

BOISI CENTER INTERVIEWS



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DAVID KYUMAN KIM is an associate professor of religious studies and American studies at Connecticut College, where he served as the inaugural director of the Center for the Comparative Study of Race and Ethnicity. He spoke with Boisi Center associate director **Erik Owens** before his presentation on the public life of love at the Boisi Center.

OWENS: You are working on a new book with an intriguing title, *The Public Life of Love*. Can you give us a sketch of your key themes and how you understand what love is about in this context?

KIM: “The public life of love” was a phrase that arose as a lament about contemporary American political culture—as a response to what I perceived as certain kinds of deficits and losses. I’ve had a longstanding interest and concern about the vitality of political participation and civic life—about the possibilities and potentialities as well as the dangers of what we expect of politics. On the one hand, we have enormous expectations of the transformative possibilities of politics. On the other hand, we should be rightfully wary of overinvesting in politics.

Public life has been constrained by a certain conception of politics. Participation in public life, participation in civic life has been politicized, not necessarily in the best ways or not necessarily in the most humanizing ways. There is a political tenor to public life.

I am concerned about the status of a humanistic discourse. What’s the status of religion? Among the significant ends and aims of humanizing discourses, among the ends and aims of religion is finding purpose, finding meaning. Where is the

capacity to cultivate that in people’s lives if you find the kind of diminishing career of that in public life, not just because of the old saws about secularization, but because of the sheer plurality of options? Moral pluralism is a pretty good metaphor for secularism. The vastness of



options for our moral sources and sense of the good is one of the reasons that secularism has had the staying power that it’s had. The question arises: what’s the status of love under these conditions?

The lament is that there’s been a lot of talk of love in politics, a lot of talk of love in public life. But it has not struck me as particularly deep. It doesn’t strike me as

a love of integrity. It has struck me as a kind of a cynical dispatch of love.

OWENS: I’m surprised to hear you say that there’s a lot of discourse about love in our politics today. Can you give me some examples of what you’re thinking of?

KIM: I noticed in one of your offices downstairs you have this little shelf of books by the Fox News folks: Bill O’Reilly, Laura Ingraham, Ann Coulter and of course Glenn Beck. One of the curiosities about Glenn Beck is that he’s a pretty consistent purveyor of nasty public discourse. But he’s also a pretty consistent purveyor of a language of love. He had this enormous rally in DC, with around 300,000, or 500,000 people in attendance. And in his rambling concluding speech, after lighting into gays, the poor, liberals and so forth, he says, “but of course we’re all about love; the conservative movement is a movement about love.”

I thought this was a powerful paradox. Beck doesn’t see it as a paradox, but I perceived it as one.

OWENS: Love of what? What was his assertion?

KIM: I think the assertion is that his brand of conservatism—which is demeaning of queer folks, people of color,

and so forth—is at root animated by love. I’m not really sure what that love is, but for him and for his listeners and followers, which are legion, it’s clearly doing a lot of work.

OWENS: Is it perhaps love of salvation? He seeks salvation for all, and love means telling the truth to people who need to hear it?

KIM: It could be. I don’t want to situate Beck amongst the prophets, but I think he might want to do that. To my mind, we need to question and have a dispute about the love in question. If someone like Beck—who, to me, is very much about hate and disdain—is going to make a claim of love in public, I want us to make strong counterclaims, to recuperate that language, to revive that language—again, in a context where the public is pervasively animated by forms of politics. So that led me to this question: What is the public life of love right now?

OWENS: Augustine famously described a commonwealth as a collectivity of shared loves. I wonder: Are we a commonwealth in the United States today? Do we love anything in common? If so, what might that be?

KIM: One could point to things like patriotism, love of nation, love of democracy—love of certain kinds of civic concepts and civic ideas. Whether that’s actual love is, to me, another question.

I think the question about patriotism—love of nation, love of country—probably is more about loyalty than it is about love as such. The Augustinian notion of the commonwealth—perhaps otherwise rendered as a loving, beloved community—seems more aspirational than actual. But of course it’s an animating ideal for important social movements in the history of the United States. The civil rights movement and Martin Luther King are obvious examples, but you can go back further, if you look at the abolition movement or even the temperance movement. The temperance movement is really

interesting—it’s like we are seeking to establish the common good, but we’re going to do this through a kind of strict moralism, in concert with the law. Do I consider that to be a good path to the common good? No. It’s not particularly participatory, it’s not particularly humanizing and it’s preordaining of what flourishing looks like.

OWENS: It’s not humanizing because it’s negative in nature as opposed to positive?

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KIM: Well, I’m not against discipline and disciplinizing. I think those are quite important. The goal of collective health is an important one. But when that goal of collective health tips into an onerous political ideology—

OWENS: A sort of “enforced moral hygiene”?

KIM: Exactly. So the question of moralism is a tough one in regard to public love because if you’re going to insist on something, that’s moralistic by nature. This may sound a little trite, but there are moralisms and there are moralisms.

There are those that are ideological and insistent, but then there are others that are dialogical, dialectical and so not simply declarative. What I heard in Beck and I would hear in others—you hear this in patriotic discourse—is just a declarative statement of love.

OWENS: I also see this fitting into a contemporary conversation on tolerance and intolerance. You spoke of a dialectical conception of moralism. This allows for a back and forth on the question of what ought we to tolerate and what ought we to not tolerate. On the one hand, you can veer off into a sort of bland moral embrace of all things—this may be moral relativism, but you can file it under love and tolerance of all things, or perhaps civility. On a sliding scale, maybe “civility” represents the better end; at the opposite side is a radical intolerance of all things different; and, closer toward the middle, a simple rejection of those things that are wrong or are contrary to the common good. So here’s a spectrum, and a conversation can be had. How do you see this conversation taking place, because it’s really exploded in the past year in particular around same-sex marriage and the political and legal obligations that flow from it. What’s your take on how this conversation is happening now?

KIM: To borrow a phrase from Wendy Brown, the conversation now is about risk-aversion; toleration is concerned about what’s aversive or not. That’s different than toleration that is inclusive and integrative, that’s not a toleration of holding one’s nose. To me, that latter form—which is integrative, inclusive, participatory—is very much where I would rather go. So the tolerance is a method of expansiveness, and not of control.

OWENS: But is that possible in a world in which you also want to uphold standards of proper love or ordered love?

KIM: I’m hesitant to talk about proper love. And I think part of it is a question of paradigmatic scale, so our most intense experiences of love tend to be quite

intimate—even in Augustine. The love that Augustine finds, he finds with God, within himself. You don't get any more intimate than that. And then what does he do? You extrapolate from that foundational experience and try to discern it out in the world. I'm not convinced that that's what we're doing now, and so there are family resemblances of the ways in which we talk about love and experience it in public.

There's this disjunction between the culture of tolerance and toleration and how we comport ourselves with those we love intimately. Think about the immigration debates right now, the extraordinary level of lovelessness around the immigration debates, where just the mere notion that you would provide sanctuary is considered to be a betrayal. Betrayal of what? Of nation. The Obama administration has the highest number of deportations of any administration—an extraordinary fact. Who are they deporting? They're deporting entire families; the children are legally citizens, but if the parents are "illegals," the entire family goes. That's a political pronouncement about the unacceptability of modes and forms of love.

OWENS: Although we can debate about the nature of these terms, someone who calls herself a realist might say that love is no way to build a foreign policy, and that love is no way to decide immigration policy, in this case in particular. How do you respond to the argument that love is a nice-to-have, soft virtue as opposed to the realists' hard, meaningful virtues that focus on power and influence?

KIM: My first response is that I have a fundamentally different view of governmentality. You can have a conception of governmentality that's about maintaining order, so it's going to be a Hobbesian view of human nature and that the state of nature and chaos is always at the door and that the government is really here to just keep things in check.

But I take my lead from people like Martin Luther King, Mahatma Gandhi,



Augustine, Francis, Dorothy Day, Fannie Lou Hamer and Ella Baker. These are vanguards and heroes of public love, who are not saying governmentality and politics have to be circumscribed by self-interest, but rather that the fate of others' suffering is a principle that should guide law and policy.

Look at what's happening with Ebola right now: craven self-regard and self-interest, whether you're Chris Christie, Andrew Cuomo, even the U.S. Army, apparently. What do they say? All in the name of the common good.

OWENS: A relatively large public conversation about race in the United States has developed after the killing in Ferguson. Recently one of your teachers, Cornel West, made a very splashy criticism of the soft sort of religious love, as he saw it there, and went on to commit civil disobedience and was arrested as a result. Could you frame that for me in your vision of public love?

KIM: I haven't spoken to Cornel since the arrest, but his critique went something like the following: there was a presumptuousness by a generation of religious leaders in responding to Ferguson, and they were dispatching themselves in a way where the younger folks—and it turns out quite justifiably—felt that their voices and experiences were

being neglected. The religious leaders would invoke someone like King or speak about religious tolerance. The younger generation was saying that's not the issue here. To superimpose this vision of the common good, to superimpose what public love might look—or should look like—provoked ire among these young folks.

So Cornel comes there, and he says, "You know, the young folks are right. We haven't been listening to them." I think the quote that was teased out of that was "I didn't come here to make a speech, I came here to be arrested," which is a good Cornel line, and somewhat ironic, because of course they wanted him to give a speech as well.

I think the significance of Cornel showing up at Ferguson was the symbolic disruption. Because, in many ways, Cornel's the last of that generation, of a certain kind of progressive radical public intellectual that has direct connection, not necessarily to King himself, but to that generation.

OWENS: What does being arrested do in this context, though? Why is that a form of love or solidarity as opposed to some other option of solidarity on the ground?

KIM: I'm not sure that it has to be in opposition to those other options. But again, when I say it was an important symbolic

disruption, I think that's true. We all saw the images of Cornel in handcuffs being forced to the ground, this lauded professor from Princeton, from Union Theological Seminary, and that image—that symbolic disruption—will do as much, if not 100-fold as much, as a speech would in our culture, in our media age. It's not to say that words aren't important. Of course words are important. But I don't think anyone will dispute that the level of deliberative patience around words is not very high right now. There's a need for both words of love and acts of love.

OWENS: What acts of love in American politics do you see as meaningful manifestations of the public life of love?

KIM: This may not be an obvious one, but Emmett Till's mother, Mamie. When she insists on this open casket, this experience of mourning, it's a declaration of justice, but it's also a declaration of love, like she's saying, "I love my son, but I also love others such that we need to see what we are capable of."

I'm trying to think of what might be atypical examples. John Brown, right? It's an interesting question, because John Brown says "I'm doing this out of love. I received this prophecy. I'm going to take arms to Harper's Ferry." Of course these are grand gestures, but there are smaller ones—I referenced Dorothy Day earlier.

I have two teenage sons. One of the constant worries I've had ever since they were born was whether they would feel like they could avail themselves to something like public love over the course of their lives. I lament: Where is a grand social movement that they can join, our version of the civil rights movement? At some point I thought, it's not a false expectation, but it's setting the bar in a peculiarly high place. My older one teaches church school; both of them enact forms of community in their wildly diverse multiracial, multiclass soccer teams. These are acts of love. These are performances of love. We shouldn't over-

look those because we're looking for the grand gesture.

OWENS: There's a tension in American political thought also between the elite and the everyday. We see, in Emerson and in others, the everydayness of love.

KIM: Absolutely. That's something that's very, very important to this project for me: Whether we can discern in the everyday—in the ordinary—our highest ideals, whether it's democracy, whether it's the cultivation of love. That's always been one of the drumbeats for me, the everyday. To simply be undertaking these arguments in the high churches and the high temples of the academy, it's good for the mind, but it's not good for the soul. I'm deeply concerned about soul care. I

take that seriously as a teacher—there's a lot at stake for my students when I introduce these incredibly difficult and important ideas and thinkers to them. I don't need them simply to say, "well, here's the argument in Madison or here's the argument in Jefferson, here's the argument in Habermas and Rawls." How do you extend that to your life, such that the students feel like they're participating in those debates and not just watching them from the sidelines or the stands as the great gladiators of the mind are in contest with one another.

OWENS: It's a good charge for all of us in the academy and all of us who are parents.

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