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# The Boisi Center Report

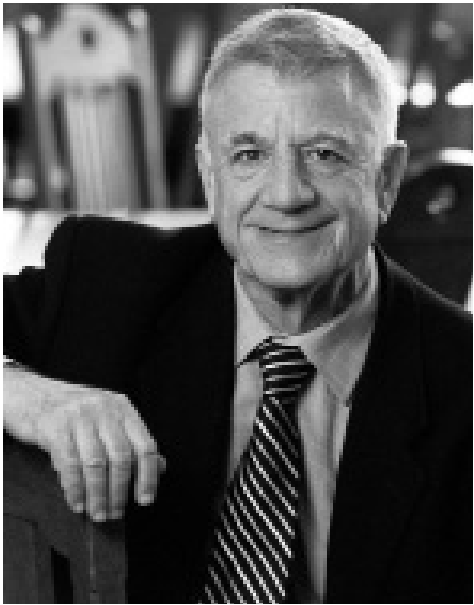
THE BOISI CENTER FOR RELIGION AND AMERICAN PUBLIC LIFE AT BOSTON COLLEGE

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## *From the Director*



*On April 30, BC's Provost Bert Garza, together with Fr. Jim Keenan of the Theology Department, held a panel discussion dealing with the results of the two year initiative they sponsored on the Catholic Intellectual Traditions. I realized making my presentation how much of a role the CIT played in the Boisi Center's activities this year.*

*The most visible part of that role was our decision to have members of the CIT seminar on "Ways of Knowing," which I chaired, speak to our luncheon groups. Because of their presentations, we had the best attended lunches since we began the Boisi Center. We were also able to sponsor other events around the general topic, in particular Stephen Pope's lecture on evolution and its implications for Christian ethics.*

*While I'll miss the cross-disciplinary conversations around the seminar table with my colleagues, this project is not really at an end. We've been wrestling in our last few meetings with the future of our work, and it's been exciting to hear faculty discussions about providing leadership to our community by extending the conversation to students and other faculty members at BC. We'll see what faculty seminars, artistic endeavors, events or even publications emerge over the months to come.*

*A new website is also being developed to communicate specific reflections on the CIT. In the meantime, many of the seminar participants' lectures related to the CIT can be found on the Boisi Center website: [www.bc.edu/boisi](http://www.bc.edu/boisi).*

*This summer the Boisi Center will host another seminar, "Religious Diversity and the Common Good," sponsored by the National Endowment for the Humanities. Fifteen college teachers from around the country will be in residence for six weeks discussing readings, making presentations and listening to guest lecturers. Although I have yet to meet them, on paper they are a truly outstanding group.*

*My book *The Future of Liberalism* was published in February and is already into its second printing. I've done book tour events in the Twin Cities, Madison, New York and Washington. A panel discussion on the book was held at Brookings Institution featuring William Galston, Ross Douthat and E. J. Dionne. Another was held here at BC featuring Mary Sarah Bilder and Dan Mahoney. The book was reviewed widely and generally with enthusiasm. A paperback version will appear in the winter.*

*The other big news on the book front is that this summer Baylor University Press will be publishing the results of our 2007 conference on gambling. Erik Owens and I are the editors, and the book is called *Gambling: Mapping the American Moral Landscape*.*

*This has been a rough year financially for higher education – indeed for everyone. Still we expect to have as full a slate of events as possible for next year, and I will be reporting on them at the appropriate time.*

— Alan Wolfe

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## REALISM, ETHICS AND U.S. FOREIGN POLICY

Realism is a school of thought in international relations that asserts the need to carefully assess and project national power to achieve maximum stability and security among states. Some political realists (such as Henry Kissinger) deny any role to ethics or morality in this process, while others (such as Walter Lippmann and Reinhold Niebuhr) have argued that moral issues must be a part of any serious realist analysis. On February 18, less than a month after President Obama promised in his inaugural address foreign policy that would not sacrifice ideals for security, the Boisi Center brought together three of the nation's most influential scholars on political realism. Andrew Bacevich (Professor of History and International Relations, Boston University), Jean Bethke Elshtain (Laura Spelman Rockefeller Professor of Social and Political Ethics, University of Chicago) and Rev. J. Bryan Hehir (Parker Gilbert Montgomery Professor of the Practice of Religion and Public Life at the Kennedy School of Government, Harvard University) spoke to a packed audience about the role of realism and ethics in U.S. foreign policy at the dawn of the Obama administration.

Citing the preamble of the U.S. Constitution, Bacevich argued that the President is first and foremost obligated to “provide for the common defense, promote the general welfare and secure the blessings of liberty to ourselves and our posterity.” Our posterity—future generations of Americans—cannot enjoy our present quality of life, he said, without a balanced budget, a cap on federal entitlements, alleviation of the current account deficit, an end to our dependence on foreign oil and the restoration of the environment and its protection from further harm. Likewise, a clearheaded appraisal of our common defense



counsels us to abandon the dominant view of “national security” as requiring global hegemony instead use our military for defensive purposes only. President Obama’s moral obligation to the American people demands no less.

Professors Elshtain and Hehir both began with historical perspectives, differentiating the classical form of political realism, which completely eschewed talk of morality and ethics, from the modern version, which is open in varying degrees to ethical considerations. Elshtain focused her remarks upon a particular form of modern realism epitomized by the work of Reinhold Niebuhr. Christian realism, as this view has come to be known, argues that a theological understanding of human nature—as invested with natural rights and capable of transcendence, but bound by a sinful pride that refuses to admit the limits of our rationality and altruism—affords a much more accurate portrait of international relations than its alternatives. President Obama has claimed Reinhold Niebuhr as an important influence in his thinking, and Elshtain skillfully outlined the sort of policy critiques Christian realism could offer the new administration.

Hehir faulted classical realism for over-emphasizing the moral importance of nation-states, reminding the audience that while states are crucial political entities, they must always have relative, not absolute, moral value. Human dignity transcends national boundaries, and political leaders should understand the world as a human community, not simply a collection of states. With regard to the challenges facing the new president, Hehir argued that Obama needs to reclaim a sort of Niebuhrian foreign policy that embraces both moral realism and (in opposition to the Bush administration) limits to American power and influence. This will entail careful attention to our responsibilities in Iraq and Central Asia, along with a redefinition (and limitation) of the scope of our present “war on terror.” ■



*Left to right: Erik Owens, Jean Bethke Elshtain, Rev. J. Bryan Hehir and Andrew Bacevich*

## EVANGELICALS AND DEMOCRACY IN THE GLOBAL SOUTH

Timothy Samuel Shah, Adjunct Senior Fellow for Religion and Foreign Policy at the Council on Foreign Relations, spoke on March 18 about the role of global evangelicalism in democracy around the world and across time. Shah began with the illuminating statistic that 600 million evangelicals, of the 700 hundred million evangelicals worldwide, live in the global south. This has major implications for social dynamics and political action.

Having recently completed a massive multi-year study of global evangelicalism, Shah argued that five definitive conclusions that can be made regarding evangelicalism and democracy. First, evangelicals are generally not very good at direct political activism and involvement because of ineffectiveness in idea and institution building, which is necessary for effective and sustainable political activism. Second, direct evangelical political involvement and activism has often been detrimental for evangelical Christianity's reputation; it has spurred division and occasionally undermined religious authority. Third, contrary to conventional wisdom, evangelicalism is consistently at home with liberal democratic modernity. The primary principle for evangelicalism is the necessity and legitimacy of free choice in religion; one must choose to become a Christian. As a result, there is a deep and



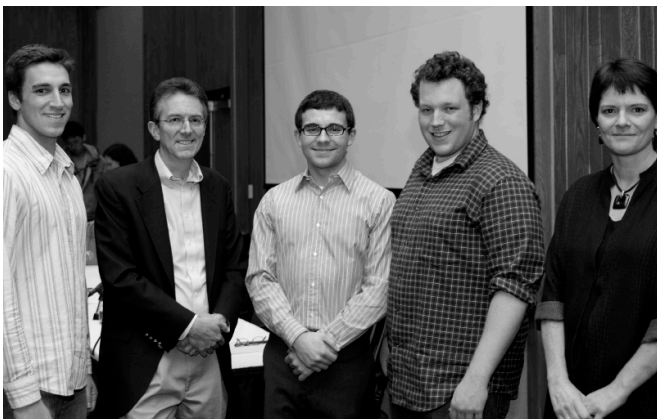
*Timothy Samuel Shah*

heartfelt affinity with evangelicals and modernity. Shah pointed out that both modernity and evangelicalism share an historical time period of formation. Fourth, evangelicalism has also characteristically deepened and strengthened liberal democratic modernity, not through formal political engagement but by empowering otherwise marginalized peoples. This is sometimes an indirect byproduct of evangelicalism rather than an intentional, politically motivated action. Finally, evangelicalism has avoided involvement in theocratic political projects designed to impose some kind of comprehensive Christian political society. ■

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## BUILDING: HOUSES, COMMUNITY, RESUMES?

Boston College student service leaders Dan Couch (A&S '09) and Matt Raffol (CSOM '09) each gave an impassioned account of their service experiences under various organizations on campus. Along with Robert Murphy, Associate Professor of Economics, and Jennie Purnell, Associate Professor of Political Science, they served as panelists at an event organized by the Boisi Center Student Advisory Panel on March 19. Andrew Bianco (A&S '09) served as moderator.



*Left to right: Matt Raffol, Robert Murphy, Andrew Bianco, Dan Couch and Jennie Purnell*

Couch, serving on the 4Boston Council, emphasized the ability of service projects to change students' perceptions of how their individual choices affect the world beyond. Raffol, active in the Pedro Arrupe Program, as well as having been a participant in various immersion trips, said BC's Jesuit commitment to service and education allowed students to transform their values into informed social action.

Murphy surveyed the latest research, including his own, on foreign aid at the governmental level and indicated that despite good intentions these programs have not been very effective. Murphy concluded that the real question was not the amount of foreign aid that would alleviate poverty, but how the aid would be employed to assist people. The best way to help, he believes, is service on the ground rather than at large organizational levels. Purnell, who researches faith-based social activism, while also directing the BC Center for Student Formation, spoke to the ideal of service in relation to the Jesuit mission. Purnell proposed that the term "service trip" was a misnomer because service extends in two directions -- from the students and from those they assist. Justice that comes out of solidarity is the Christian ideal. Service and education are integral components to realizing human potential from a Jesuit understanding. ■

## FIELD SCIENCE IN THE 21ST CENTURY



Noah Snyder

Noah Snyder, Assistant Professor of Geology, spoke about technology and field observation in his geologic work on rivers on February 4. Snyder noted that paths to knowledge across disciplines have similarities, incorporating different perspectives and approaches to knowledge.

Snyder talked about the ways in which geologists approach their field research. Using advanced technology, there is a temptation to simply work off of aerial photography images, topographic maps and digital elevation models. Snyder noted how helpful technology can be, but emphasized how important field work remains. By observing a given area, a geologist can contextualize the rest of the data, making field work imperative. In an example of the relationship between technology and fieldwork from his own research, Snyder recounted his experience while doing his PhD near the San Andreas Fault in California. After months of work, he expected a certain result from the data he collected, and when he did not get that result, he was only able to account for the variables because of the work they had done on site. Intimate familiarity with the physical traits of the ground explained the surprising outcome. Digital technology enhances the possibilities of fieldwork, but the two should be pursued in tandem.

The kind of work Snyder conducts has wide applications, and he cited the work done in New Orleans on the levees to avoid catastrophe again. Snyder himself is currently working in Maine to help protect endangered species. By recognizing different “ways of knowing,” one can connect disparate threads to arrive at constructive and revealing conclusions, as Snyder’s work proves. ■

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## SCIENTIFIC KNOWLEDGE AND FAITH

Paul Davidovits, Professor of Chemistry, addressed the relationship between science and faith at a lunch colloquium on March 25. In particular, he discussed how faith affects science and scientific discovery. To begin, he offered a definition of faith, which is “a firm belief in something for which there is no proof.” In this definition, Davidovits emphasized how faith is characteristically optimistic and a basic human trait.

According to Davidovits, three categories of faith exist: faith that contradicts science, faith that is tangential to science and faith that drives science. Miracles, events that contradict all known scientific evidence, make up the first category. The second category is a realm of study in which science and faith should not and cannot overlap. This includes questions such as “Is there a meaning to life?” or “Is there a guiding cosmic purpose?” These questions cannot be answered by science and are therefore left up to faith. Finally, faith that drives science can be profound, such as belief in a unifying principle underlying the diversity of phenomena encountered in nature.

Davidovits fielded challenging questions about his presentation, such as the relationship between finding

an explanation and finding meaning, and what actually qualifies as science. He also addressed the potential limitations of the human mind and whether human beings are actually capable of understanding the depths of the universe. ■



Paul Davidovits

## CHRISTIAN ETHICS AND HUMAN EVOLUTION

**H**ow does evolution inform Christian ethics? This was the central question explored in a major lecture delivered on March 31 by Stephen Pope, Professor of Theology, Boston College. Pope is the author of the book *Human Evolution and Christian Ethics*, published in 2008. His lecture was co-sponsored by the seminar on the Catholic Intellectual Traditions that wrapped up its work this Spring. (See the Director's Letter on p.1 for details.)

Evolution can be understood as a scientific fact or as an ideology. The scientific community agrees that evolution occurs, but a large number of Americans believe in the literal story of Genesis, in direct opposition to this claim. Many people fear an evolutionary ideology that promotes eugenics and other means of harming the human being. Academic Christian ethics generally rejects the usefulness of biology and evolution to its enterprise, but Pope argued that there is indeed value in evolution for Christian ethics.

A necessary biological function for morality emerges from understanding evolution. Species depend on encouraging trust and loyalty in culturally acceptable ways, in order to promote evolutionary success. This has five implications for Christian ethics: (1) understanding the evolutionary roots of ethics in relation to the natural law, (2) assessing our own moral commitments and integrity, (3) properly directing our behavioral and emotional responses, (4) recognizing selfishness as original sin and (5) transcending constraints of an evolutionary past.

Evolutionary altruism is another insight Christian ethicists have from evolution. This accounts for Christian love – *agape* – which is reproductively detrimental. Only *agape* and natural love can explain human behavior completely. Pope notes that justice rather than biology obliges human beings to act beyond natural love. Genetically, humans have a morality towards others in their group, but an enmity towards outsiders. Christian

ethics challenges the natural zones and helps move people beyond the imperative of genetic love.

A final contribution evolution makes to Christian ethics pertains to the nature of human dignity. Evolution is often perceived to undermine human dignity, for if we are descended from monkeys, we are no better than monkeys. Pope argued that dignity does not simply equal the various traits of different people, but rather the whole person as loved for being an individual. Consequently, there is continuity with other species and a responsibility within the natural person to honor that relationship. The church upholds human dignity in practical ways to combat the risk that evolution will undermine that dignity. ■



Left to right: Alan Wolfe, Stephen Pope and Erik Owens

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## WOMEN LIVING WITH HIV/AIDS IN THE U.S.

**R**osanna DeMarco, Associate Professor of Community Health at Boston College, spoke on February 26 about her work with American women living with HIV/AIDS. She shared some of her struggles to understand the situation of these women, who statistically tend to be poor and non-white. DeMarco approaches her work from both an inductive and deductive manner; in addition to scientific statistical analysis, DeMarco personally interacts with a number of women with HIV/AIDS in the Greater Boston area.

Four of these women persuaded her to make a film with them about their lives – to be used as an educational piece encouraging others to avoid high-risk practices. The documentary, “Women’s Voices, Women’s Lives,” empowered the women involved in the making of it and is being shown internationally for AIDS prevention. DeMarco hopes that by encouraging women to speak out about their experiences, the circumstances that promote the spread of the disease will change. See the Boisi Center website for a link to the film. ■

## INTUITION, EMOTION AND VISUALIZATION



*Crystal Tiala*

Set designer Crystal Tiala, Associate Professor of Design in the Theater Department, gave a lively and hands-on presentation entitled “Intuition, Emotion, and Visualization” on March 11. Tiala described the process of designing a set, which involves research about the show, its historical context and the playwright. Using the collected information, she begins to develop an idea of what she wants the set to look like. She emphasized how important context is and argued that the context in which one sees an image is just as important as the image itself. Unlike many other academics, Tiala said, she “intuits” things based on her own observations; she visualizes and does not verbalize. This can make her feel like an outsider in the university community, she noted, because her work does not necessarily come across as “academic” to those in other disciplines.

To challenge the audience’s tendencies towards words rather than images, Tiala engaged the audience with image cards and slides, asking everyone to contribute ideas about what sort of emotions the images evoked. She included images of several of her own sets from shows at Boston College and elsewhere, as well as collages her students created. The audience offered a wide-ranging mix of ideas and perspectives in response to the variety of images Tiala provided. ■

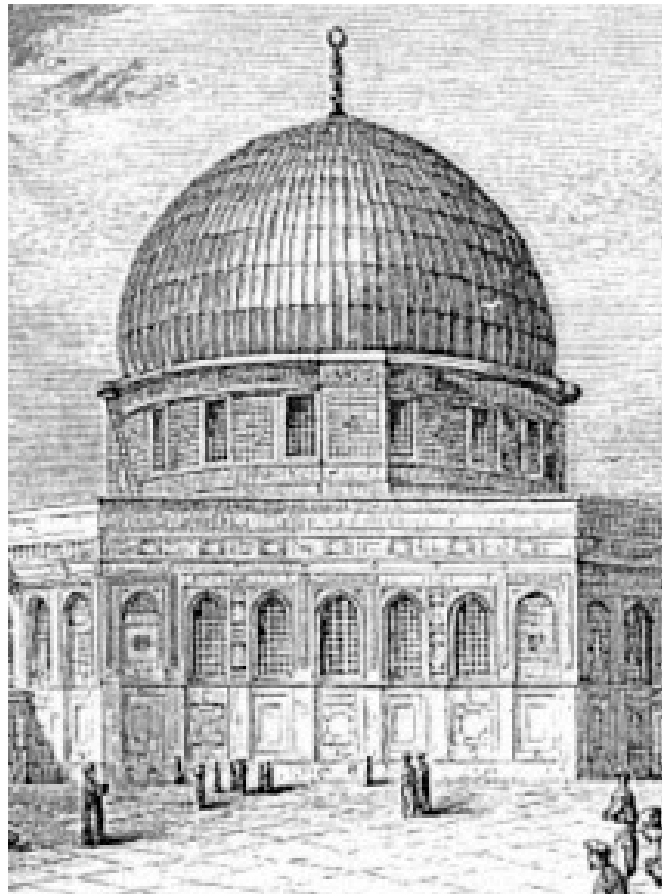
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## ICONOGRAPHY IN THE ABRAHAMIC TRADITIONS

During her April 8 presentation at the Boisi Center, Pamela Berger, Professor of Fine Arts, explored the iconographic relationship between the Temple of Solomon and the Dome of the Rock. Berger’s interest in this topic arose when she noticed that in medieval art the Temple was often depicted as circular, even though it is known to have been rectilinear both when built by Solomon and when rebuilt by Herod.

Even after the destruction of the Second Temple, Jews, who were expelled from Jerusalem, would return to the city and conduct furtive ceremonies at the site of a pierced stone where they believed the Holy of Holies had stood. Under Christian rule the land eventually became part of a garbage dump and was defiled. When Muslim armies captured the city in 636 CE, their leader, Umar, sought out the holy rock. By now it had been legendarily connected to Abraham’s near sacrifice of Isaac (according to Jews and Christians) or Ishmael (according to Muslims), Jacob’s pillow and the site where David prayed asking for God’s mercy while his first child with Bathsheba was dying.

The Dome of the Rock was erected as a large circular building on the site, and Muslims tolerated Jewish worship there. Berger showed examples of how this round Muslim building was iconographically conflated by Christian crusaders, as well as Jews, with the Temple of Jerusalem. She hopes this art historical conversation will encourage greater interreligious dialogue. ■



*The Dome of the Rock*

## FAITHS OF A CATHOLIC UNIVERSITY

James Bernauer, S.J., began his discussion at the Boisi Center on February 11 with a few observations regarding Boston College's religious character. Bernauer, Professor of Philosophy, said that although the school is traditionally Catholic, the plurality of religious faiths present will continue to increase in the years to come. In the future, the key dividing line in terms of school and student development will be between personal and impersonal faiths and relationships within the community. Bernauer provided a guiding motto, "All meaningful knowledge is for the sake of action, and all meaningful action is for the sake of friendship."

Bernauer explained that the Catholic religious tradition recognizes the "universal personal other," the idea that every member of a community can be in a personal relationship with another member regardless of geographical limits. In its full development, the universal personal other is the idea of God. This idea of God as personal is what allows a person to show compassion for or empathize with people from diverse backgrounds. This is the kind of religious tradition that BC and other Catholic universities must strive to maintain and enhance. ■



James Bernauer, S.J.

## GETTYSBURG IN REHAB

At his April 1 luncheon colloquium, Boisi Center visiting scholar John Summers questioned the drive for "historical authenticity" in the "rehabilitation" presently underway at the Gettysburg National Military Park. Park authorities are felling trees and moving earth to restore the sightlines and topography present in 1863, hoping visitors and reenactors will be able to almost "feel the bullets" from the crucial Civil War battle. Practically speaking, Summers argued, Gettysburg cannot be returned to exactly what it was; contemporary documentation of the topography is limited and unreliable.

More importantly, though, this desire to fix the battleground in its 1863 condition belies the moral lessons the battle should teach us. It is the soldiers' deaths that render the site historically significant, not our ability to feel as if we have authentically experienced the battle. Many of the trees slated for removal today were in fact nourished by the blood of soldiers wounded and killed there nearly one hundred and fifty years ago. (Summers expands upon this theme in a March 18, 2009 article in *The New Republic*, available on our website.) ■

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### AUTHOR MEETS CRITICS: *THE FUTURE OF LIBERALISM*

The Boisi Center's final event of the year focused on Alan Wolfe's newest book, *The Future of Liberalism* (Knopf, 2009). Wolfe was joined by friendly critics Mary Sarah Bilder, Professor of Law, a legal historian at Boston College School of Law, and Daniel Mahoney, Professor of Political Science, a political philosopher at Assumption College. Liberalism, argued Wolfe in his opening remarks, is grounded in the principle that as many people as possible should have as much control over their lives as possible. Liberty and equality, he said, are mutually reinforcing, not contradictory, as some theorists would have it; a person cannot lead a life of dignity and self-respect if those around her are not able to do the same.

Bilder praised Wolfe's historical method and sensibility but argued that his account of John Locke required more nuance. Locke, she argued, was at once both deeply conservative (in his views on property ownership and race) and unusually liberal (in his promotion of religious tolerance). Mahoney welcomed Wolfe's call for a liberalism that is both self-critical and friendly to religion, but critiqued what he saw as liberalism's reliance on the state for promulgation of its ends. The ensuing Q&A session brought spirited discussion of liberal means and ends in the Obama era. ■

