

BOISI CENTER INTERVIEWS



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M. SHAWN COPELAND is professor of systematic theology at Boston College. She spoke with Boisi Center associate director **Erik Owens** before the Boisi Center panel on “Race, Religion, and Social Change: A Campus Conversation,” on which she was joined by St. Anselm theology instructor **Nichole Flores** and BU theology professor **Walter Fluker**.

OWENS: Tonight our event is centered upon a conversation with the BC community about the dynamics on campus after Ferguson. What have you seen, from the ground level, on campus?

COPELAND: I was away last semester. Since I have been back, though, I have talked with two or three students who have expressed concern about what they would identify as the passivity or indifference of the university administration to their attempt to hold the die-in in St. Mary’s. The faculty has responded very differently to that, and I was privy to a lot of that conversation because it was done by email, and I was able to learn what other faculty were thinking and share a bit of the conversation. But these students were very hurt. One student is a former PULSE student, another student is one I’ve had in African and African Diaspora Studies courses. From my perspective, both of these people are very reasonable, rational young people who felt very hurt that their university—unlike Emmanuel College, Georgetown, or Loyola University Maryland—could not make a public stand. And when we say “the university,” for students it means Father Leahy. While faculty understand the university in a more complex way, for the students, it’s Father Leahy.

There were students who spoke up about their feelings. One student wrote a very

poignant blog for the *Huffington Post* called “When a School Lets everyone Down,” and another wrote a [public letter to the Heights](#). What these students are pointing to is a perceived disjunction



between what we teach them and the university’s response when they carry that out. They feel very much betrayed by the response. Instead of some form of affirmation for their efforts, they were met with barriers and attempts at reprisals, or at least stern conversation. That hurts them because they are looking for a way to exercise their understanding of justice—not just going one-on-one to your placement in PULSE and serving people, but taking a more activist, advocacy

position. That’s the overall sentiment I’ve picked up from the few students that I’ve talked to and from what I’ve read.

OWENS: That is a challenging dynamic for all of us to consider: how do we understand deeply contextual and challenging concepts like racism with regard to the people around us? And then separately, with regard to institutions?

The university administration, as you’ve mentioned, is sometimes seen as monolithic. In your own theological thinking, how can we bridge the personal, the interpersonal and the institutional when there is a desire to cry out for justice? Is it easier to look further away than close to home, to ourselves?

COPELAND: Yes, always, because any institution aspires to the most positive values. No college or university wants to be mediocre in any way. I do think religious-based colleges and universities, and Catholic colleges and universities specifically, have a real responsibility to help our students think about what it means to contribute to the common good. And that’s not easy. You have identified the complex dynamics at work here: personal, interpersonal, communal or social, and institutional.

I also think that on the matter of race, Christianity has really let us down. In the long term, over the last 500 years,

a number of scholars have begun to remind us that the otherizing of Jews in the immediate period after the New Testament has laid the ground, not only for supercessionism but for racism. George Fredrickson begins his *Racism: A Short History* in this way, and Jay Cameron Carter talks about it too. Christianity in its own formation has taken the lead in this. In that way, we've become accustomed to categorizing and typing people, and we have difficulties in the New Testament itself. Practicing Christians in the New Testament owned slaves. There is a kind of caste system, if you will.

Our own response to this must ask: What does it really mean to be a faithful disciple of Jesus in light of the question, "who is my neighbor?" It's not just the neighbor who is far, but the neighbor who is near—that's the difficulty. As Karl Barth notes, sometimes it's easier to love the far neighbor than it is to love the near neighbor.

Another perspective to consider is James Keenan's wonderful review and [moral notes on the issue of conscience](#). He has made the comparison between European nations confronting their complicity in the attempt to destroy the Jewish people during the Second World War, and the failure of our nation to come to grips in a real way with slavery. In any case, I think the near and far neighbor is a helpful concept; we are often very concerned about events far away, because the world has shrunk and there are almost no far neighbors. If someone can hack my computer, there are no far neighbors.

OWENS: And of course, it's all a matter of perspective. A far neighbor for me might be someone who lives six miles away, with whom I never interact and who seems completely alien. For that reason, when students feel a distance from institutions, it can also be easier to find in that the source of trouble. It's a difficult challenge.

COPELAND: Yes, exactly. I think one of the things that programs like PULSE, the

Arrupe trips and the Appalachia Volunteers do is encourage our students toward introspection, toward examen of their own social behavior. That may not be the vast majority of our students, but it's a kind of leaven that raises conversations in the dorm room and raises conversations over meals. It evokes an interest in other students, and starts conversations that can turn out to be conflictual or inspirational, I think. We are our own neighbors in that respect.

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OWENS: You've already stated that Christianity has a troubled past, and perhaps inherently is troubled from its origins with the question of race. Yet we know that there are also transcendent moments in the history of Christianity, countless examples over time of saints and people we admire who have raised themselves beyond hope and done amazing things, in this country and others. How it is possible to think about religion as a tradition for social change when both of these realities exist? Must we always as Christians apologize, or can we be full-throated advocates of the movements for social change that we identify with?

COPELAND: No, we don't always need to apologize. I think there are very good examples of full-throated advocacy from a Christian perspective. The most obvious examples in our own country are Dorothy Day and Martin Luther King, Jr. There

are certainly other people who have tried their very best to lead us in that direction. We should, however, attempt to be more critical of ourselves. In other words, I think that there ought not be any form of self-righteousness on the part of any Christian activist, because we have our own experience of what it means to fail in these areas, what it means not to press forward, what it means to shift our gaze and to take an easier path.

The other thing is that Christianity itself is quite protean. The Bible is protean. The history of slavery in this country shows us how people can take the same sacred text and find differing kinds of meanings there, one that might tend toward preserving the status quo and another that pushes forward for liberation in every possible way.

OWENS: Yes, and we see this in responses to Ferguson as well. Religious leaders of many stripes came to march arm in arm across denominations and religious traditions, and yet we also saw some pretty important differences among clusters of white churches and non-white churches in their responses. Is the same advice applicable, then, just for everyone, for these groups as a whole to be mindful and walk in a mode of humility? How can we overcome what we see as an entrenchment into camps, as churches reach back into traditions of social justice and put forth different responses?

COPELAND: Just take a look at Martin Luther King, Jr., for example. Not all black churches were behind him, for lots of different reasons. The National Baptist Convention first supported him but then pulled that support back when King became more popular and sought after. Churches, some out of fear of reprisals from towns and cities, refused to invite him to speak in their churches, to use their facilities. Others were motivated by their own status.

The reality is, we are all complex human beings. There are no completely pure people in the world. I think we always

want the victim to be completely pure, and the perpetrator or the accused to be completely evil. It's just never that simple. But that's why, in a real way, both justice and mercy are at stake in whatever we do, in terms of Christian action for social change. We need to be able to have some pity and mercy toward people who find themselves in difficult circumstances and react in ways they wish they hadn't much later. But we also to recognize that we are not inaccurate to hold people who are identified as our protectors accountable to their office and to the regulations and to the prescriptions of that office.

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