student; a series of "author meets critics" discussions; semi-monthly lunch colloquia with Christopher Winship, Kay Schlozman, and Sidney Verba; and a Templeton lecture series including Judge John Noonan, Lord Robert Skidelsky, and Professor Seymour Martin Lipset.

It has been an exciting year so far and it looks like it will be an even more exciting spring. Speaking only for myself, I feel that I have learned a tremendous amount from my colleagues at Boston College and from the visitors we have invited. I hope that what I have learned will show up in various things I write, including my book [*Moral Freedom: The Search for Virtue in a World of Choice*](#), which will be out in April 2001 from W. W. Norton.

I hope that those of you in the Boston area – indeed anywhere in the country – will be able to come and visit the Boisi Center and to share in our activities. Already I can feel that the gap between religion as it is practiced and religion as it is studied is beginning to close.

~ Alan Wolfe

[Return to Table of Contents](#)

Boisi Center Kicks off the Year with E.J. Dionne and David Brooks on Election 2000

The Boisi Center inaugurated its series of Templeton Lectures on November 16 with a panel by David Brooks and E. J. Dionne, moderated by Alan Wolfe on "Religion and the 2000 Election." Brooks, a senior editor at the *Weekly Standard*, and Dionne, a columnist for the *Washington Post* and Fellow at the Brookings Institute, offered analysis of the election results and thoughts about future trends in American politics.

Wolfe began the discussion by asking both men what they thought the election said about America today. Brooks argued that, while American politics is divided, divided, the country itself is not, and this is a sign of the increasing distance between the political class and the rest of Americans. One factor contributing to this this division is the saturation of politics by interest groups: he noted that this was the first election in which soft money contributions surpassed hard money contributions.

Dionne argued that "America is sharply but not deeply divided." There were clear divisions on social issues, but the debate over the size and role of the federal government is perhaps the most significant. While Bush took the position of Ronald Reagan arguing for smaller government, Gore claimed that it was now possible for the government to be more active. "This is a more important election than we think," he said, as "the country hasn't made up its mind which direction it wants to go." Dionne noted that in the past the Democrats wanted to look like Republicans, whereas in this election the reverse was true, and he suggested that this may be a sign of things to come.

When asked about the impact of the Clinton scandals and the influence of moral issues in general, Dionne remarked that church-goers tended to favor Bush. While moral issues played a role, the sex scandals related to the Clinton presidency did not hurt Gore directly. But they did exacerbate Gore's own credibility problems, which Bush highlighted in the first debate.



From left to right: E.J. Dionne, Joseph Quinn, Alan Wolfe, and David Brooks at the Election 2000 Panel

Brooks argued that Republican politicians were unsure how to play the moral issues. McCain and Bush responded to the Clinton scandals almost anti-religiously with an appeal to a very vague, secular notion of virtue. The McCain attacks on Falwell and Robertson did not go over very well with the rank and file of the Republican party: "While ninety percent may have agreed with the substance of the attacks," Brooks argued, "they didn't like the fact that the attacks came from someone so secular."

When asked specifically about the fate of the Religious Right and New Democrats, both Brooks and Dionne agreed that their influence was greatly diminishing. On the Republican side, organizational problems have led to an overall weakening of the religious conservatives. In particular, increasing affluence has softened the most hard-core activists, Brooks claimed, and as a result they make up a much smaller percent of the religious right. In addition, the religious right has become less libertarian. The Democratic party has rejected the New Democrats, Brooks said, and it was the more liberal side of the party which supported Clinton and asserted its influence during the impeachment process. Gore's quasi-populist campaign, moreover, proved more effective than many thought. Dionne argued that Clinton was never really a New Democrat, but rather he appealed to moderates in order to add new voters to the Democratic base. Conversely, Gore's populism is rather moderate, with attacks limited to drug companies, HMOs, and polluters among others. Both speakers agreed that the American political spectrum is shifting to the left.

At the end of the evening Alan Wolfe thanked the panelists for offering students at Boston College a wonderful opportunity to hear their insights and reflections at a time when the election was still undetermined. Earlier in the evening, Dionne had also met with students from the course co-taught by Wolfe, Dean Joseph Quinn, and Professor Marc Landy titled "Economic Freedom, Religious Freedom and Social Justice."

[Return to Table of Contents](#)

[Dr. Sherwin Nuland Discusses "Dying Well"](#)

On November 14, 2000, the Boisi Center hosted an interdisciplinary faculty roundtable discussion with Sherwin B. Nuland, clinical professor of surgery at Yale Yale School of Medicine and author of *How We Die: Reflections on Life's Final Chapter* (Knopf, 1994; National Book Award Winner, 1995).

The discussion group included faculty from Boston College's law school, school of social work, school of nursing, theology department and Center for Ignatian Ignatian Spirituality as well as Christine Mitchell, director of the office of ethics at Boston Children's Hospital. They discussed how their professions view what it what it means to "die well," as well as the complex issues that arise in one's experience as patient, doctor, caregiver and family member.

The discussion centered around questions such as who possesses the authority to determine how we die, how and when quality of life concerns counterbalance counterbalance (research) interests in keeping a patient alive at all costs, and how the economics of health care affects end of life decision making. Discussants Discussants offered both personal accounts of accompanying loved ones through end of life decisions as well as professional perspectives on the subject. They also They also talked about the social changes in recent history in terms of doctor-patient relationships and approaches to fatal illness: from a basic paternalism, to an to an increased emphasis on autonomy and informed consent, to a recent shift toward an ethics of care, with a more contextual understanding of how responsibility responsibility is shared.

Dr. Nuland's discussion at the Boisi Center was part of the first annual symposium on belief and non-belief held at Boston's Copley Theater later that evening. The evening. The symposium featured Dr. Nuland along with Dr. Jerome Groopman, professor of medicine at Harvard Medical School and author of *The Measure of Measure of Our Days: A Spiritual Exploration of Illness*. The symposium, sponsored by Boston College and cosponsored by *The Atlantic Monthly*, addressed the the ways in which issues involving religious belief or non-belief and divergent understandings of the meaning of life intersect with medical decisions.

[Return to Table of Contents](#)

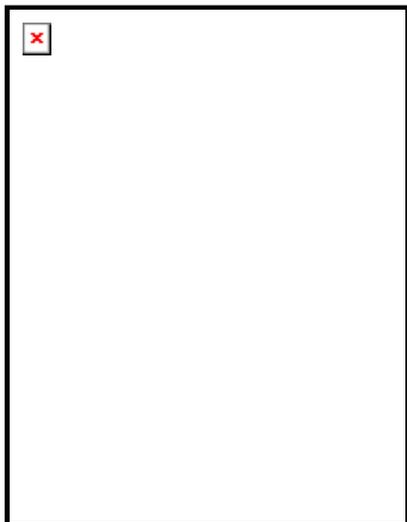
Michele Dillon discusses Catholic Identity

How do so many Catholics who actively dissent from specific teachings remain active members of their Church? What resources do they draw upon to sustain sustain their Catholic identity and commitment? Michele Dillon, associate professor of sociology at Yale University, discussed these questions in a luncheon colloquium at the Boisi Center on October 30, 2000. Commenting on her presentation were Professor Lisa Cahill of the Theology Department, and Professor Lynn Professor Lynn Davidman, Visiting Scholar at the Boisi Center and professor in Judaic Studies, American Civilization, and Women Studies at Brown University. University.

Dillon's research, which is reported in her book, *Catholic Identity: Balancing Reason, Faith and Power* (Cambridge University Press, 1999), draws upon interviews interviews with Catholics who are openly gay or lesbian, advocates of women's ordination, and pro-choice activists, to explore how they remain actively committed committed to the Church while rejecting Vatican teachings.

Dillon discussed how these dissenters remain deliberately and self-consciously engaged with Catholicism and draw upon strains of thought from within the Catholic Catholic tradition to legitimate their dissent. Their emphasis on the importance of community, doctrinal reflexivity, reasoned theology, and pluralism allow them to them to sustain an identity within the Catholic tradition, but disagree with Vatican statements. Looking at the history of doctrine, they see ambiguities and discontinuities within the unfolding tradition. This method of "doctrinal reflexivity," using previous changes as an opening to argue for new ones, Dillon found found "very powerful."

Dillon also commented on the possibilities for common ground between liberals and conservatives. She pointed to the divisions among those on the left and noted that, while each group disagrees with some church doctrines, there is often agreement on others. Finally, she remarked that, despite the official opposition of the Catholic League, surveys show that thirty percent of the members think that some positive effects would come from women's ordination.



Dillon discussed how dissenters remain deliberately and self-consciously engaged with Catholicism and draw upon strains of thought from within the Catholic tradition to legitimate their dissent. Their emphasis on the importance of community, doctrinal reflexivity, reasonable theology, and pluralism allow them to sustain an identity within the Catholic tradition, but disagree with Vatican statements.

Michelle Dillon at the Boisi Center

Cahill stressed the differences between the dissenters of the 1970s and the young people of today. Thirty years ago, anger at the Church prompted many to leave or to try and change the structure through activist organizations. Many young people today, she claims, think the church irrelevant and find it easier to ignore negative aspects and identify with the positive. Dillon agreed that more young people today are apathetic but emphasized that when they return to the church they are more critical, unlike some older Catholics who are less willing to discuss religion.

Davidman's comments addressed the theoretical framework of the book. Davidman thought that more attention to Foucault's emphasis on the role of power in structuring discourse would prove useful. Dillon replied that Foucault's rejection of the use of language and other institutional procedures as a vehicle for transforming attitudes and practices was too pessimistic and that her research showed that pro-change Catholics were able to draw upon "emancipatory resources" within their tradition to argue for and build a more inclusive church.

The response from the interdisciplinary audience was lively and continued informally beyond the end of the presentation. Because of the strong response to the program, a second talk by Dillon, co-sponsored by the Boisi Center, the Sociology Department and the National Association for Women in Catholic Higher Education is being scheduled for the spring.

[Return to Table of Contents](#)

Center to Hold Conference on the Moral and Normative Aspects of School Choice

Are Americans better off when they can choose schools that best fit their own conception of morality or should they be exposed to moralities other than their own? Will school choice weaken rather than strengthen the mission or identity of religious institutions? Is there a "common good" that, in the absence of a common school, is less likely to be realized? Will school choice promote religious disagreement and increased sectarianism? With a greater variety of school choice options, can schools be expected to play a role in moral education? Whose moral education will it be? Are there moral benefits to choice itself?

With support from the Smith Richardson Foundation, the Boisi Center will be holding a major national conference on March 9-10, 2001 addressing precisely such questions, that is, the normative and philosophical issues inherent in America's debates over school choice. Vouchers, charter schools, home schooling, and other such changes in the landscape of American education have begun important national debates in America. Yet most of these debates have involved economic and pedagogical questions, pitting contrasting methodologies and interpretations of statistical data against one other. In an effort to broaden the debate the Boisi Center has invited philosophers, theologians, and political and legal theorists whose work is relevant to these issues, in the hope that that deeper reflection will inform the tone of public controversy.

Scholars such as Nancy Rosenblum, Joseph O'Keefe, Stephen Macedo and Michael Perry will come together to discuss these normative issues surrounding school choice. The conference will be organized around four central topics, each of which will be addressed by a panel of scholars. The key subject areas include *school choice and pluralism*, *school choice and equality*, *the ecology of various institutions in civil society*, and *school choice and constitutional law*.

The conference on the Moral and Normative Aspects of School Choice should be one of the central highlights of the Boisi Center's inaugural year.

Further information regarding conference topics, panelists, and registration may be obtained through our web site, [at the School Choice Resource Page](#)

[Return to Table of Contents](#)

Alan Wolfe Addresses Anti-Defamation League Conference in New York

On Friday November 3, 2000 Boisi Center Director Alan Wolfe delivered an address to the Anti-Defamation League's 2000 National Commission Meeting in Meeting in New York City. The address was part of a conference on "The Changing Face of America," and other presenters included Hillary Rodham Clinton, New York Governor George E. Pataki, Acting Israeli Foreign Minister Shlomo Ben-Ami, and Archbishop of New York Edward M. Egan.

Wolfe's talk focused on the problems of maintaining a common morality amidst growing religious diversity. He commented that religious values have always been viewed as a necessary check to the dangers associated with political liberty. Thus religion has always been viewed as an underlying requirement of a civil society. During much of America's history Protestant values served as the basis of this common morality, but with the growth of Catholic and Jewish immigration, and more recently, the growth of Latino and Asian immigrants, the assumptions of a Protestant Establishment have eroded.

Wolfe reviewed the common solutions offered to this problem, which include the reassertion of Christian values as a moral standard, the high wall of separation between church and state that privileges the rights of non-believers, or a religious pluralism that ultimately alienates non-believers. In addition, Wolfe suggested an alternative approach.

He argued that in religious terms, we have become a highly diverse society and in practice, choice has played a strong role in both the religions we choose to follow, follow, and the practices within those religions that we choose to embrace. Therefore we need to seek a separation of church and state in such a way that many

many religions can flourish in ways that they, and their adherents think is best for themselves. His belief is that a society that relies on enterprise and initiative will initiative will be more innovative and respectful of diversity than one that tries to regulate religious belief.

[Return to Table of Contents](#)

The Boisi Center Staff

[Alan Wolfe](#) serves as the director of the Boisi Center For Religion and American Public Life and is a professor of political science at Boston College. In addition to directing the Center's mission and activities, Professor Wolfe is currently teaching a course funded by the Templeton Foundation through the Boisi Center called "The Freedom Project: A Seminar on Economic Freedom, Religious Freedom, and Social Justice" along with Professor Mark Landy and Dean Joseph Quinn. The class covers classic works in economic freedom and religious liberty and considers the relevance of these works to contemporary political and moral controversies in the United States, including debates over school choice, the living wage, and moral education.

Professor Wolfe is the author or editor of more than ten books, including *Marginalized in the Middle* and *One Nation After All*. A contributing editor of *The New Republic* and *The Wilson Quarterly*, Professor Wolfe writes frequently for those publications as well as for *Commonweal*, *The New York Times*, *Harper's*, *The Atlantic Monthly*, *The Washington Post*, and other magazines and newspapers. Professor Wolfe has been a Fulbright Professor of American Studies at Studies at the University of Copenhagen. His latest book, *Moral Freedom: Searching for Virtue in a World of Choice* is forthcoming in April 2001.

[Patricia M.Y. Chang](#) is the assistant director for the Boisi Center and is an associate research professor of sociology at Boston College. Professor Chang has published numerous articles on religion and organizations, and the careers of female clergy. She is currently working on a book that explores how theological understandings of authority affect conceptions of democratic participation in Protestant denominations.

[Lynn Davidman](#), associate professor of Judaic Studies, American Civilization, and Women Studies at Brown University is the Boisi Center's Visiting Scholar for 2000-2001. Davidman received the National Jewish Book Award for her book *Tradition in a Rootless World: Women Turn to Orthodox Judaism*. While at the Center, Davidman will be working on a project that examines the lives of unaffiliated or secular Jews in American society.

[Susan Richards](#) serves as the Center's administrative assistant. Prior to coming to Boston College in September 1999, Susan worked at Boston University for five years as the Department Administrator for the sociology department. Susan is taking classes in higher education through Boston College's Lynch School of Education.

[Thornton C. Lockwood, Jr.](#) is the program administrator for the school choice conference at the Boisi Center and is finishing a dissertation in the philosophy department at Boston University entitled "Justice in Aristotle's Nicomachean Ethics and Politics." He has received a masters in Liberal Arts from St. John's College and a Bachelor of Arts in American History from Hamilton College.

[Kristin Heyer](#) serves as Alan Wolfe's research assistant and is a doctoral student in theological ethics at Boston College. She holds a bachelor's degree in U.S. history from Brown University and worked at the U.S. Department of Justice prior to beginning graduate studies. Her research interests include public theology and religion and public discourse.

[Return to Table of Contents](#)

[back](#)

Copyright 2001- The Trustees of Boston College
Last updated: February 21, 2001
[Comments/Questions?](#)