

BOISI CENTER REPORT



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FROM THE DIRECTOR



Friends:

It's been a busy but rewarding fall semester at the Boisi Center, with many good things going on.

Our two faculty seminars—a lunch seminar on “Catholic and Jesuit Education: BC’s Mission” and a dinner seminar focused on the person and work of Dorothy Day—have been the scenes of exciting interchange and thoughtful debate. Both seminars are models of interdisciplinary conversation, with faculty from the departments of sociology, English, philosophy, political science, and the schools of education, nursing, and theology and ministry. As one participant said after an especially lively meeting, “This is what I thought being a professor would be like when I decided to go to graduate school.” (High praise from a hard grader!)

We started our events calendar this fall before a standing-room-only crowd when we hosted a panel discussing “How Would You Reform the Catholic Church?” Richard Gaillardetz (chair of BC’s theology department and regular commentator on the Catholic Church), Natalia Imperatori-Lee (noted scholar of Latinx theology and Catholic feminism), Bishop Mark O’Connell from the Archdiocese of Boston, and Phyllis Zagano (recently on the Vatican Commission to study the question of women deacons in the Catholic Church) kept the audience on the edge of their seats before audience members themselves joined the conversation.

Our third annual Wolfe Lecture (honoring Boisi’s founding director, Alan Wolfe) in early October hosted Sarah Stitzlein of the University of Cincinnati, whose recent book *Learning How to Hope: Reviving Democracy Through Our Schools and Civil*

Society, offered provocative ideas about how to utilize public education to foster democratic values among dispirited citizens and alienated students. Co-sponsored by BC’s Lynch School of Education and Human Development, the lecture was followed by an insightful response by Christopher Higgins (a recent addition to the Lynch School’s faculty), which sparked a lively conversation between the speaker and a diverse audience composed of social scientists, interested BC neighbors, and students from BC’s ed school.

Two weeks later, the Boisi Center hosted an event entitled “What Is ‘Nature’ Today in Science and Theology?” – a panel discussion generated in part by the document issued last summer by the Vatican Congregation for Catholic Education repudiating the understanding of “nature” utilized in arguing for the rights of transgender persons. Welkin Johnson (chair of BC’s biology department), Julie Hanlon Rubio (University of Santa Clara), Andrea Vicini, S.J. (a physician and social ethicist in BC’s theology department), and myself approached the contested understanding of what “nature” means today among biologists, social ethicists, and religious historians. Needless to say, a lively and exciting conversation with the audience followed the panel discussion moderated by Richard Gaillardetz.

At the end of October, the Boisi Center sponsored a well-attended public conversation on the question, “Do the Democrats Have a Religion Problem?” Moderated by M. Cathleen Kaveny (professor at the BC Law School and theology department), speakers included Mark Silk (director of the Greenberg Center for Religion and Public Culture at Trinity College, Hartford), Michael Sean Winters (senior correspondent for the *National Catholic Reporter*), and Peter Skerry (professor of political science at BC). Moderator Kaveny masterfully curated the conversation both among the panelists

and between the speakers and audience members.

Three lunch colloquia over the course of the semester brought scholars working on cutting-edge projects into close-knit conversations over lunch. Michael Serazio, a professor in BC’s communication department, offered a truly informative and provocative look into popular culture with his presentation “The Power of Sports: Media and Spectacle in American Culture,” showing how sports spectacle has borrowed (and in some cases, replaced) organized religion as the site of “transcendent” impulses. R. Ward Holder and Peter Josephson from St. Anselm College offered a mesmerizing look at America’s reigning “patron saint” of legal theory in “Religion and the Divided American Republic: Rawls’ Fault?” And Erick Berrelleza, S.J., a visiting scholar at the Boisi Center for the 2019-20 academic year, curated an intense discussion on the film *Santuario*, about the plight of “Juana,” an undocumented immigrant living for over two years in the “sanctuary” of an Episcopal Church in the face of government efforts to deport her.

I look forward to seeing you at our events next semester, which will kick off with the screening of Martin Doblmeier’s new film, “Revolution of the Heart: The Dorothy Day Story” on Wednesday, January 22, 2020.

~ Mark Massa, S.J.

THE POWER OF SPORTS: MEDIA AND SPECTACLE IN AMERICAN CULTURE

Boston College's Michael Serazio spoke on sports' role in America's cultural interpretation.

In the first luncheon colloquium of the academic year, Michael Serazio explored “The Power of Sports” in contemporary American society. Far more than a form of entertainment, Serazio argued that sports are a way in which American society derives its meaning, contending that sports have filled the gap left by the decline of organized religion. He then analyzed this meaning through sports' relationship to journalism, commercialism, gender, and politics.

Sports can be understood as a great unifier, Serazio argued. At a time when entertainment is individualized and on-demand, sports are more pervasive and air non-stop. Sports journalism, he added, manufactures the meanings and illusions that accompany the sports. The rise of social media, however, has forced those same journalists to sacrifice their journalistic integrity to compete for viewers against the same players or teams that they cover. Why go to ESPN to read about LeBron James when you can simply go to his Instagram profile? Stories are necessary, and journalism creates them.

Serazio then explored sports' second, though closely related, relationship to commercialism. Since information is instantaneous, consumers' attention spans shorter, and marketing dollars subject to competition, sports journalists are pushed towards the “hot take”: to write the most outrageous or controversial opinion to ensure views, likes, clicks, and retweets from fans. This leads to overworked and underpaid journalists and,



Serazio addresses an engaged audience.

most importantly, contributes to a shift in journalism—no longer is there a concern for objectivity, journalists validate popular opinions.

Serazio then turned to the relationship between sports and gender. For men, sports embody and express the epitome of masculinity. For example, Serazio described how male athletes are encouraged to “play through the pain.” Of all sports writers, anchors, and commentators, over 90% are men. Women in these fields often face sexism and discrimination and are held to a double-standard. For example, women are expected to be pretty and smart yet a single error is enough to destroy their career.

Lastly, Serazio turned to sports as the expression of our politics. Since Colin Kaepernick's protest against the treatment of black Americans by kneeling during the national anthem, many have called for a strict separation between sports and politics. Serazio argued that such a separation is impossible as sports

are bound up with the expression of two central political issues facing society: economics and the military. The central myth of sports culture—that the key to achievement is merely hard work—is a major tenet of the meritocracy work ethic. This messaging justifies America's capitalist regime and asserts, at least implicitly, that poverty is the product of laziness. Additionally, sports have been used since ancient times as a way to prepare for war or celebrate military excellence. That is still true today, Serazio explained. Consider the way war veterans are brought out onto the football field where their sacrifice for our country is acknowledged for a few minutes before a football game starts. To some, “this is the least we can do.” For Serazio, it affirms ongoing American military intervention on the world stage and occludes any critical reflection on that intervention.

Serazio concluded by affirming that, as these relationships illustrate, sports define us, create our collective consciousness, and are a reflection of who we are as Americans. The Q&A that followed focused on the sports culture at Boston College, new legislation that allows college athletes to receive compensation for their contribution to college athletics, the rising costs of sport events and what that means for local economies, as well as potential remedies to sports' runaway domination in American culture.

More photos, further readings, and an audio recording of the event can be found on the event page.

www.bc.edu/boisi-serazio

RELIGION AND THE DIVIDED AMERICAN REPUBLIC: RAWLS' FAULT?

Saint Anselm's professors offered a Niebuhrian remedy to a Rawlsian problem.

On October 7, R. Ward Holder and Peter Josephson, both of St. Anselm College and professors of politics and theology, respectively, joined the Boisi Center for a luncheon colloquium to present a talk entitled “Religion and the Divided American Republic: Rawls' Fault?”

They began their discussion by outlining the two moral principles Rawls believed to be central to a just society: the capacity for a sense of justice and the capacity to hold one's own private ideas of the good. They outlined the Rawlsian society in

which individuals maintain private conceptions of the good that need not impact the expedient politics pursued in public life. Holder and Josephson argued that this understanding of public life is inadequate, in part because it draws a kind of disembodied and ahistorical image of humanity. In Reinhold Niebuhr they find an alternative.

Central to their conception of Niebuhr's superior proposal for an approach to religion in public life is the two-fold test of toleration. According to this test, one

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Holder (L) and Josephson (R) answering questions from the audience.

holds their own individual beliefs while also accepting and listening to those of others. This test's guidance emphasizes the idea that one should both understand the importance of individual moral convictions and be aware of the individual's capacity for fallibility. Josephson and Holder argued that this understanding of public engagement is persuasive because it leaves space for religious thought and speech in the public sphere—as distinct from the necessary separation that flows from Rawls—and encourages open

dialogue.

At the conclusion of the presentation, a number of insightful questions facilitated the expansion of the audience's understanding of Niebuhr. Attention was drawn, for example, to the fact that Niebuhr's two-fold test is one of his more earnest ideas and that in his other works he also possesses a certain pessimistic pragmatism. Additionally, questions explored the meaning and

possibility of a true pluralistic democracy as well as the nuances and difficulties of applying Niebuhr's principles to our current political environment.

A recording of the colloquium, additional readings, and more photos can be found on the event page.

www.bc.edu/boisi-holderjosephson2

HOW WOULD YOU REFORM THE CATHOLIC CHURCH?

A lively panel discussion sought to answer an urgent question.

Recent years have been difficult for many Catholics. In light of the ongoing revelations from the sex abuse scandals, the marginalization of certain people and groups within the Catholic Church, and the oftentimes dramatic infighting, many American Catholics and Catholics around the world are asking themselves whether it is worth it to stay in the Church. Others, however, are asking themselves how the Church might change. The Boisi Center's first event of the year brought a diverse panel together to answer the question, "How would you reform the Catholic Church?" The panel featured Richard Gaillardetz of Boston College, Natalia Imperatori-Lee of Manhattan College, Bishop Mark O'Connell of the Archdiocese of Boston, and Phyllis Zagano of Hofstra University, with Mark Massa, S.J. moderating.

Massa began by asking the panelists what the single most important issue is that they would reform in the Church today? Zagano answered first, asserting that she would allow women to be ordained deacons. She argued that in doing so the Church would be returning to its history because women were ordained deacons in the early centuries of Christianity. She also noted the consistency of such a decision with the belief that we all were created in God's image—women, as men, can image Christ and gendered arguments for its prohibition should be denied.

O'Connell focused on overcoming the damage caused by the sex abuse crisis. He argued that to process and heal after the scandal and to ensure it is not repeated, the laity must be more involved. He urged the Church to allow more laypeople to participate in its councils, committees, and synods, and he offered that canon law

reform could aid in redistributing power in the fight against clericalism. These two reforms, he argued, could begin the move towards inclusive justice and mercy.

Imperatori-Lee advocated for dismantling the seminary system as it currently exists. She argued that part of the problem of clericalism and the abuse crisis is that the problems priests face are exacerbated by the fact that seminarians are educated and formed in isolation from the future congregations in which they will live and serve. Instead, she advocated for models of collaborative formation. For example, the Boston College School of Theology and Ministry offers classes where seminarians and priests study alongside lay people. She affirmed this model and pushed for a more universal adoption of it.

Gaillardetz argued to reform the relationship between the local Church and the Church hierarchy. He specifically highlighted the relationship between bishops and the communities they serve.

Gaillardetz envisioned a Church in which bishops are not ordained to titular sees, but instead are called from and for their local communities in smaller sees to which they are more accountable. This reform, he proposed, would require dividing existing dioceses into smaller jurisdictions, but it would allow bishops to be more active with the faithful as opposed to the honorific model that some episcopal appointments project.

Massa then invited the panelists to either expand on their first point or to highlight a new theological question of interest. Zagano took this opportunity to expand on her first point—the diaconate for women. She highlighted for the audience that no doctrinal law prohibits women's ordination to the diaconate, only ecclesial law. She illustrated this point with the story of two women ordained to the diaconate as recently as 19th century France.

O'Connell introduced a new point. He perceives a struggle between the strict and lenient interpretations of Church precepts, laws, and beliefs as well as in the discourse between the two.

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Imperatori-Lee (L) offers her remarks. O'Connell (C) and Zagano (R).

American Catholics are thus faced with a choice between extreme right or left (conservative or progressive) positions with little room for a middle ground. In response to this situation, O’Connell proposed two remedies. One remedy is “to learn to love baseball before one learns the rules of the game.” In this, O’Connell emphasized that learning to love God should be prioritized over engaging in theological debates about canon law. A second remedy is advocating for a centered Catholicism that refuses the demand adherence polemical stances are making from both sides. These, he believes, ought to be enticing for individuals looking to return to the Church, which can be facilitated by a program—comparable to RCIA—to welcome back

lapsed Catholics.

Imperatori-Lee made the case for decolonizing the Church. She asserted that many minoritized Catholics, such as women, Latinx, Asian, and African Catholics, have been subjugated and instrumentalized by the Catholic Church. She hopes that someday non-Western Catholics will be able to fully participate in and thus shape the Catholic ecclesial narrative. As she said, “Wounds heal from the margins in.”

Finally, Gaillardetz hopes to find a new theology that gives people a reason to stay in the Catholic Church in the midst of so many reasons to leave. When the Second Vatican Council declared that salvation can be found outside the Church, out of

a sense of salvific optimism, the unintended consequence was complacency by Church hierarchy. Gaillardetz envisions a new practical theology that attracts young people and marginalized communities.

The lively Q&A session that followed focused on inclusion within the Catholic Church. The audience raised issues such as the role of “paraecclesial” communities in the Church and women of color in Jesuit institutions of higher education.

A video recording of the panel and additional reading materials can be found on the event page.

www.bc.edu/boisi-reformcatholicchurch

THE THIRD ANNUAL WOLFE LECTURE ON RELIGION AND AMERICAN POLITICS

Sarah Stitzlein spoke on “Reviving Democracy During the 2020 Campaign Season by Learning How to Hope”



Stitzlein offering comments following Higgins’s response.

On the evening of October 9, Professor Sarah Stitzlein of the University of Cincinnati sparked an exciting discussion with her presentation on fostering hope, and how that might affect the 2020 election. Stitzlein began with her diagnosis—a look at America’s attitude today toward our political future. She characterized this attitude as cynical. Largely, Americans want to retreat from the political sphere, to throw their hands up in denunciation of the government, and to insist there is nothing we can do. Stitzlein argued, instead, that Americans need to foster, and act in, hope.

Stitzlein’s is not a traditional definition of hope. For many, hope is an individual desire toward a particular goal. This intensified individualization of hope is problematic, she said, though it is the

natural result of our hyper-individualistic, competitive discourse in the framework of the “American Dream.”

Instead, Stitzlein urged the audience to re-evaluate their definition of hope and to adopt a “pragmatic hope” framework, drawing from the work of John Dewey. Hope, she argued, must be seen as collective and active. It is not a thing to hold, but a process of having. This reconceptualization of hope requires a few steps. The first step is inquiry: in times of despair, the situation is best understood empirically. Next, Stitzlein detailed growth: this comes as a result of what was learned empirically, though this growth is not toward an end, but is worthwhile in and of itself. The third step is meliorism: an essential characteristic of Stitzlein’s entire outlook, meliorism is a call for thoughtful action, not blind optimism. In meliorism is

the belief that there is a way rational-empirical understandings can help society. Stitzlein’s final step is the development of habits. According to her, hope is a set of habits—“a predisposition to act.”

Stemming from this active, dynamic definition of hope, Stitzlein suggested ways to practice hope and explained the benefit of viewing hope as a collaborative, social mission, grounded in mutual trust. One essential practice, Stitzlein argued, is to conceive of political dissent as hope—proactively using dissent to raise consciousness and propose solutions.

Stitzlein shared with the audience her own experience teaching “hope as habits” in her course, “Save Our Schools!” at the University of Cincinnati. In the course, students foster a spirit of criticality and the ability to imagine creative solutions to problems in Cincinnati’s public schools.

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In this process, research and effective listening are emphasized as essential to the practice of hope and the generation of solutions.

Stitzlein ended with a call to action: young people have the motivation and the leadership to practice hope as well as to foster a melioric attitude surrounding our current political climate and the

upcoming election.

Stitzlein's lecture launched an exciting discussion, beginning with a keenly insightful response by Professor Christopher Higgins that questioned whether asking schools to teach hope was putting too much responsibility onto an already over-worked and over-burdened system. Others asked whether there

were limits to what groups can hope for, particularly with regard to matters that violate others' moral convictions, and toward what image of democracy Stitzlein's teaching of hope was working.

A recording of the lecture can be found on the event page.

www.bc.edu/boisi-stitzlein

SANTUARIO - FILM SCREENING AND DISCUSSION

A discussion on the new sanctuary movement as seen through the experience of one sanctuary resident in North Carolina.

Erick Berrelleza, S.J. presented a glimpse into his latest research, an ethnographic study on immigrants' lived religious experiences. He explained his long-time fascination with the idea of "sanctuary" as a physical entity—an idea that has existed since the Middle Ages. Now, since 2007, a new iteration of sanctuary has emerged in response to undocumented immigration in the United States: churches around the country offering support and protection to undocumented immigrants at risk of deportation.

Today, there are forty-six immigrants housed in churches nationwide, though many more religious groups have offered their facilities and resources as sanctuary, Berrelleza explained. Being granted sanctuary requires the person seeking it to have an active case against Immigration and Customs Enforcement (ICE) to remain in the United States—there have been, however, drastically few successful cases, in which the immigrant and the church were able to overturn ICE's earlier

deportation order.

For Berrelleza, this new iteration of physical sanctuary raises interesting questions about these immigrants' lived religious experiences while in sanctuary. Specifically, his research explores three main questions. The first entails the contours of religion for a sanctuary resident: how are they interacting with their space in a religious sense? The second asks how the experience of dwelling in a church influences the practices and beliefs of the resident. And the third analyzes the relationship of the residents to this new sanctuary movement itself: how active a role do they tend to take in broader activism?

Berrelleza supplemented his lecture with the short documentary, *Santuario*, which follows Guatemalan native Juana for two years while living in sanctuary at St. Barnabas Episcopal Church in North Carolina. *Santuario* offers the viewer a window into the complicated questions of the sanctuary movement which Berrelleza seeks to answer in his research. Juana, despite being Pentecostal, finds living in the Episcopal church "enlightening." The language difference between her and the congregation did not constitute a barrier, and Juana was able to connect with her faith even in this unfamiliar space, which serve as both her home and her place of worship.

Many sanctuary residents found themselves housed in atmospheres of religious expression; some more conservative, some more progressive. While uncomfortable at first for some—another sanctuary resident Rosa reported being shocked by the church's decision to perform same-sex marriages, for example—the differences did not hinder the resident's own Christian practice or belief. Instead, Berrelleza explained that

with the prolonged time and consistent interaction with the host congregations, residents reported experiencing a broader view of their religious faith.

Finally, Berrelleza discussed the distinct ways sanctuary residents interact with the broader movement. Some serve as symbols of the movement, while others opt to take more active roles. Juana, for example, is shown taking a moderately active role, connecting with others housed in sanctuary congregations and agreeing to be filmed in the documentary, while another sanctuary resident participates in press conferences and other forms of her own activism. Juana, however, remains in sanctuary even to this day as ICE's order is as of yet unchanged. This unveils any misunderstanding of the movement as facilitating rapid change—the reality is significantly slower. Due to that and other important factors, sanctuary residents themselves must gauge the level of activity they desire in the overarching movement.

In the conversation that followed Berrelleza's lecture, the attendees discussed the lack of sanctuary activity from Catholic churches—the players are, overwhelmingly, Protestant churches. Berrelleza emphasized the sometimes confusing legal implications of the movement—often, churches need to overcome hesitation and discomfort towards the movement. Churches face a choice between serving individual people and serving the government of their country. While some laws are unjust, the path of action is frequently unclear. The sanctuary movement, however, has changed the religious experiences of immigrants and congregations across the United States.

More information can be found on the event page.

www.bc.edu/boisi-berrellezaz



Berrelleza explaining the sanctuary movement.

WHAT IS ‘NATURE’ TODAY IN SCIENCE AND THEOLOGY?

An interdisciplinary panel engaged scientific and theological developments on a much-contested concept.

On October 22nd, the Boisi Center hosted a panel discussion entitled, “What Is ‘Nature’ Today in Science and Theology?” Panelists included chair of Boston College’s biology department, Welkin Johnson; the director of the Boisi Center, Mark Massa, S.J.; professor at the Jesuit School of Theology of Santa Clara University, Julie Hanlon Rubio; and professor of bioethics and moral theology at Boston College, Andrea Vicini, S.J. The chair of Boston College’s theology department, Richard Gaillardetz, moderated.

Gaillardetz opened the conversation by presenting several understandings of ‘nature’ and ‘the natural’ as conceived in the spheres of discourse today. He then asked each panelist to present how these concepts are used in their respective disciplines.

Julie Hanlon Rubio, speaking from the field of Christian ethics, emphasized the significance of natural law in determining how we should formulate moral norms. She suggested that the development of norms is complicated by humanity’s inherent fallibility and the church’s own incorrect conceptions of morality historically. She also emphasized that humanity’s creation in the image of God implies a universal dignity that must be recognized more consistently.

Welkin Johnson spoke from a scientific perspective, explaining that science does not use the terms “nature” or “natural” to distinguish human life. He also emphasized that “nature,” in science, precisely defines the limitations of the field—science does not address anything outside the bounds of nature.

Andrea Vicini, S.J., speaking as a theological ethicist who focuses on bioethics and a trained medical doctor and pediatrician, discussed the importance of interaction between disciplines when making efforts to understand nature. He described theology and science as different “lenses” through which one observes human nature’s complexity. Vicini defined “naturalistic essentialism” as the error of thinking you can know all about human nature by looking through one lens, which misses the complexity of the human experience.



Johnson responds to audience questions. Also pictured (L-R) Massa, Vicini, and Rubio.

Finally, Mark Massa S.J. defined nature as a conceptual construct—the best human attempt to define what constitutes the rationality of the world. But just as institutions and beliefs have evolved, he argued, so has human nature and it is important to allow for this development instead of resisting or rejecting it.

Gaillardetz then asked panelists to address the problems that emerge when there are disputed appeals to nature.

Rubio invoked the recent document from the Vatican’s Congregation for Catholic Education, released in June, entitled “Male and Female, He Created Them,” and emphasized that many who are critical of gender fluidity fear that such fluidity will extend to other realms which they regard as fundamental to Christianity—a slippery slope argument. Rubio suggested that engaging gender theory in Christian theology will require us to explain why this area can be considered fluid and if or how such fluidity applies to those other categories.

Johnson outlined the long history of human attempts to scientifically define what it means to be human. Viewing these attempts as problematic, he argued there are many cases in which humans did not reflect the theory’s definition, for example, instances when no one exists that resembles what the mean or average might render as the “norm,” yet applications of the normativity sparked controversy. He considers this problematic particularly in conceptions of evolution.

Vicini’s response addressed four large concepts central to an understanding of human nature: diversity, variation, healing and medicalization of human nature, and culture and colonization of human

nature. He suggested that diversity and variation should be embraced, not feared, and that we should be wary of extreme efforts to make normative certain elements of human nature or medicalize it to the point that we lose the import of natural aspects of human life, such as death. Reflecting on human nature, he noted, must entail reflecting on the diversity of cultures that form us.

Massa criticized this summer’s Vatican document through appeals to the problematic concept of “human realism.” Human realism asserts that we can come up with principles and ideas about human nature by observing the real world “out there.” Massa argued that the problem with such an assertion is that it calls for an understanding of human nature as set and objective. Instead, Massa proposed that essential to human nature is its fluidity and evolution. It should not be considered apart from us, but internal to us, and changing as we do.

An interesting Q&A followed, during which a number of interesting questions raised concerns ranging from, among other things, the way human nature should be discussed in educational institutions, particularly with regard to childhood development and transgenerism, to the psychological relevance of biological conceptions of nature, as well as how biological or scientific concepts of nature could inform Christian moral thought.

More photos, a video recording of the panel, and recommended readings can be found on the event page.

www.bc.edu/boisi-naturepanel

DO THE DEMOCRATS HAVE A RELIGION PROBLEM?

A lively panel sought to define and remedy the problem the Democratic Party seems to have with religion.

On October 28, the Boisi Center hosted its last panel event of the fall semester, entitled, “Do the Democrats Have a Religion Problem?” The panel featured Mark Silk of Trinity College, Peter Skerry of Boston College, and Michael Sean Winters of the *National Catholic Reporter*, with M. Cathleen Kaveny, of Boston College, moderating.

Kaveny began the discussion by asking the title question, encouraging the panelists to define precisely what that problem is. Silk and Skerry both argued that the Democrats do indeed have a religion problem, approaching their explanation of the problem by describing the ways certain groups traditionally vote. They noted that white, evangelical Protestants overwhelmingly support the Republican Party, while black, Hispanic/Latinx, and non-religious white voters favor the Democratic Party. Silk referred to this difference as the “God gap”—an ongoing phenomenon that those who attend church services regularly are more likely to vote Republican. Skerry acknowledged the changing American religious landscape, though, noting the increase of those who identify as “nones” (meaning, they identify as having no religious affiliation) and who often vote Democrat. Skerry contended that this rising population will become more politically salient since “nones” are highly educated and heavily engaged in political activism. Lastly, Skerry pointed out that the Democratic Party has demonstrably offered their support of the “nones” and will continue to do so in the future, exacerbating what Silk calls the “God gap.”

Winters argued, on the other hand, that the Democrats do not have a religion problem. Instead, he believes, the Democrats have a political problem with

religion. Reading the question broadly, Winters pointed out that the Republican Party also has a problem with religion: they contort religion to support their political agenda. However, Winters acknowledged that the perceived problem that Democrats have with religion is of their own making. Winters cited either ignorance of religion or a lack of commitment to their own faith among elite Democrats, “intellectual flabbiness,” and endorsements from large corporations—like Planned Parenthood—that are perceived as anti-religious in the eyes of the American public. He argued this is all viewed as unreligious behavior and indicative of a “lukewarm” faith. Winters concluded by reflecting on how, at least numerically, the Catholic vote is important, but because Catholics mirror the broader culture with regard to political party membership and their views on particular issues, there is no longer a “Catholic vote” as there once was.

Kaveny asked if there is a solution to this religion problem. Silk saw that reducing the “God gap” was the only path forward. In a similar vein, Skerry hoped that the Democrats would be more tolerant of people with religious views and that they would invest their time in attracting religious voters, especially progressive ones. But such a path forward is not without its challenges. Distinct from what the Democrats could do to woo religious voters, religious Republican voters, Skerry indicated, are prepared and able to act on their faith because the Republican Party integrates their worldview into their political platform. Winters argued that Catholics need to be more “stiff-necked” and consistent on matters of faith, unafraid to speak of the role religion plays in their own lives as their Republican counterparts do.

The panel concluded with a Q&A session in which audience members asked about, among other things, how Israel and the Middle East play into American politics, how the left could realistically integrate religiosity, possible plans to change the role religion plays in politics, and the future of the Catholic Church in light of its deep, internal political division.

A video recording of the panel can be found on the event page.

www.bc.edu/boisi-democratsreligionproblem

THE BOISI CENTER FOR RELIGION AND AMERICAN PUBLIC LIFE

24 Quincy Road
Chestnut Hill, MA 02467

TEL: 617-552-1860

FAX: 617-552-1863

EMAIL: boisi.center@bc.edu

www.bc.edu/boisi

BOISI CENTER STAFF

MARK MASSA, S.J.

DIRECTOR

SUSAN RICHARD

ADMINISTRATIVE ASSISTANT

R. ZACHARY KARANOVICH

GRADUATE RESEARCH ASSISTANT


JULIA BLOECHL


ZOE GREENWOOD


MONICA ORONA


UNDERGRADUATE RESEARCH FELLOWS

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All Boisi Center event photos by: Christopher Soldt
MTS Photography.



(L-R) Silk, Skerry, and Winters engaged in conversation.

The Boisi Center for Religion and American Public Life

Boston College
24 Quincy Road
Chestnut Hill, MA 02467 USA

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SOME OF OUR UPCOMING EVENTS

WEDNESDAY, JANUARY 22, 2020

“REVOLUTION OF THE HEART: THE DOROTHY DAY STORY”
FILM SCREENING & PANEL DISCUSSION

TUESDAY, FEBRUARY 18, 2020

“IS THERE A NEW ANTI-SEMITISM”
PANEL DISCUSSION

MONDAY, FEBRUARY 24, 2020

“RACE, CLASS, AND ETHNICITY IN COLLEGE ADMISSIONS: DEANS DISCUSS THE HARVARD CASE”
PANEL DISCUSSION

WEDNESDAY, MARCH 11, 2020

19TH ANNUAL PROPHETIC VOICES LECTURE
JONATHAN LEE WALTON, DEAN | WAKE FOREST UNIVERSITY SCHOOL OF DIVINITY

FOR INFORMATION ON THESE AND ALL OF OUR SPRING 2020 EVENTS, PLEASE SEE OUR WEBSITE www.bc.edu/boisi