
The Boisi Center Report

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

VOL. 11 ❖ NO. 2 ❖ MAY 2011

From the Director



For the first time, I am writing my director's letter from abroad. Four of my six months at Oxford University have passed, and it has been a great experience. Fortunately, the staff at the Boisi Center, especially Erik Owens, Susan Richard and Brenna McMahan, have kept things running amazingly smoothly.

There is nothing quite like being associated with a university that has been around for some 750 years. Take, for example, the Snell dinner, an annual event that celebrates the relationship between Balliol, my college, and the University of Glasgow. It is one thing for people to show up in kilts and for bag pipe music to fill the hall—or for me to slip into the tux I bought second-hand in nearby Woodstock—but it adds another level of enjoyment to learn that Adam Smith attended the same Snell dinner more than two hundred years before me. Smith, though, is recent history. Dinners at Balliol take place in a Harry Potteresque hall featuring a portrait of John Wycliffe, the religious reformer and translator, who was elected master of the college in 1361. (I'll leave Balliol's religious history to others, but I cannot help mentioning that it was right in front of the college door that Thomas Cranmer, former Archbishop of Canterbury, was burned at the stake in 1556.)

It is not clear whether Oxford is such a beautiful city because the colleges are so breathtaking or the other way around; town and gown are intimately linked here. But there is no denying that I have had the fortune to spend considerable

time in one of the most enchanting places in the world. The dinners are so stimulating and the setting so idyllic that I feel my intellectual life renewed. At a typical dinner a Sanskrit scholar will sit on one side of me and a cardiologist on the other. The only problem with the conversations we have is that they distract from the fantastic food and wine we consume.

Being here has also enabled me to travel, and I have spent time in South Africa, Turkey, and France. Each, of course, has its wonders but from a religious standpoint, Turkey was by far the most interesting. I have always had an interest in Byzantine history and was anxious to see what remained from the days of Constantine and his successors. The answer is very little. Turkey offers one of the world's most impressive mosques, along with Roman and Greek ruins breathtaking in their size and state of preservation. But aside from the many churches buried in the caves of Cappadocia, there was little left of the world in which Christianity became a state religion—and changed Western history for all time.

My time at Oxford has been spent lecturing on my new book on political evil, to be published in September. I can hardly keep up with events in the real world that bear on the book, such as the killing of Osama bin Laden, but I hope I offer in this book a framework for thinking about what happens when evil people use the power of a state or political movement to wreak their havoc, and for pondering the best ways to respond. The reaction to my talks at Oxford has been positive, and I hope the same thing will take place when the book appears.

As much as I love it here in Oxford, I miss Boston College and the Boisi Center and look forward to returning home. Though we will announce more details in coming months, we at Boisi are honored to have been selected recently to help BC celebrate its sesquicentennial during the 2012-2013 academic year. We love Boston College and are anxious to do all we can so that people will remember it as fondly centuries from now as I will remember Oxford after my return.

— Alan Wolfe

WOMEN AND THE STATE OF AMERICAN FEMINISM

How are women doing today? The Obama administration recently released a major report on the status of American women, filled with demographic data and sociological analysis. Seeking to place the report in a broader context, the Boisi Center invited three scholars with wide-ranging expertise in history, religion and culture to discuss the state of women—and feminism—in the United States today. The overflow crowd in Devlin Hall on April 26 attested to the wide interest in the topic as well as the esteem in which they held our speakers, Laurel Thatcher Ulrich, Lisa Sowle Cahill and Cynthia Young.

Ulrich, a feminist writer and historian who holds a prestigious university professorship at Harvard, framed her remarks around a comparison of the Obama report and its only predecessor, released by the Kennedy administration in 1963. Though most of the statistics had improved for women, some dramatically, Ulrich noted the continuity in the kind of work women do outside the home. Women continue to be concentrated in a small number of traditionally female occupations: secretaries, registered nurses, elementary school teachers, cashiers, and nursing aides. Not coincidentally, these are also some of the lowest-paying jobs in our economy. “Feminism isn’t about inspiring more female doctors,” she said. “It’s about fostering a society in which nurses are truly respected for the work they do.”

Lisa Cahill, Monan Professor of Theology at Boston College, spoke about the resources available to Catholic feminists—and, more broadly, Christian feminists—as they face the apparent disjunction between their desire



Cynthia Young



Laurel Thatcher Ulrich

for gender equality and their faith tradition’s teaching on gender inequality. She pointed to recent developments in feminist theology and Biblical interpretation (hermeneutics), to statements by Church leaders about gender complementarity, and most of all, to the growing awareness of the incredibly diverse experiences of women around the world. Women’s reflections on their own experience help to make Catholicism truly a “living tradition” that can remain vibrant and meaningful for women in all circumstances.

The final panelist was Cynthia Young, associate professor of English at Boston College and former director of BC’s program in African and African Diaspora Studies. Young began with an analysis of two iconic black women who, in many people’s eyes, have come to define the aspirations of African American women: Michelle Obama and Oprah Winfrey. Our culture’s focus on “the two O’s,” known for their fashion sensibility as much as their business prowess and philanthropic tendencies, is notable in part for what it obscures: the much more common plight of black women who face higher rates of domestic abuse, poverty and incarceration.

In the lively Q&A period that followed, panelists reflected on the media’s portrayal of women, the challenges of motherhood and the sometimes imposing generational gap that complicates any agreement about the priorities and concerns of American feminism. All agreed that while some women are indeed doing much better than ever before, many others are not; American women’s status varies enormously by race, class and religion, as it always has. ■

PERFECT STORM: CRISIS & POSSIBILITY IN HIGHER ED

Higher education today faces a perfect storm of three mutually reinforcing crises: economic uncertainty, a demand for quantifiable results and a failed theory of educational improvement. This was the sobering message delivered in an April 5 lecture by W. Robert Connor, past president of the Teagle Foundation and former professor of classics at Princeton and Duke universities. Unless faculty, administrators and students alike make needed reforms, Connor warned, higher education will find itself increasingly subject to reforms from legislators and policymakers outside the academy. By revamping the current theory of educational improvement based on research about what works, he argued, we can not only strengthen higher education, but also strengthen the case for liberal education. Held at the Lynch School of Education at BC, the lecture was co-sponsored by the school's Center for the Study of Testing, Evaluation and Educational Policy.

The three crises Connor described are familiar to most people connected to higher education. First, most Americans today face some level of economic uncertainty thanks to a major recession that lowered average household income and put millions of people out of work. But the recession has merely added salt to an already gaping economic wound for college graduates: outsourcing and competition for

white-collar jobs means that a college degree no longer guarantees a well-paying job. At the same time, the tuition required to earn a degree has been rising for more than two decades at rates well above inflation.

This disjunction, along with austere state budgets, has led to the second “crisis” Connor cited: an increasing demand for quantifiable results of higher education. An influential book entitled *Academically Adrift* recently reported that over a third of American students at four-year colleges and universities failed to improve their critical reasoning or real-world problem-solving skills (assessed by the Collegiate Learning Assessment) in a statistically significant way between their freshman and senior years. It's no surprise, Connor said, that parents and students alike demand evidence of returns on their huge investment in education.

Efforts to improve education—and to prove it with data—reflect the third crisis Connor described: an unsustainable reform policy. Conventional wisdom in higher educational reform calls for smaller class sizes, more specialized fields of expertise, and more faculty research time to develop that specialization—and each of these changes have important benefits. But they are also all very costly, and it is not at all clear that their cost outweighs the marginal benefits they produce. We need a new alternative, Connor said.

The good news is that recent research can tell us a lot about what works in higher education, Connor noted. Studies show that the greatest gains in critical thinking occur in foreign languages, sociology, and interdisciplinary studies—areas in which students are forced to consider alternative views of reality and thus think critically about their own views. Data also shows that top students improved critical thinking skills most when professors engaged fully as teachers and mentors, providing prompt feedback on student work, engaging in high-quality interactions outside of classroom (which signal care for the student as a learner), fostering challenging academic environments with high expectations and allowing for diverse views about how life ought to be lived. Extracurricular programs such as internships, research and community service also lead to higher retention and graduation rates, not least among minorities.

One thing is clear, Connor concluded: the path to reform requires everyone involved in higher education—students, faculty, and administrators—to ask what students ought to get out of their education, and to take responsibility for the answer. ■



W. Robert Connor

CLIMATE CHANGE AND CHRISTIAN ETHICS

In an engaging lunch colloquium that packed our seminar room, Willis Jenkins, assistant professor of social ethics at Yale Divinity School, called for a new approach to climate change among Christian ethicists. Climate change, he argued, is an unprecedented moral problem because of its scope, duration, uncertainty and susceptibility to perverse incentives, yet the Christian community has mostly just issued broad blanket statements that do little to help Christians take concrete steps to address the problem. To maintain the relevance of their tradition to contemporary global issues, Christian communities must show how climate change is a theological problem, and how solutions to climate change fit into larger Christian moral commitments. Most importantly, Jenkins said, Christians must take actions to address specific problems in particular areas, for example by partnering with churches in less-developed nations threatened by climate change.

Creative responses to climate change must combine knowledge of climate change with theological reflection in the ecological dimensions of justice. Rather than merely a theoretical exercise, Christian ethics can be a springboard to creative, targeted approaches to this unprecedented global problem. Substantively, Christian ethics can better combat climate change by linking environmental issues to the churches' stories of God, the experience of God and

what Jenkins called the "ecologies of grace," that is, the modes of understanding God's grace in the context of environmental ethics.

During the lively discussion that followed, colloquium participants drew a wide range of disciplines from environmental science to business to discuss alternative strategies to address climate change. Participants struggled with the apparently simple question, "What is so difficult about this for Christian communities?" Jenkins responded that there are perverse incentives for individuals to ignore the issue—or existence—of climate change, and thus to defer responsibility to the next generation. He argued that those most able to do something are those with the least incentive to do so, such as owners of big businesses, and that human beings do not feel an obvious responsibility to animals and the environment. While some argued that religion might obstruct steps to address climate change, Jenkins replied that no one group has "the answer" and that Christian communities, as well as other communities, can all provide compelling, and effective, responses to climate change. ■



Willis Jenkins

SYMPOSIUM ON RELIGION AND POLITICS

This spring the Boisi Center was pleased to continue its Symposia on Religion and Politics. The student group, which first convened in the fall, discussed Christian conservatism as well as current issues at the crossroads of religion and politics. In February the Boisi Center launched a second, parallel symposium for Boston College faculty, alumni and staff. Thirteen members from backgrounds as diverse as art, nursing and law met over the course of the spring semester to discuss readings from important moments in American political history, including texts by Thomas Jefferson, Abraham Lincoln, John F. Kennedy, and Martin Luther King. Facilitated by Boisi Center graduate research assistant (and Ph.D. candidate in political theory) Brenna McMahon, both symposia were framed by the question: How Christian is American politics?

BC senior Morgan Crank led the first discussion of the student session. Reading selections from the writings of Pat Robertson and Antonin Scalia, the group wrestled with how to balance respect for different religious views with toleration of different claims of truth. In the second session, Amanda Davis (visiting from Wellesley College) led the group as it explored how the Supreme Court tried to reconcile tension between freedom of religion and the

rule of law in the 1990 peyote case, *Employment Division v. Smith*. Senior Danielle Carder led the discussion about marriage, in which the group asked: what interests does the state have in restricting marriage to one man and one woman? In the final session, led by senior Kara McBride, the group read case law relating to abortion and assisted suicide.

Meeting over breakfast over the course of five Fridays, the faculty, staff, and alumni symposium began the spring session with the question: What is dialogue? At the second meeting, led by Rod Williams, the group explored the grounds for freedom of religion in the Declaration of Independence. On April 15th, apropos of the sesquicentennial of the America Civil War, Paul Kelley asked the group to consider the religious aspects of the war. Participants also debated the grounds for the decision on the 1879 polygamy case, *Reynolds v. U.S.* Inspired by texts from the mid-twentieth century, Andrea Frank opened up the fourth conversation with the question: what is the conscience? In the final session, led by Michael Smith, the group discussed Christian conservatism in America. It was a terrific end to a new tradition of ongoing symposia at the Boisi Center. To participate next year, visit our web site before the fall term begins: bc.edu/boisi. ■

THE RISK OF CIVIL SOCIETY, ANCIENT AND MODERN

As the 2011 “Arab Spring” approaches summertime, conventional wisdom holds that the success of these revolutions hinges in large part upon the presence of a strong civil society, which provides cohesion to popular uprisings and allows the possibility of the orderly change of political power. The key cases are Egypt, where a relatively strong civil society has enabled communication and collaboration throughout the revolution, and Libya, where institutions of civil society had been systematically crushed for decades. Without question the current revolutionary fervor in the Arab world has reinvigorated a debate about the role civil society plays in democratization, human rights and international peace.



Yonder Gillihan

On April 14 Yonder Gillihan brought new historical perspective to bear on the question during a lunch colloquium that compared ancient and modern understandings of civil society. While researching the anti-statist Jewish sect believed to have written the Dead Sea Scrolls, Gillihan, an assistant professor of theology at Boston College, noted surprising similarities between this group and pro-state groups in

ancient Athens, Rome, Egypt, and Asia Minor. He also found that although ancient Athens harbored very few voluntary associations (the core component of civil society), voluntary associations flourished elsewhere under Hellenistic and Roman imperial rule. Modern understandings, or models, of civil society, he argued, help explain when and why associations flourished in these ancient and medieval societies.

The core component of a thriving civil society is the voluntary association, Gillihan said. Through voluntary associations, civil

society creates a common identity in a diverse society, facilitates trust between citizens, and legitimizes the state by creating trust between it and its members. Certain conditions must exist, however, for civil society to thrive: (1) protections of the freedoms of assembly and speech; (2) a state guarantee for binding associational contracts; (3) some political, economic, and social stability as well as some level of prosperity. This model explains the state’s motivation in encouraging civil society: through granting funds, land, or other resources the state encourages the individual to identify their welfare and ideology with that of the state. Encouraging voluntary associations, however, also poses risks: voluntary associations can form along racial and economic lines, be explicitly anti-state, or simply alienate citizens from political life.

According to Gillihan, Plato understood the importance of cultivating a common identity through public institutions, but he viewed private, voluntary associations as a threat to the city. In contrast, Gillihan argued that we can infer Aristotle’s views from his treatment of tyrants: associations such as common meal clubs and private organizations promoted trust between members of the polis. Aristotle’s more pragmatic approach won the day. Greek and Roman imperial rulers strategically extended liberties and resources, thereby increasing their legitimacy and allowing them to manage smaller groups within their realms. Arguably, Gillihan said, we can attribute long periods of political stability in the Roman Empire to the cultivation of civil society. Just as in modern times, however, the risks of cultivating voluntary associations remained and imperial rulers often had to balance these risks with the benefits, sometimes by brutal means. ■

LINGUA SACRA: NEGOTIATING GOD-TALK IN AMERICA



The Boisi Center’s final event of the year, on April 28, brought together a large panel discussion, co-sponsored by the Office of Marketing Communications and the School of Theology and Ministry (STM), on the history of “God talk” in America. Moderated by Boisi Center associate director Erik Owens (*far left, above*), the panel featured (*continuing from left*) Mark Massa, S.J., Dean and professor of Church history at the BC STM; Rachel Gordan, doctoral candidate in American Jewish history at Harvard; Cynthia L. Lyerly, associate professor of history at BC; Sarah Colt, writer, director and producer of a two episodes of the PBS *Frontline* and *American Experience* series “God in America”; and David Belton, series director of “God in America.” ■

ADVOCATING FOR NIGERIAN WOMEN

What are the challenges of protecting women's rights under sharia law in Northern Nigeria? On March 23, Hauwa Ibrahim, a Nigerian attorney and visiting lecturer at Harvard Divinity School, detailed her experiences defending women in a number of precedent-setting cases to a riveted audience at the Boisi Center. As senior partner at her firm in the capital city Abuja, Ibrahim has challenged the "new sharia" launched in Nigeria in October 1999. The new laws, deriving from the Maliki School of Islam, incorporate severe punishments including



Hauwa Ibrahim

amputation of limbs, stonings and floggings, and are based on what Ibrahim refers to as the "eye for an eye concept."

Ibrahim argued that the tensions between the secular rule of law and the new sharia in Nigeria are best reconciled within the social system, rather than through

international interventions that might undermine important cultural institutions. For example, Nigerian women's literacy rates are much lower than men's, but it would be counterproductive to pose the issue as one of human rights, Ibrahim said, since the idea of gender equality simply doesn't fit the predominant understanding of gender roles. Recognizing that Nigerian men want their sons to have better lives than they had, she persuaded community leaders that educated mothers could better help their sons with homework and therefore improve the boys' prospects of succeeding in the future. This approach was well-received by conservatives in the community, who were otherwise known to be opponents of women's education.

Ibrahim explained that sharia itself was not the problem, but rather interpretations of sharia that emphasize only bits and pieces of text without looking at its broad message of justice. Her strategy does not stop at winning cases, but extends to winning the hearts and minds of villagers as well, so that her clients may go back to their community and live with them in peace. Through a well-informed approach of knowing the law inside and out, staying focused amidst media pressure, and appealing to deep emotions when necessary, Ibrahim has achieved undeniable success in her efforts for the justice of her clients as well as Nigerian society as a whole. ■

GLOBAL HISTORY AND THE AMERICAN CIVIL WAR

On April 28, just two weeks after the sesquicentennial anniversary of the American Civil War's beginning, historian David Quigley delivered a timely presentation at the Boisi Center based on his book-in-progress, *Last Best Hope: International Lives of the American Civil War*. Dean of the College and Graduate School of Arts and Sciences and professor of history at Boston College, Quigley explained that his project fits into a broader academic movement to better understand the global dimensions of American history.

The book will contain biographical sketches of nine nineteenth-century figures including foreign citizens in the United States as well as Americans who spent formative time abroad. Key subjects include Frederick Douglass, whose 1848 visit to the British Isles helped shaped his republican abolitionism; Ulysses Grant, who embarked on a world tour with a sixty-person retinue after leaving the presidency; and Secretary of State John Hay, Lincoln's former personal secretary who played a key role in ending the Spanish-American War in 1898.

Naturally, Abraham Lincoln is also a central figure in Quigley's book, despite the fact that he never travelled abroad. Lincoln's views of the world developed in sometimes

surprising ways; historians still wrestle, Quigley noted, with the President's proposal, a month after writing the first draft of the Emancipation Proclamation, to colonize part of Central America with American slaves. After Lincoln's assassination, mythologies began to take shape in biographies, statues, and even reliquaries in Europe and South America that portrayed the slain president as liberator, uniter and model of the "new American."



Dean David Quigley

Quigley argued that this sort of global perspective helps to correct misunderstandings of the crucial period from 1848-1898, widely thought to be a time of inwardness and isolationism in the United States. In fact, he said, by transforming American domestic life, the Civil War also transformed America's place in the world; contemporary scholarship should reflect that reality. ■

ETHICS AND NEW BRAIN IMAGING TECHNOLOGIES

Each year two million Americans suffer some form of traumatic brain injury (TBI); nearly 375,000 of these require hospitalization, 60,000 die and another 2,000 are left in a permanent unconscious state. To shed light on the ethics of this public health issue, the Boisi Center invited Andrea Vicini, S.J., a medical doctor (pediatrician) and theological ethicist, to discuss his work in the field. Currently a visiting professor at BC, this summer he will leave his post at the Pontifical Faculty of Theology of Southern Italy to become an associate professor of Christian ethics at the BC School of Theology and Ministry.

Fr. Vicini's work in bioethics involves a new imaging technology, functional magnetic resonance imaging (fMRI), which attempts to differentiate between different states of consciousness by measuring blood flow in the brain. Among the goals of fMRI research is to evaluate the likelihood of recovery from TBIs, but the present state of knowledge and technology leads to misdiagnosis rates of 40% or more. As medical research improves fMRI usefulness in this area, Fr. Vicini said, ethicists must address issues concerning the well-being and desires of the patient, the wishes of the family and the uncertainty involved in assessing consciousness.

Long-term brain injuries can place incredible stress on patients' families and loved ones, not least because of the uncertainty and difficulty in assessing levels of consciousness.

Fr. Vicini argued that end-of-life care should therefore be evaluated from three perspectives: consciousness, relational identity, and care. In evaluating a TBI patient's state of consciousness (coma, vegetative state, minimally conscious state, or "locked-in syndrome") and the likelihood of recovery, fMRI testing will eventually be extremely helpful. Relational identity involves considering the needs of a patient and their family and crafting a care plan well suited to the needs of both. Finally, the concept of care addresses not only strictly medical care but also holistic care that can take place outside the hospital setting.



Andrea Vicini, S.J., M.D.

In the lively Q & A session that followed, participants raised concerns about the prohibitive cost of this diagnostic tool for a majority of patients. Many in the audience empathized with the difficulty of making end-of-life care decisions and all agreed that these situations bring a certain humility to the practice of medicine, sometimes thought to have all the answers in the modern age. ■

SHOULD INTERNATIONAL LAWS AFFECT U.S. COURTS?

If the task of American courts is to interpret and apply American law, why should American jurists care about foreign law, especially foreign human rights laws? That was the question posed by Hiroshi Nakazato, associate director of the International Studies Program at Boston College, at the Boisi Center's February 16 lunch colloquium. The answer, he said, is that while foreign laws are non-binding on American court decisions, they can provide important sources of wisdom as judges consider the impact of new cases in the American context.



Hiroshi Nakazato

This issue has become quite contentious in the legal community in recent years as citations of foreign law have appeared in several important U.S. Supreme Court opinions, including *Atkins v. Virginia* (outlawing the death penalty for mentally retarded killers in 2002), *Lawrence v. Texas* (striking

down sodomy laws in 2003) and *Roper v. Simmons* (banning the death penalty for juvenile killers in 2005). Some critics of these citations argue that any reference, let alone deference, to foreign laws in our courts diminishes American sovereignty by effectively allowing other nations to influence American constitutional interpretation. Supporters argue that a global consensus on an issue such as the death penalty is indeed relevant to American jurists, who are charged with interpreting vague language from the nineteenth century (for example, the Eighth Amendment's ban on "cruel and unusual punishment") for use in the contemporary context.

Nakazato explained that while American officials and judges frequently encourage other nations to adopt American-style laws and procedures, they are much less amenable to the influence of international law in the American system. This imbalance, he noted, has not been lost on the world community. Charges of hypocrisy aside, the real cost of this imbalance to U.S. law is the lost opportunity engage with perspectives from outside what is by definition an insular system of American laws. Not even our own extraordinarily successful legal system, said Nakazato, has a "monopoly on wisdom." ■

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