
The Boisi Center Report

THE BOISI CENTER FOR RELIGION AND AMERICAN PUBLIC LIFE AT BOSTON COLLEGE

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From the Director



It is now one year since I returned from my six wonderful months in Oxford. I've actually been back two times since I left, once to talk about political evil with a group of philosophers and the other to give a lecture at Green Templeton College on the crisis of the modern state. It seems that it takes them a while to learn you are there, but it is truly a wonderful place to spend time. The most striking difference compared to here is the way the college system encourages one to learn about fields of inquiry other than one's own.

*The big news on this director's front was the publication of my book *Political Evil* last fall. I was delighted by its reception, especially by Jonathan Rauch's rave review in *The New York Times Book Review*. Writing from the libertarian side of the political spectrum, Rauch argued that I was speaking for a tradition of liberal realism—a label I am willing to accept even though, as I tried to show in the book, realism itself can have a moral dimension. The Boisi Center's panel on the book featured friendly and critical commentary from distinguished thinkers Martha Minow (Harvard Law School) and James Traub (New York Times Magazine). What more could an author want? Minow pointed out, like a good lawyer, that I am not one and that as a result I had few firm principles to offer on how we ought to respond to evil—a fair enough criticism. I confess,*

though, that I worry about the inflexible application of principles in matters of political conflict. Traub has been to some of the places I wrote about, especially in Africa, and he said, almost quite correctly, that local situations can be more complex than they appear to outside observers.

Our other major panel discussion in the fall term was on torture. Glenn Carle, a former interrogator for the CIA, gave a moving and eloquent account of his experiences, which were contextualized by theologian Kenneth Himes and legal scholar Sanford Levinson. I believe our best efforts at the Boisi Center are those that combine real world events with engaged critical thinking; this panel did that, and was one of the best we ever had.

This spring Yale theologian Miroslav Volf delivered our annual prophetic voices lecture, a nuanced and fascinating argument about how ever-exclusive religions can participate in a pluralistic world. His warm and engaging personality, along with his thoughtful lecture, made his visit one of the highlights of my time here at BC.

At a recent event sponsored by the School of Theology and Ministry (and broadcast on C-Span), I was able to engage religion scholars Kristine Haglund and Stephen Prothero on whether anti-Mormonism is the new anti-Catholicism or anti-Semitism.

Of all our lunch events this year, I want to single out our tribute to Harvard Law professor William Stuntz, who died last year after a long fight with colon cancer. Bill was a deeply committed evangelical Protestant and one of the finest human beings I have ever met. His good friend and collaborator David Skeel came up from Penn to speak movingly and compassionately about Bill's work and life. I think about Bill often, and just the other day told my religion and politics class about his brilliant analysis of the changing way Christians have thought about the criminal law.

I am honored to report that the Boisi Center will play a leading role in BC's sesquicentennial celebration by organizing two major academic conferences: "Religion and the Liberal Aims of Higher Education," in November 2012, and "Religious Diversity and the Common Good 1863-2013," in November 2013. More on these big events in future director's letters.

Finally, I encourage readers to visit our web site (bc.edu/boisi), where you can read transcripts of interviews with most of our speakers or peruse event photos as you watch videos or listen to audio from our many recent events.

— Alan Wolfe

INTERROGATION POLICY AFTER OSAMA BIN LADEN

One day after the tenth anniversary of the 9/11 terror attacks, the Boisi Center hosted a major panel discussion on the future of American interrogation policy in front of an overflow audience in Higgins Hall, featuring a former CIA interrogator, a constitutional scholar, and a moral theologian.



Glenn Carle

Glenn Carle, a 23-year CIA veteran and author of the 2011 book *The Interrogator*, opened the panel with a riveting account of his experience as an interrogator in the post-9/11 world. Given explicit orders from his superiors to use all necessary means to obtain intelligence from several captives in secret American prisons, Carle strongly believed that physical abuse was counterproductive to the effort. After more than a year in charge of the interrogation of a “high value target” in two separate locations, he was replaced by a case officer more amenable to the administration’s aggressive interrogation policies. Carle also bemoaned the effects of public efforts to make torture an accepted method of interrogation, citing polls showing that young Americans under age 35 support torture at much higher rates than older Americans.

Boston College theologian Kenneth Himes, O.F.M. argued that the public debate on torture should focus on justice, not utility. To be sure, he said, the utility argument fails: studies have shown torture to be only marginally useful—resulting in intelligence that is unreliable in nature and limited in quantity—even as it problematizes American foreign relations and increases the likelihood that American soldiers could face a similar fate. More importantly, however, torture

is a grave violation of the inherent dignity and integrity of the human person, and Himes was deeply troubled that Americans now see it as a debatable policy option rather than a deplorable war crime. He closed by arguing for increased oversight and training of interrogators (especially contractors), greater public awareness and support of officials who have spoken out against torture, and a more robust and informed national conversation about interrogation policy.

Sanford Levinson, professor of law and government at the University of Texas, began by explaining that defining torture is a central problem in abolishing it. Clear and strict definitions are elusive. The word itself is never used by those who employ it, and it is diversely understood in psychological or physical terms, or by its intended or perceived effects. For his part, Levinson argued that torture is the treatment of a human person as a slave without rights. Focusing on rights instead of interrogation methods, he said, will help us face the deeper questions about whether we believe all people have rights we should respect.

In the lively question and answer period that followed, Carle endorsed truth commissions over prosecutions of Americans who authorized or conducted torture; Levinson argued that political leaders and media outlets failed in their duty to bring the question of torture into broad national debate; and a host of BC students and faculty members expressed their hope that this kind of rigorous moral, legal and political conversation would continue in the years ahead. ■



Sanford Levinson, Kenneth Himes, Glenn Carle and Erik Owens

POLITICAL EVIL

Evil does in fact exist in the world today, argues Boisi Center director Alan Wolfe in his newest book, but too many of us confuse and conflate its different varieties, and as a result we make poor decisions about when, where and how we should act to combat it. *Political Evil: What It is and How to Combat It* (Knopf, 2011) aims to clarify the issue and analyze its implications for American foreign policy. On September 21 the Boisi Center hosted a vigorous conversation about the book's central themes with James Traub and Martha Minow, two distinguished authorities on international relations and conflict resolution.

Wolfe opened the discussion with a summary of his key arguments. When considering the need for military intervention around the world, he emphasized, we must first understand which kind of evil is operative in the conflict. "Political evil" is strategic in nature, focused on realizable objectives, and can therefore be opposed and redirected through strategic negotiations and/or the use of force. Not all evil is amenable to political resolution, however: the "radical evil" of dictators like Hitler and Stalin is employed in pursuit of unrealizable and abstract goals (such as the extermination of a race or class), while the "everyday evil" of serial killers or isolated random shooters have no political relevance at all. Still, Wolfe said, four of the central problems we now face—terrorism, ethnic cleansing, genocide and "counter-evil" (i.e., torture and other evil acts employed by states to combat evil)—are forms of political evil with specific means and ends that call for specific responses.

New York Times Magazine contributor and *Foreign Policy* columnist James Traub focused his comments on the conflict in Darfur, which Wolfe argued the West was too hasty to call "genocide." On the ground, Traub said, the Darfur conflict clearly combined civil



Alan Wolfe

war and genocide, and a purely local and political response would have been insufficient to stop the massacres. Traub agreed that the world's response to Darfur has been a failure, but not because of the moral hyperbole Wolfe criticized. Rather, the existing lack of international support for large-scale military intervention was bolstered by rhetoric from Sudan's African neighbors that cast the conflict as nothing more than a regional political dispute.

Martha Minow, Dean of Harvard Law School and author of several books on post-conflict reconciliation, applauded Wolfe's analysis of political evil but questioned how, in the midst of an unfolding conflict, we can know when atrocities are committed for "political" instead of "radical"

ends. Imperfect information makes the proper response difficult to discern, she said. Furthermore, if we want to educate and inspire the American public to act to end massacres like those in Darfur, we must employ precisely the sort of strong moral language that Wolfe deprecates.

Following Wolfe's brief response to each of the other panelists, the packed audience leapt into the conversation with a number of incisive comments and questions about humanitarian intervention, the continuing perils of colonialism and empire, and above all, the many ways we talk about evil in the world today. ■



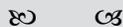
Erik Owens, James Traub, Alan Wolfe and Martha Minow

9/11 REFLECTIONS

On the occasion of the tenth anniversary of the 9/11 terror attacks, the Boisi Center launched a special web-based project of reflection and remembrance for the BC community entitled 9/11 Reflections. Nearly 250 faculty, students, staff and alumni of the university contributed brief responses to the question, “What have you learned since 9/11?” The submissions are as diverse and profound as their authors, and we invite you to browse them—and contribute your own—at www.bc.edu/911reflections. Below, a few excerpts.

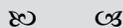
September 11, 2001 was the first time in my life that I discovered I wasn't invincible. It was the first time I felt a deep, unnerving fear, that grew inside as I truly began to comprehend the magnitude of devastation..... I ran to the school office, knowing that my Dad was flying to New York that morning. His flight was at 9:30am out of Logan—it was cancelled.

Kristyn Roth, CSOM 2010



Like many other Americans, I thought that the world had changed on September 11, 2001. Ten years later I have learned that change comes slowly, if at all. I remember speaking at BC right after the horror and saying that Osama bin Laden, for all his evil, had at least brought us together. It turns out, however, that we are as divided as ever, if not more so. How truly and terribly sad this is.

*Alan Wolfe
Boisi Center director*

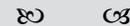


When 9/11 happened, I was home in China... My father was working in the North Tower at the time, and no one knew if he was safe or not. ...I remember sitting there, digging through my memory, trying to remember the last thing I said to him. It was in that moment I recognized the fragile and fleeting nature of life. I realized that I should treasure every minute I spend with my family, my friends, and my loved ones.

X.S.P., A&S 2012

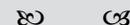
We're still in the early stages of making meaning out of that Tuesday morning's heartbreak ten years ago. ...My country, my home city of New York, my own sense of what matters most—all have been remade by 9/11.

*David Quigley
Dean of Arts & Sciences*



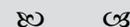
Terms like “the 9/11 Generation” get tossed about to label those who were kids when it happened, and I think that is accurate. I had trouble processing it at 26, and I still look at my life in halves: as it was before and how it has been since.

K., A&S 1997



May we all use our education and spiritual formation to do everything we can to “light the world” with hope, and make the effort to understand each other and to educate all in what is the best of human nature. 9/11 showed the worst of human nature but brought out the best in all of us in response to that tragedy. Let us never forget the spirit which lifted all after that event.

Rick Roche, A&S 1981



We cannot bring back the dead. But we can honor their lives and memories by choosing to live with purpose and meaning.

*Natana DeLong-Bas
Faculty, theology department*

PROPHETIC VOICES LECTURE: RELIGIOUS EXCLUSIVISM

Miroslav Volf, the Henry B. Wright Professor of Systemic Theology at Yale Divinity School and founding director of Yale Center for Faith and Culture, delivered the Boisi Center's 11th annual Prophetic Voices Lecture on March 14 to an eager audience on the topic of "Religious Exclusivism and Pluralism as a Political Project."

Political pluralism, Volf argued, exists when institutions protect the political rights of all people, regardless of their beliefs. Its converse is political exclusivism, in which an overarching vision of life (such as Saudi Wahhabi Islam or Soviet communism) is enshrined in political institutions and used to punish or repress those who do not share it. Religious pluralism is the theological claim that many religions can provide access to the divine along with effective avenues for human flourishing. It is opposed to religious exclusivism, whose adherents Volf described in three categories: "strong truth exclusivists" who view their faith as the only true faith; "weak truth exclusivists" who believe that their faith merely contains a more complete truth than others; and "salvation exclusivists" who believe that their faith alone can provide human flourishing and save souls.

Today, Volf said, religious faiths are primarily exclusivist and often politically assertive—and despite predictions to the contrary, they are growing. At the same time, globalization encourages interdependence and homogeneity,

spreads democratic ideals and gathers those of diverse faiths under the same political roof. A crucial challenge for societies around the world, then, is how to manage the convergence of religious exclusivism and calls for political pluralism. Volf emphasized that religious exclusivism is not necessarily tied to political exclusivism, and called for a decoupling of the two concepts. He argued that religious exclusivists can (and indeed many do) embrace political pluralism, citing examples across time and traditions from seventeenth-century Baptists to twentieth century Sufis.



Miroslav Volf

During the robust question and answer session following his lecture, Volf defended his argument that truth claims inherent in religious faiths are not at odds with political pluralism. While religions often profess superiority, he suggested that most still admit their imperfection in the interpretation of the divine. When asked whether religion is the only means to human flourishing, Volf clarified that there are robust secular as well as religious visions of common good, citing the philosophers Nietzsche, Marx and Kant.

Earlier, Professor Volf had conducted a seminar at the Boisi Center for graduate students and faculty in which he discussed contemporary conflicts between religion and pluralism in Europe, the Middle East and North Africa. He also discussed the book he is writing with former British Prime Minister Tony Blair on faith and globalization, based on a course they jointly taught at Yale. ■

TURKISH ISLAM AND DEMOCRACY



As the Arab uprisings continue to unsettle the societies and regimes of the Middle East and North Africa, Turkey has quickly become a powerful model of Islamic democracy for many in the region. With a ninety-year tradition of secularism and a more recent resurgence of religion in public life, Turkey is a fascinating, complicated nation at the intersection of continents, cultures and religious traditions. On March 16 the Boisi Center worked with several other organizations at Boston College, Harvard University and the local Turkish community to host an all-day conference on the issue. See our web site for photos and video of the event, along with detailed description of the panels and speakers. Pictured above, left to right: Jonathan Laurence (Boston College), Berna Turam (Northeastern University), Omar Taspinar (Brookings Institution), Ahmet Kuru (San Diego State) and Scott Thomas (Catholic Theological Union). ■

SOCIAL THEORIST TZVETAN TODOROV IN RESIDENCE

This fall the Boisi Center was honored to host French-Bulgarian philosopher, theorist and literary critic, Tzvetan Todorov. A researcher at the National Center for Scientific Research (Paris) and the author of many influential books, Todorov began his week-long visit with a lecture on the debate between Pelagius and Augustine about original sin, and its influence on the Enlightenment and modern totalitarianism. In the two seminars following the lecture, he traced the emergence of totalitarianism and discussed its relationship to the modern understanding of beauty and art.

In his opening lecture, Todorov argued that the fifth-century debate between Christian thinkers Pelagius and Augustine has had crucial influence on modern religious and political thought. Pelagius believed that man cannot be completely evil because he is created in the image of God; human sin is thus not innate but rather a matter of will. Because divine grace is simply God's gift of free will, man is capable of perfecting himself—and thus, in a sense, of saving himself. Augustine forcefully rejected the Pelagian view, arguing that man is saved by God's grace alone, that our will is easily perverted and thus an untrustworthy guide to perfection, and that perfection itself is always beyond our capacity.

Todorov then described how the fundamental questions Pelagius and Augustine debated—How much can humans improve themselves? How deeply-seated is our sinfulness? How reliable are our moral and intellectual capacities? To what extent is our salvation dependent upon our own

actions?—influenced subsequent Western religious and political thought, using examples from Montesquieu, Rousseau, Condorcet, and many others. Todorov argued that the Pelagian belief in individual (and thus social)

perfectibility ultimately informed the development of “political messianism” and the rise of totalitarianism in Europe.

In a faculty seminar the next day, Todorov gave more detail to his account of political messianism. He argued that three variants of political messianism developed among ideologues who were convinced that much good could be done in the world, but that it sometimes must be forced upon those who do not know what is good for them. Enlightenment messianists crusaded for universal liberty against barbarism and tyranny; Communist messianists sought to create a classless society of equals; and

human rights messianists now strive to globalize Western norms of democracy and individual rights.

Todorov's last public event at the Boisi Center was a graduate seminar on his recent book *The Limits of Art*. He explained how the Pelagian view of the perfectibility of man can be seen in the emergence of the modern understanding of art. Rather than seeing art as a reflection of a higher truth or morality, art is now seen as a creative act of the individual. Totalitarian leaders like Stalin and Hitler, he argued, understood themselves as artists perfecting the world. He concluded by pointing to a possible new understanding of art, one articulated by Iris Murdoch: art as an inescapably ethical activity. ■



Tzvetan Todorov

REFORMING OUR VIEWS OF PURITAN NEW ENGLAND

The social ethics and practices of the New England Puritans are widely misunderstood, said David Hall, Harvard Divinity School historian and author of the new book *A Reforming People*, at an October 18 lunch colloquium. Often depicted by twentieth-century historians as authoritarians who suppressed religious and political dissent, Puritans are better understood, Hall argued, as moral reformers who brought a democratic sensibility to early American social and political life.

For example, the Puritans refused to privilege religious authorities in land or wealth distribution, and they allowed non-church members to hold land. In fact, they explicitly

declared that the saints should not decide material matters; town governments were to address these matters in broadly participatory fashion. Hall highlighted some of the crucial political precedents instituted by the Puritans, most notably their emphasis on government accountability, active consent, and popular sovereignty. Rather than promulgating authoritarianism, New England Puritans called upon equity more frequently than any other concept. They also, he said, had very different understandings of some key concepts in American political thought. Liberty, for example, was understood by the Puritans to be the state of being subordinate to the good, whereas we most commonly take it to mean a freedom from interference. ■

SYMPOSIA ON RELIGION AND POLITICS



Left to right: Symposium leader Brenna Strauss, with participants William Augu, Jessica Coblentz, Lucia Kim, and Séamus Coffey. [Photo: Gary Wayne Gilbert]

This year the Boisi Center was pleased to continue its Symposia on Religion and Politics, facilitated by Ph.D. candidate in political science Brenna R. Strauss. Composed of two groups—one for undergraduate and graduate students and one for BC faculty, alumni and staff—the symposia are an opportunity to discuss primary sources at the crossroads of American religion and politics.

This year the theme of both symposia was: Is God-talk a requirement in American politics? Participants discussed speeches from the founding to those of current presidential candidates, including speeches by George Washington, Franklin Delano Roosevelt, Abraham Lincoln, Ronald Reagan and Barack Obama.

In two sessions over lunch in the fall, students wrestled with the role religious rhetoric may play in promoting civic virtue, and whether the United States can be said to have a civil religion. In the first session of the spring semester, led by STM graduate student Grégoire Catta, students turned more directly to the question of how politicians might reconcile their religious beliefs with their political responsibilities in a democracy. Reading FDR's "Commonwealth Club Address" and Lyndon Johnson's "Great Society" speech, students next discussed what role the federal government ought to play in the lives of individuals. In the final session, senior Séamus Coffey asked students about the role of religious rhetoric in the campaigns and to reflect on what is at stake for women in the contraception debate.

Meeting over the same texts over breakfast, the faculty/staff/alumni conversation took a different direction. In the first session, Gregory Kalscheur and Annette McDermott contrasted the apparent deism of George Washington with John Adams' emphasis on the sinful character of human

beings and God as the "Redeemer of the World." In the second session, led by Bill Donovan, the conversation lingered on the meaning of FDR's reference to the "Christian ideal" in his May 1941 speech "Proclaiming an Unlimited National Emergency." Syed Khan led the following discussion, in which participants discussed ways in which the Catholic tradition is reflected in the speeches of Mario Cuomo and John F. Kennedy. The group plans to meet at least two more times this spring and summer to discuss federalism and public morality as well as speeches by the 2012 presidential candidates. ■

Interested in participating next year? We'll post details on our web site (bc.edu/boisi) in early September, or you can email nichole.flores@bc.edu.

Selected topics and readings from this year's symposia

The Founding and Nation-Building

- Thanksgiving Sermon, John Witherspoon (ca. 1783)
- First Inaugural, George Washington (1789)
- Farewell Address, George Washington (1796)
- Proclamation of Day of Fasting, Humiliation and Prayer, John Adams (1798)

War and National Crisis

- Second Inaugural, Abraham Lincoln (1865)
- Proclaiming an Unlimited National Emergency, Franklin Roosevelt (1941)
- War Message to Congress, Franklin Roosevelt (1941)
- First Inaugural, Dwight Eisenhower (1953)
- "Evil Empire" Speech, Ronald Reagan (1983)
- State of the Union ("Axis of Evil" Speech), George W. Bush (2002)

Religion and the Politician

- Address to the Greater Houston Ministerial Association, John F. Kennedy (1960)
- Religious Belief, Public Morality, Mario Cuomo (1984)
- Call to Renewal, Barack Obama (2006)
- Faith in America, Mitt Romney (2007)

Election 2012 and the Contraception Debate

- Notre Dame Commencement, Barack Obama (2009)
 - Contraception Policy Speech, Barack Obama (2012)
 - Why I Vetted the Contraception Bill, Mitt Romney (2005)
 - Remarks at CPAC, Mitt Romney (2012)
 - Charge to Revive the Role of Faith in the Public Square, Rick Santorum (2010)
 - Missouri Victory Speech, Rick Santorum (2012)
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HONORING WILLIAM STUNTZ, CHRISTIAN LEGAL THEORIST

On September 22 University of Pennsylvania Law Professor David Skeel spoke at the Boisi Center about the life and work of William Stuntz, a close friend and long-time collaborator who passed away on March 20, 2011 after a battle with cancer. Stuntz was a distinguished and prolific law professor at Harvard whose humane sensibility and incisive analytic skills yielded innovative contributions to criminal law as well as Christian legal theory.

Stuntz is perhaps best known for his argument, expressed in the 2001 article “Pathological Politics of Criminal Law,” that criminal law is like a one-way ratchet that constantly tightens its grip with more and more crimes to enforce. He called into question the American legal system’s tendency to value procedural rights over substantive ones, pointing to its problematic obsession with privacy and its failure to address more pressing issues like the prevention of police coercion and violence. Skeel explained how Stuntz nearly single-handedly brought together analysis of criminal procedure and substantive criminal law, which were

previously treated as entirely separate domains (the one focused upon judicial opinions, the other on the philosophy of punishment).

Stuntz’s influence on Christian legal theory was equally as profound, said Skeel. Until the *Harvard Law Review* published Stuntz’s essay on the topic in 2003, no article from a discernibly Christian perspective had ever been featured in a prominent law review. In this breakthrough article, Stuntz remained critical of legal moralism, arguing that true Christian legal theory should be about humility.

Skeel closed his remarks by recounting how his friend’s faith permeated every aspect of life. Stuntz saw God in everyone else and treated them better than himself, said Skeel. A 2008 cancer diagnosis only strengthened his faith commitment, enabling him to view the pain as “a form of discipline from God.” Skeel’s heartfelt tribute to Stuntz’s rigorous intellect and devout Christian values moved many in the room to tears as it lifted up the memory of this exceptional man. ■

CHRISTIAN NOVELISTS AS RELIGIOUS INSPIRATION

On November 16, Wheaton College English Professor Alan Jacobs delivered a lecture on the role that Western poets and novelists have had in shaping the faith of modern American Christians. Virtually absent until the middle of the twentieth century, this phenomenon emerged as individuals left cold by pastors, theologians, and lifeless liturgies sought a different kind of religious experience. While Jacobs regards the phenomenon as a positive thing for the future of Christianity, he notes that local churches need to think in constructive and creative ways about how to ease the transition of individuals who come to worshipping communities as the result of a literary experience.

Jacobs first took notice of the phenomenon during Fredrick Buechner’s visit to Calvin College in Grand Rapids, Michigan. Jacobs was surprised to hear so many of Buechner’s fans tell the author, “I’m a Christian because of your books.” Recognizing this statement of faith as historically uncommon, he began searching for its origin, eventually tracing it to Fyodor Dostoyevsky, a writer whose prophetic witness was not contingent on his membership with the Church. The phenomenon evolved throughout the 20th century and flourished in the work of Simone Weil, C.S. Lewis and William Hale White. These and others whose diverse spiritual lives were inspired by literature (and who in turn inspired the spiritual lives of others) demonstrate, Jacobs argued, the modern desire to receive spiritual instruction indirectly (without being told we’re



Alan Jacobs

receiving it), and to embrace a religious experience without feeling vulnerable.

In a brief response to Jacob’s lecture, BC English Professor Judith Wilt argued that historical novels, science fiction, and detective stories are three additional genres of literature that sustain faith for many, including herself. Jacobs agreed, noting that these genres have great power because they give the least impression that they’re working on us in any spiritual or religious way. Their engaging conversation was quickly joined by members of the audience, who shared their own stories of spiritual engagement with literature, to the benefit of all. ■

FIGHTING FOR GOD AND COUNTRY

Hundreds of thousands of American soldiers in recent years have endured long wartime deployments and the physical, spiritual and psychological challenges that accompany them. How they handle this experience—how they make sense of what they are asked to do, of the unspeakable things they see, of the choices they are required to make—is in part the province of the chaplain corps, which ministers to the spiritual needs of America’s servicemen and women.

As the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan come to an end, there are also broader cultural questions about how the rest of us respond to their return. For at least the past hundred years, Americans have invested the American soldier with a deep religious significance connected to heroism, purity of sacrifice, and devotion to the nation. But the soldiers themselves have not always seen things the same way. To ponder these and other crucial issues about religion in the U.S. military today, the Boisi Center invited two experienced servicemen and academics to a panel discussion on February 9.

Jonathan Ebel, a religious studies professor at the University of Illinois and former naval officer, began with observations about how God and country inspire similarly strong emotions (from love and hate to compassion, duty and awe) and rituals (hymns, holidays, ceremonies), and indeed are frequently joined together through a distinctive American civil religion. He then discussed three American servicemen—Salvatore Giunta, David Senft and Pat Tillman—

whose ambivalent stories of sacrifice and heroism confounded the traditional judgments that Americans bestow upon its honored and fallen warriors.

Fr. Richard Erikson, chaplain and colonel in the U.S. Air Force, gave specific focus to Ebel’s reflections by exploring the role of military chaplains, who naturally blend patriotism and religious practice in their daily duties. Chaplains

are unarmed noncombatants in the battlefield who must minister to all soldiers’ religious needs—from crises of faith and matters of conscience to faithful observance and last rites—without proselytizing for their own faith tradition. Because existential threats are simply a part of the job for servicemen and women, said Erikson, their spiritual wellness is a crucial component to achieving military readiness. The chaplain corps thus serves an essential function in the armed services, and in so doing presents a fascinating case study of the ways God and country are intertwined in the military. ■



Fr. Richard Erikson

A FRENCH VIEW OF AMERICAN RELIGION

French political scientist Denis Lacorne joined us on October 12 for a colloquium on his latest book, *Religion in America*. He began by explaining that Americans adopted a federal constitution in 1789 well before they shared a coherent national cultural and political

identity. This meant that American national identity was tightly tied to the construction of national narratives—of the stories told by historians and political leaders in the course of American history.

Two of these narratives about the relation between religion and politics continue to influence our discourse today. The first is a secular narrative of religious freedom and separation of church and state, rooted in the Founding Fathers’ Enlightenment influences and seen in documents from Thomas Jefferson’s letter to the Danbury Baptists to twentieth-century Supreme Court cases. The second is a romantic narrative of moral purity that highlights America’s religious origins and essential character; it was advanced famously in the 19th century by Alexis de Tocqueville and his contemporary George Bancroft.

In the conversation that followed, Lacorne described religious accommodationism as a middle ground between the two traditions sketched above, but noted the deep differences in how French and American societies actually accommodate religious minorities. ■



Denis Lacorne

IRAN AND THE ARAB SPRING

On September 27 we invited reporter and photojournalist Scott Peterson, Istanbul Bureau Chief for the *Christian Science Monitor*, to discuss the latest episode of Iran’s century-old quest for democracy and freedom. Though the 2009 Green Movement failed in its revolutionary vision, Peterson credited its massive show of “people power” with providing a template for the recent Arab Spring revolutions.



Scott Peterson

The 1979 Islamic Revolution marked the beginning of Iran’s love-hate relationship with people power, Peterson argued. Contrary to beliefs in the Western World, he said, the revolution was genuinely powered by individuals in search of democratic change, not a group of radicals. The

unique Islamic republic that emerged in the wake of the revolution has been silently undermined for years by what Peterson called a “fake democratic temperament,” and only in the aftermath of Ahmadinejad’s 2009 re-election was the mask covering this charade finally removed by the public. In what Peterson regarded as “the first pro-democracy street protest that Iran has seen for decades,” the Iranian population raised serious questions about the legitimacy of the republican and theological pillars of the regime.

According to Peterson, both Supreme Leader Khamenei and President Ahmadinejad hope to bridge this credibility gap by explaining the recent Arab Spring in terms of the 1979 Iranian Revolution. Khamenei maintains that the “Islamic Awakenings” against pro-Western regimes provide evidence of a coming pan-Islamic revolution that has its roots in Iran. One crucial element, however, separates the Iranian revolution from other awakenings in the region: Arab revolutions have generally occurred in predominantly Sunni nations, whereas Iran’s took place in a Shia context. The collapse of al-Assad’s regime in Syria would considerably diminish the credibility of Iran’s pan-Islamic model. In that case, said Peterson, the Iranian regime may find itself facing another round of “where’s my vote people-power” that proves too difficult to quell. ■

CATHOLIC ORGANIZING IN GLOBAL CITIES

The dynamic multicultural diversity in global cities like New York, Paris or London creates a new and complicated context for citizenship, said Vincent Rougeau, dean of the BC Law School, at a March 20 lunch colloquium. Traditional norms of citizenship are changing in order to accommodate the increasing movement of individuals from the colonial periphery to the center—South Asians to London, for example, or North Africans to Paris. Immigrants to these cities frequently turn to local faith communities to help them make sense of their new identity and make their way in the local economy. As a result, faith communities provide the gateway for broad-based community organizing efforts among immigrants from diverse backgrounds.

Rougeau described his recent work with community organizers in East London who draw upon Catholic social thought in their work with immigrants of all faith traditions. Despite deep differences, the religiously diverse community can still rally around core concepts of Catholic social thought: respect for human dignity, recognition of a common good, solidarity with the underclasses, and the pursuit of social justice through (among other things) the payment of living wages to all workers.

During the ensuing conversation with the audience, Rougeau cited a number of factors that largely preclude the possibility of similar forms of community organizing taking root in the United States. Europeans embrace the concept of cosmopolitan citizenship much more widely than Americans, and the existence of



Vincent Rougeau

historic church-state relationships in Europe (like England’s established church) makes faith-based organizing more politically and logistically feasible there than in the United States. And in this era of increased anti-immigrant sentiment in both places, the persistence of negative stereotypes continues to hinder efforts to work for social justice across religious and cultural boundaries. ■

OTHER BOISI CENTER HIGHLIGHTS FROM 2011-2012



Boisi Center visiting scholar **Gregor Scherzinger** spoke on December 1 about the “minaret controversy” in his native Switzerland. Two years earlier, nearly 60% of Swiss voters had approved a national ban on the construction of new minarets in the country. Catholic and Protestant Church leaders voiced their disapproval, but often with disturbing ambivalence, defending religious freedom for Muslims while affirming the same Islamophobic stereotypes that referendum supporters employed. Since then, Scherzinger argued, religious groups have reflected on their complicity and some have re-committed themselves to interfaith support. ■



To discuss the hotly contested 2012 Republican presidential primaries, the Boisi Center invited Harvard historian **Jill Lepore** (right, above) and writer **Rebecca Traister** (left, above) to talk with Alan Wolfe at an April 12 panel. Their wide-ranging conversation pondered the impact of what Lepore called “the politics of righteousness,” mused upon the political impact of Mitt Romney’s Mormonism and Rick Santorum’s Catholicism, and predicted that the general election is likely to serve as a national referendum on the principle that government cannot be trusted to act effectively on behalf of its citizens. ■



At a March 1 lunch colloquium at the Boisi Center, theologian **Christian Polke** of Hamburg University discussed the use of political power in the quest for religious meaning. Drawing upon comparative cultural theories to understand the revolutionary religious developments of the axial age—an era spanning the lives and religious movements inspired by Socrates, Sidhartha Gautama (the Buddha) and Confucius, among many others—Polke argued that early models of social and political thought continue to shape our understanding of political and religious diversity today. ■



Our final event of the year featured Boston College political science professor **Kathleen Bailey**, who spoke about the unique opportunities and challenges faced by BC’s Islamic Civilization and Societies Program. A large grant in 2009 from the U.S. Department of Education has helped to finance instruction in several additional languages, travel and research stipends for undergraduates, and a lecture series to enhance the intellectual community. As the program looks to build on its success, new sources of funding are needed to expand what has become a rigorous and well-regarded interdisciplinary undergraduate major. ■

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