

2019 CORCORAN CONFERENCE IN CHRISTIAN-JEWISH RELATIONS

*Merciful God, Punitive God: Interdisciplinary Reflections on
Scriptural Warrants in Judaism, Christianity, and Islam*

Boston College

April 7-8

Jack Miles, Corcoran Visiting Chair in Christian-Jewish Relations:

For many years now, liberal Christian theologians and preachers have been at pains to repudiate a prejudicial contrast between a supposed Old Testament God of Wrath and a supposed New Testament God of Mercy. The paradoxical thrust of this year's conference is to rehabilitate divine wrath as, after all, an inescapable aspect of the divine character throughout the entirety of the Bible, the New Testament included, and—not least important—as a model for human imitation. This year, too, for the first time, the purview of the annual Corcoran Conference is broadened to include the Qur'an as a third scripture, often ignored but never quite out of view, rather like the Dome of the Rock in Jerusalem.

April 7 (Murray Room, Yawkey Center)

4:00-4:45 pm

Pamela Berger (Boston College)

“Hidden in Plain Sight: Changing Perceptions of the Dome of the Rock”

Recalling that the essence of education is learning what “you didn’t know you didn’t know,” Jack Miles opens the conference by introducing art historian Berger who “will show us a few things that we didn’t know we didn’t know about a site of contestation among Jews, Christians, and Muslims—namely, the Dome of the Rock in Jerusalem,” focusing on its place in the history of Jewish, Christian, and Muslim art. Berger’s *The Crescent on the Temple: The Dome of the Rock as Image of the Ancient Jewish Sanctuary* (Brill, 2012) does tell a story full of surprises!

5:00-5:45 pm

Keynote Address

Patrick J. Ryan, S.J. (Fordham University)

“Neither Moloch nor the Velveteen Rabbit”

As McGinley Professor of Religion and Society at Fordham, Patrick Ryan, whose doctorate from Harvard is in Islamic Studies, lectures twice a year on a topic of common Jewish-Christian-Muslim interest, always publishing the lecture with both a Jewish and a Muslim response. One quite recent such lecture was on imitation as a religious duty, differently inflected, of course, in the three traditions. As published, the lecture and comments land entirely on the “merciful” side of “merciful/punitive.” As keynote speaker, he will further develop this theme, addressing the darker side of the divine character as well: the wrath of God as situated within the justice of God and otherwise within the related antinomies of the divine character (male/female, absent/present, creator/destroyer, etc.).

6:00-6:30 pm

Reception – all are invited

6:30 pm

Dinner for presenters and invited guests

April 8 (Murray Room, Yawkey Center)

9:00-10:15 am

First Morning Session

Reuven Firestone (Hebrew Union College)

“Savagery and the Sacred:

The Rhetoric of Terror and Its Consequences in the Scriptural Monotheisms”

Firestone, as Regenstein Professor in Medieval Judaism and Islam, Hebrew Union College and Jewish Institute of Religion, continues here the triplicate theme struck on the previous day: Jewish, Christian, and Muslim. In his remarks, the emphasis falls squarely on the “punitive” side of the title antinomy but with the nuance and informed detail typical of his work. Given that the conference announcement specifically references the understood will of God as repeatedly a trigger for religious warfare, it matters that Firestone’s paper has as deep background his work as the author both of *Jihad: The Origin of Holy War in Islam* and of *Holy War in Judaism*.

Respondent: Katherine McAuliffe (Boston College)

McAuliffe is the co-recipient of a major Templeton Foundation research grant entitled “Building Virtue: Environmental and Social Influences on the Development of Fairness, Forgiveness, Honesty, and Trustworthiness.” Her research has shown that six-year-olds are motivated by retribution rather than by restoration and, more broadly, that punishment can motivate “good” behavior in children and adults alike. What then of the prospect of divine punishment in the lives of the religiously educated, whether children or adults?

9:00-9:20. Firestone offers the highlights of his paper.

9:20-9:40. McAuliffe responds, and the two converse.

9:40-10:15. Firestone, who is a rabbi and a parent as well as a scholar, and McAuliffe, who is a mother as well as a scholar, entertain questions and comments from the audience.

10:15-10:30 am Break

10:30-11:45 am

Second Morning Session

Omri Boehm (The New School)

“The Akedah and the Conscience of Contemporary Israel”

Boehm, associate professor of philosophy at the New School in New York, is a veteran of the Israel Defense Force and of the Shin Bet. He believes that the two-state solution is now a dead letter, abandoned by both the Palestinian and the Israeli side, and that the path forward can only be some form of single state. However, he is an ardent Israeli patriot and a Zionist who sees here the opportunity for a new departure, a reconceived liberal Zionism. His book in progress on this subject is under contract with New York Review Books, the book-publishing companion of *The New York Review of Books*. As a philosopher, Boehm is a Kantian, a commitment implied in his book *The Binding of Isaac: A Religious Model of Disobedience* (T&T Clark), and his talk will center on the place of the *akedah* in the contemporary Israeli political imaginarium.

Respondent: Eve Spangler (Boston College)

Spangler, author of the recent *Understanding Israel/Palestine: Race, Nation, and Human Rights in the Conflict* (Springer, 2015), has been taking Boston College students annually on trips to Israel where they meet with everyone from West Bank Jewish nationalists to Hamas apologists.

10:30-10:50. Boehm discusses how variously the *akedah* has functioned and continues to function in the framing of alternate political visions for the future of Israel.

10:50-11:10. Spangler responds to Boehm's vision of a politically viable, authentically Jewish path forward for Israel out of her richly varied experience of Palestinians and Israelis in the land that they share.

11:10-11:45. The two of them entertain questions and reactions from the audience.

11:45 am-12:00 pm Break

12:00-1:15 pm Lunch

1:30-2:45 pm

First Afternoon Session

Bruce B. Lawrence (Duke University)

“Allah – Merciful or Punitive (or Both)?”

Lawrence, Nancy and Jeffrey Marcus Humanities Professor Emeritus at Duke University, is an eminent and prolific scholar of Islam. Among his many books is *Who Is Allah?* (University of North Carolina Press). His general reflections on the conference's engagement with the character of God as merciful or punitive, starting partly from that book, will add a Muslim dimension to the general discussion.

Respondent: Natana J. DeLong-Bas (Boston College)

DeLong-Bas is the author of *Shariah: What Everyone Needs to Know* (co-authored with John L. Esposito, 2018), *Islam: A Living Faith* (2018), *Wahhabi Islam: From Revival and Reform to Global Jihad* (rev. ed. 2008), *Notable Muslims: Muslim Builders of World Civilization and Culture* (2006), and *Women in Muslim Family Law* (co-authored with John L. Esposito, rev. ed., 2001). She is an expert on Islam, the Arabian Gulf, women and gender, Islamic law, and terrorism and extremism. She is Associate Professor of the Practice of Theology and Islamic Civilizations and Societies at Boston College.

1:30-1:50. Lawrence addresses the insistently merciful and yet unhesitatingly punitive character of Allah as presented in Muslim scripture and interpretation.

1:50-2:10. DeLong-Bas and Lawrence engage in conversation about Lawrence's remarks and the subject matter of the conference, conceivably addressing earlier speakers' discussions in the process.

2:10-2:45. The two of them entertain questions and comments from the audience.

2:45-3:00 pm Break

3:00-4:15 pm

Second Afternoon Session

M. Cathleen Kaveny (Boston College)

“*Prophecy Without Contempt and the Current American Moment*”

Kaveny, professor of theology and law at Boston College, is the author of a major new work, *Prophecy Without Contempt* (Harvard University Press, 2018), a work that may become particularly timely if by early April Robert Mueller has delivered his long awaited report about Russian interference in the 2016 American presidential election. The thesis of her book is, broadly, that public discourse must have a place for righteous and passionate indignation in the spirit of the classical Israelite prophets, but that to *condemn* must never be to *contemn* and never is when the condemnation comes from God. The book is thus simultaneously about righteous anger and about its restraint.

Respondent: Yehudah Mirsky (Brandeis University)

As the author of *Rav Kook: Mystic in a Time of Revolution* (Yale University Press) and as a mainstay of the Schusterman Center for Israel Studies at Brandeis, Mirsky, a Modern Orthodox rabbi, is as deeply versed in the politics of Jerusalem as of Washington, where he worked for years with Al Gore, notably on Gore’s prophetic *Earth in the Balance: Ecology and the Human Spirit*, and where he served in the Clinton Administration’s Human Rights Bureau. Mirsky’s undergraduate degree is from Yeshiva College, his law degree from Yale, and his doctorate from the Harvard Divinity School.

3:00-3:20. Kaveny gives the highlights of her new book.

3:20-3:40. Kaveny and Mirsky engage in conversation about the prophetic example—for Americans of conscience at this juncture in our history.

3:40-4:15. The two of them entertain questions and comments from the audience.

Jack Miles (ending the conference): Thanks and ultra-brief final reflections.