

# BOISI CENTER REPORT



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## FROM THE DIRECTOR



*We had two top-notch panels this semester: one with noted writers on religion that examined their trade in our increasingly polarized age, and one in which we heard from critics on my new book *At Home in Exile*. Our lunch speakers included BC's own Cathy Kaveny and Catherine Cornille.*

The past semester was exceptionally busy—and stimulating—at the Boisi Center. In one

of our best-attended sessions, we asked three prominent religion journalists to discuss the nature of their craft. Rod Dreher of *The American Conservative*, Mark Oppenheimer of the *New York Times* (and, for this current academic year, Boston College), and Sarah Posner of *Religion Dispatches*, discussed questions about whether religious leaders receive too much or too little scrutiny, how to write about religions that are not your own, and how to render theological questions important in a secular culture. Despite the heat surrounding such issues, the discussants were tied together by their honesty, self-scrutiny and professionalism.

Current debates over Obamacare have fueled interest in the importance of Catholic social services. Fr. Larry Snyder, the head of Catholic Charities USA, graced our presence with a luncheon presentation as well as a panel discussion co-sponsored with the Church in the 21st Century Center that also featured Michele Broemmelsiek of Catholic Relief Services and Rev. J. Bryan Hehir of the Boston Archdiocese. Our own Alberto Godenzi, dean of BC's School of Social Work, moderated.

Besides Fr. Snyder, we were joined for lunches by BC's Cathy Kaveny and Catherine Cornille, David Kim of Connecticut College and David Bosworth of the University of Washington.

Finally, the Boisi Center held a panel discussion on my own book, *At Home in Exile: Why Diaspora Is Good for the Jews*. Ben Birnbaum and Kevin Kenny of BC joined Dartmouth's Susannah Heschel in a vigorous discussion of the issues I discussed, especially the theme of exile and the questions it raises for Jews and non-Jews alike. The book, I am happy to report, was reviewed in both the daily and Sunday *New York Times* and was discussed at similar panel discussions at the Brookings Institution and the Manhattan Jewish Community Center.

I wish to add here a note of sorrow at the passing of Jonathan Trejo-Mathys, a BC colleague in political philosophy who spoke at the Boisi Center just one year ago, and who died tragically at an all-too-young age in late November.

In closing I want to thank our staff. Susan Richard gives the Boisi Center the tone of friendliness that has marked it since its start. Yael Hungerford organized and sustained our Religion and Politics Symposium, and Erik Owens showed his remarkable capacity for turning suggestions into ever-interesting realities.

- IN THIS ISSUE
- *Author Meets Critics: At Home in Exile: Why Diaspora Is Good for the Jews*
  - *Panel on "Writing About Religion in a Polarized Age"*
  - *M. Cathleen Kaveny on prophetic rhetoric in the public square*
  - *David Bosworth on the moral origins of the great recession*
  - *David Kyuman Kim on the public life of love*
  - *Catherine Cornille on women and interreligious dialogue*
  - *Rev. Larry Snyder on the challenges facing Catholic Charities, and their response*
  - *2014-2015 Graduate Student Symposium on Religion and Politics: "The Future of Marriage and the Family"*
  - *Yair Hirschfeld on negotiating Middle East peace*
  - *Heard at the Boisi Center*

## AT HOME IN EXILE: WHY DIASPORA IS GOOD FOR THE JEWS

Presenting his latest book on the blessings of exile for the Jewish people, Alan Wolfe met a panel of distinguished critics at a Boisi Center event in November. Wolfe's respondents provided insightful feedback on the book's controversial arguments.



The author meets his critics: (l to r) Erik Owens, Alan Wolfe, Ben Birnbaum, Susannah Heschel and Kevin Kenny.

On November 12 Alan Wolfe presented his new book *At Home in Exile: Why Diaspora Is Good for the Jews*, and received feedback from a distinguished panel of respondents. Billed as an “author meets critics” event, Wolfe’s critics for the evening were Ben Birnbaum, editor of the *Boston College Magazine*; Susannah Heschel, Eli Black Professor of Jewish Studies at Dartmouth College; and Kevin Kenny, professor and chair of the Boston College History Department.

In *At Home in Exile*, Wolfe argues that there is a bright future for Jewish universalism—a strand of Jewish thought that emphasizes concern for all, in contrast with a particularistic concern for the Jewish people. Jewish life in the Diaspora is vibrant and thriving. The tension between Jewish universalism and particularism is not new but has taken on a new urgency in recent years. With the Holocaust and the founding of the State of Israel now nearly seventy-five years in the past, Wolfe argues, the Jewish people have reached a moment in their history in which they can once again go beyond the particularism inherent

in these events and once more consider their broader obligations to humankind. He suggests that the Jewish people ought to embrace their broad acceptance in Western society and view the Diaspora as a viable and positive site of Jewish existence.

Ben Birnbaum praised the book for being enlightening, well-researched and fair. At the same time, he explained, Wolfe’s argument pitting universalism against particularism ultimately left him cold. Particularism and universalism are, in fact, two sides of the same particularistic coin—universalism maintains the notion that the Jews are the chosen people with an obligation to be a “light unto the nations,” only without God. Birnbaum said he long ago rejected the notion that Jews had some special calling, citing it as onerous. The Jewish people are no more special, with no more obligations, than any other people. All peoples, not only Jews, do best when they live up to their own ideals. He concluded, “I am not in exile, I am not in Diaspora. I am where I was born, and where I want to be.”

Susannah Heschel’s remarks focused on the understanding of exile in Wolfe’s book. Heschel agreed with Wolfe that Jews in America are different than they were even forty years ago, let alone a century and a half ago in Europe: they are more at home with—no longer neurotic about—their Jewish identity. She asked, though: Was it exile they enjoyed, or the benefits of living in a multi-cultural democracy? She also wondered whether Jews in Israel were not still also in exile since, by design, the modern Israeli state was created in a spirit contrary to that of pious Judaism.

Kevin Kenny began his remarks with a careful articulation of Wolfe’s thesis. He then evaluated Wolfe’s book from his perspective as a historian of diaspora. Diaspora involves exile and banishment, but can also entail great flourishing, as in the case of the Jews. In assessing Jewish Diaspora today, assimilation is a factor that needs to be considered; more than half of non-Orthodox Jews in the United States are marrying non-Jews. Kenny noted, moreover, that while Judaism without a state is a concept being celebrated by a minority of Jewish academics around the world, in practice this arrangement brought with it much adversity for the Jewish people. The tragic irony is that the ending of one diaspora (the Jewish) marked the beginning of another (the Palestinian). A diaspora that is to be good for the Palestinians depends on the Jewish universalism that Wolfe advocates.

➔ [www.bc.edu/boisi-athomeinexile](http://www.bc.edu/boisi-athomeinexile)



Susannah Heschel of Dartmouth College

How does one write thoughtfully about religion in our divisive political climate? On October 23, three of America's finest religion writers shared their approaches to this challenge in a panel moderated by Boisi Center director Alan Wolfe.



Alan Wolfe moderating a religion writing panel featuring, from left, Sarah Posner, Mark Oppenheimer and Rod Dreher.

On an unusually dark and stormy October night, a dedicated crowd took shelter from the storm in Devlin 101 to hear three distinguished journalists discuss the challenge of writing about religion in today's polarized political climate. Moderated by Boisi Center director Alan Wolfe, the panel brought together Rod Dreher of *The American Conservative*, Mark Oppenheimer of the *New York Times* and Sarah Posner of *Religion Dispatches*.

In his introductory remarks, Wolfe noted how the field of religion writing has become a more serious journalistic enterprise over the past twenty-five years, pointing to the relative youth of his panelists as evidence of the subject's continued relevance. Dreher then launched the discussion by citing homosexuality as the most polarizing issue in modern religion writing, arguing that the failure to communicate the orthodox view on sexuality demonstrates a wide gap in

understanding. Dreher generalized that religious liberals tend to treat religion as something man says about God, while religious conservatives see religion as what God says to man. He also worried that modern religion has turned into what Christian Smith calls "moralistic therapeutic deism," a feel-good spirituality with little prophetic power.

Oppenheimer's remarks focused more on the writing component and the responsibilities of a religion journalist. He argued that the main problem with reporting on religion is that it is too "soft," and likened his role to that of a sports writer who holds enormous respect for his subject but is unafraid to tackle the steroid abuse stories as well.

Posner focused on the question of religious exemptions, citing the recent Hobby Lobby case as one example. For Posner, such questions reflect the ambiguous intersection of religion and politics,

and pose a real challenge for reporters, who must at once take such religious claims seriously and respect the nonbelievers who are affected by exemption policies.

Following these remarks, the panelists engaged in a lively back-and-forth discussion. Wolfe raised the provocative question as to why American journalists pay so little attention to theology. All the panelists agreed that theology was rarely written about, but Oppenheimer disputed the consensus that it needed more media coverage, arguing that most readers do not care about theology and that increased theological understanding would not necessarily lead to greater political harmony.

The panel was also met with a series of questions from the audience, including a religion reporter from California who sent in a question via Twitter. Ranging from practical questions about how religion reporters should deal with church communications staffers, to broader themes of inter-religious understanding, the audience's questions stimulated a wide-ranging discussion.

As the event drew to a close, Wolfe asked the panelists one final question: what do they consider the single most under-reported aspect about religion in the United States? Posner maintained that the answer was Islam, since few Americans understand its theological roots or the way that American Muslims live their faith. Oppenheimer took a different tack, arguing that what is most needed is hard-hitting, indigenous reporting from within religious traditions. Finally, Dreher drew the audience's attention to two neglected narratives: the growing religious divide between "the West and the rest," and the falling away of working class voices from religion in the United States.

➔ [www.bc.edu/boisi-writingaboutreligion](http://www.bc.edu/boisi-writingaboutreligion)

## PROPHETIC RHETORIC IN THE PUBLIC SQUARE

*The “rhetoric of prophetic indictment” crowds out the more measured, reasonable tradition of “deliberative rhetoric,” and we as a country should be wary of this, argued theology and law professor Cathleen Kaveny at an October lunch.*

Boston College theologian and legal scholar Cathleen Kaveny spoke at the Boisi Center on October 1 about her upcoming book, *Prophecy without Contempt: An Ethics of Religious Rhetoric in the Public Square*.

She began by describing the 2004 presidential election cycle as the height of recent culture wars. Embedded within vicious arguments over issues like



*Theology and law professor M. Cathleen Kaveny addressing a Boisi Center lunch on October 1.*

abortion, Kaveny noted, was an increasingly frequent use of what she terms the “rhetoric of prophetic indictment,” which accuses listeners of deviating sharply from the founding or covenantal principles that once rooted the community. Kaveny cited the jeremiad as the quintessentially American form of prophetic indictment. In colonial times, jeremiads were delivered in sermons that lamented the community’s wide chasm between its ideals (e.g., America as the new Israel) and its sinful reality; these sermons served as a sort of legal indictment for breach of the covenant.

Prophetic indictments stand in stark contrast with the more measured, reasonable tradition of “deliberative rhetoric,” which was in short supply, Kaveny argued, during the 2004 election season. She noticed a curious trend during that campaign: those who used prophetic rhetoric about abortion rarely did so about

torture, and vice versa. Kaveny argued that prophetic rhetoric continues to be a dominant tradition in American culture, but that it has become divisive because it presupposes a common moral framework that may not exist in our modern, pluralistic society.

She concluded her talk by suggesting some “best practices” of prophetic indictment, arguing that Martin Luther King, Jr., represents the gold standard of such discourse in the modern age. Prophetic rhetoric aims to target cancers in the body politic; like chemotherapy, it can do as much harm as good. As such, it needs to be calibrated appropriately to particular contexts. The ultimate key to successful prophetic rhetoric lies in standing with the community one condemns, rather than as a judgmental outsider.

➔ [www.bc.edu/boisi-kaveny](http://www.bc.edu/boisi-kaveny)

## THE MORAL ORIGINS OF THE GREAT RECESSION

*Although the financial collapse of 2008 seemed to come from nowhere, the materialist values that drove the recession can be traced back to the 1950s and the gradual creation of a “virtual America,” argued David Bosworth at a September lunch.*

On September 23 David Bosworth visited the Boisi Center to discuss his new book *The Demise of Virtue in Virtual America: The Moral Origins of the Great Recession*. Bosworth, a professor in the University of Washington’s Creative Writing Program, explained that he wrote the book in an attempt to unearth the moral and cultural changes that were at the root of the housing market bubble and collapse, and the ensuing recession.

Noting that people frequently act contrary to their professed ideals, Bosworth blamed the fact that traditional ideals no longer aptly apply to the changing social situation. He hoped that his book could help people recognize this disjunction and thus realign ideals and realities.

Bosworth pointed to many changes that have occurred since the 1950s, and tried identifying those factors responsible for these changes. Consumerism was a big theme throughout—both in shaping the tastes and lives of consumers, as well as the private lives of employees. Bosworth sees “evangelical mammonism”—the spirit of radical capitalism of our era, which seeks to spread the “good news” of material consumption—as replacing the republican and Judeo-Christian roots of our country, to our great detriment.

When children were raised in the 1950s, time and play were unstructured. Now, the structure of the work place has seeped into private life: children’s lives are scheduled, and their play highly organized. Fifty years ago, there were public spaces—parks, the town square—that



*The University of Washington’s David Bosworth speaking at the Boisi Center on September 23.*

facilitated civic life. Now, the indoor mall has replaced the outdoor town square; the benches and plants bespeak this intentional transformation. Except, rather than facilitating civic life, the mall aims only to facilitate consumption.

➔ [www.bc.edu/boisi-bosworth](http://www.bc.edu/boisi-bosworth)

## THE PUBLIC LIFE OF LOVE

*What role can love play as a public value in the United States, in an era characterized by hatred and division? Connecticut College theology professor David Kyuman Kim drew on historical and contemporary examples to find an answer.*

On October 28, Connecticut College religious studies and American studies professor David Kyuman Kim joined the Boisi Center for a lunch event to discuss his book in progress, *The Public Life of Love*, which examines the status of love in public discourse. Drawing on a wide variety of sources from Martin Luther King, Jr., to Confucian philosophy, Kim's



Connecticut College professor David Kim speaking about love in public life on October 28.

project explores how love is evoked in political life. Love can take many different forms, from the love between parent and child to the love enacted by prophetic public figures like Abraham Joshua Heschel. Love does not always have to be uplifting or simply affirming, but can also be challenging, as in the case of appeals for human rights and justice, which remind us of our ethical accountability to all people.

In situations of great oppression, public expressions of love can even appear, paradoxically, somewhat un-loving. Asked for his opinion on a group like ISIS that appears to not only neglect love, but to even represent the complete absence of love, Kim contested the premise, arguing that it is overly simplistic to view ISIS as representing principled lovelessness. Kim did not rule out the possibility that love could be expressed in a violent way.

One of Kim's goals is to confront improper appeals to love, and in so doing, to stake a public claim about the sort of politics that flows from enactments of public love. To illustrate what he has in mind, Kim brought up the example of a speech Glenn Beck gave at the "Restoring Honor" rally in 2010. Kim understood Beck's speech to have demonized people of color, queer people, and others perceived as threatening "American values." The speech ended, however, with an insistence that the conservative movement is grounded in love—a claim Kim disputed.

The event closed with a question about how one can find love in a world that sometimes seems loveless. Kim suggested that love can be found in the everyday, in something as significant as a massive rally or as subtle as a handshake.

➔ [www.bc.edu/boisi-kim](http://www.bc.edu/boisi-kim)

## WOMEN AND INTERRELIGIOUS DIALOGUE

*Women are often absent from official interreligious dialogue efforts, even as critical feminist thought has steadily advanced across many different faiths. Catherine Cornille reflected on this contradiction at a Boisi Center lunch event on October 14.*

Catherine Cornille, professor and chair of the BC theology department, joined the Boisi Center on October 14 to discuss her scholarly work about women and interreligious dialogue. Her talk touched on two recent book projects, *Women and Interreligious Dialogue* and *The Im-Possibility of Interreligious Dialogue*.

Cornille noted that women have been generally excluded in formal interreligious dialogue efforts, whether between faith authorities or among scholars in academic settings. At the same time, women have often participated informally in interreligious dialogue through neighborhood networks or discussion groups, to much success. Such examples of dialogue go beyond mere theological discussion, and treat religion in a holistic way by celebrating the aesthetic, social and cultural aspects of religions.

A central point of contention in the symposium that led to *Women and Interreligious Dialogue* was whether women bring anything unique to interreligious dialogue, or whether including women is beneficial simply because doing so makes dialogue less patriarchal. Including women in interreligious dialogue, Cornille argued, can help expose patriarchal aspects of tradition; for example, Muslim-Christian dialogue that includes women can reveal how Western feminists have been complicit in the denigration of Islam as misogynistic and backwards. On the other hand, there was some resistance among the symposium participants to agreeing that women make a distinct contribution to interreligious dialogue, based on the perception that to do so essentializes women, and thereby fails to appreciate the diversity that exists among



BC theology professor Catherine Cornille speaking at the Boisi Center on October 14.

women in different traditions. Nonetheless, Cornille noted the cooperative spirit that was present in the symposium itself, where participants tried to find points of agreement with each other rather than simply arguing for their own position.

➔ [www.bc.edu/boisi-cornille](http://www.bc.edu/boisi-cornille)

## CATHOLIC CHARITIES: CHALLENGES AND RESPONSE

*In advance of a larger evening panel discussion at BC, the president and CEO of Catholic Charities USA, Rev. Larry Snyder, dropped by the Boisi Center to speak about the organization's history and its role in the nation's social safety net.*

The Boisi Center hosted its final lunch colloquium of the fall semester on Wednesday, November 5, welcoming Rev. Larry Snyder to 24 Quincy Road. Drawing on his experience as the president and CEO of Catholic Charities USA, Fr. Snyder discussed his organization's attempts to reduce poverty in America, and the role that Catholic Charities can play in the nation's social safety net.



*Catholic Charities president Rev. Larry Snyder speaking at a Boisi Center lunch on November 5.*

Snyder began by explaining Catholic Charities' diocesan structure. Although Catholic Charities serves about 9 million people annually, its locally governed nature ensures that it attends to specific local needs rather than applying a one-size-fits-all policy. However, this does not mean that Catholic Charities is entirely self-sustaining: in fact, Snyder explained, they receive 60 percent of their funding from the federal government. Snyder described this cooperation as a mutually agreed-upon contract, with deep historical roots.

Snyder continued by outlining Catholic Charities' three-pronged strategy to reducing poverty. First, the agency aims to be systems-changing, helping the poor to thrive rather than merely survive, unlike the current safety net. Snyder explained that a principle of subsidiarity is key here, with a focus on developing individual opportunity plans to address specific needs. Second, he spoke of his strategy to

engage corporate America in new ways, whether helping them design better food products or engaging with altruistic "benefit corporations." Finally, Snyder explained that Catholic Charities' strategies are always results-driven, hence his partnership with Notre Dame's Lab for Economic Opportunities to analyze the tangible effects of their policies.

Fr. Snyder ended his remarks with an anecdote about Congressman Paul Ryan, who was convinced to make a change in his proposed national budget after a visit to a Catholic Charities agency in Wisconsin showed him the value of their case management approach to poverty.

While fielding questions from the audience, Fr. Snyder commented that the United States lags behind the rest of the developed world with regard to our treatment of the poor, and that people of faith have an obligation to do better.

➔ [www.bc.edu/boisi-snyder](http://www.bc.edu/boisi-snyder)

## SYMPOSIUM ON RELIGION & POLITICS

*A group of graduate students and professors meet monthly to discuss the future of marriage and the family.*

The fifth annual Boisi Center Symposium on Religion and Politics is examining the future of marriage and the family this year. A group of graduate students and professors from the theology and political science departments meet each month to discuss the nature of marriage and the family, and their state in America today. Discussions center around each session's readings, which examine marriage and the family philosophically, theologically and from the point of view of social science.

Among the topics the group is discussing are the growing socio-economic divide regarding marriage rates and the related rate of births within marriage; the rising age of marriage among college-educated Americans; and the plummeting birth rates in the United States and the West in general.

These topics invite deeper examination of what marriage means, what the place of children is within a meaningful life, and the downsides or costs of the traditional family arrangement for both men and women.

A recurrent theme is the individualism of modern liberalism. In writing about America in the nineteenth century, Alexis de Tocqueville hoped that marriage would counteract the individualizing tendencies of liberalism. It looks like instead that individualism is working to weaken the traditional institution. We are trying to understand what is gained and lost by this.

Our discussions have similarly raised questions about the relationship between law, norms and culture. It seems doubtful whether public policy can affect current trends. The question then, as

citizens and academics, is whether there is any way to affect our surrounding culture.

We are looking forward to continuing the conversation next semester.



*Boisi Center graduate research assistant Yael Levin Hungerford, who is leading this year's symposium.*

➔ [www.bc.edu/boisi-family](http://www.bc.edu/boisi-family)

## BREAKFAST WITH YAIR HIRSCHFELD

*Experienced Israeli negotiator Dr. Yair Hirschfeld stopped by the Boisi Center on September 19 for an informal discussion with BC graduate students and faculty.*

Yair Hirschfeld, an architect of the 1993 Oslo Accords between Israel and the Palestinian Liberation Organization (PLO), addressed a gathering of faculty and graduate students at an informal breakfast at the Boisi Center in September. Hirschfeld detailed the back-channel avenues with PLO leadership that he

pursued in the early stages of the peace process. These back-channel communications eventually paved the way for official negotiations, which culminated in Israeli prime minister Yitzhak Rabin and PLO chairman Yasser Arafat signing the accords in a Washington, D.C., ceremony hosted by U.S. president Bill Clinton.



*Israeli negotiator Yair Hirschfeld appeared at the Boisi Center on Friday, September 19, for an informal breakfast discussion with select faculty members and graduate students.*

## HEARD AT THE BOISI CENTER

- “Pope Benedict XVI said the best arguments for the Catholic faith are not in theology books, but in the art and the saints the Church produced.”  
-Rod Dreher, in his Boisi Center Interview prior to the October 23 panel on “Writing about Religion in a Polarized Age”
- “The rationalization of the workspace and consumerism of public spaces are deeply incoherent. . . . We’re supposed to slave like Sisyphus and consume like Falstaff.”  
-David Bosworth, at his September 23 lunch colloquium
- “For interreligious dialogue to be possible, one must be receptive to the idea that there is truth in another religion. Once you have that kind of awareness, then it becomes imperative.”  
-Catherine Cornille, at her October 14 lunch colloquium
- “We don’t serve people because they are Catholic, we serve people because we are Catholic. If we’re really taking the demands of our religion seriously, we don’t have a choice.”  
-Rev. Larry Snyder, at his November 5 lunch colloquium
- “I am not in exile, I am not in Diaspora. I am where I was born, and where I want to be.”  
-Ben Birnbaum, at the November 12 At Home in Exile book panel

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## SPRING 2015 EVENTS

### **Politicization of Religion or Sacralization of Politics: Two Faces of Political Islam**

Ali Banuazizi, Boston College  
Wednesday, January 28, 2015, 12:00-1:15 pm  
Boisi Center, 24 Quincy Road  
*RSVP required: susan.richard@bc.edu*

### **Challenging Simone Weil: The Problem of Simone's Svengali**

Benjamin Braude, Boston College  
Wednesday, February 11, 2015, 12:00-1:15 pm  
Boisi Center, 24 Quincy Road  
*RSVP required: susan.richard@bc.edu*

### **The Prophetic Ways of Dietrich Bonhoeffer**

*14th Annual Prophetic Voices Lecture*  
Charles Marsh, University of Virginia  
Thursday, February 12, 2015, 5:30-7:00 pm  
Location TBD

### **Being a Priest in the Public Square: The Experience from Down Under**

Frank Brennan, S.J., Australian Catholic University  
Wednesday, February 25, 2015, 12:00-1:15pm  
Boisi Center, 24 Quincy Road  
*RSVP required: susan.richard@bc.edu*

### **Religion, Politics and Nationalism in Contemporary Turkey**

Jenny White, Boston University  
Wednesday, March 25, 2015, 12:00-1:15 pm  
Boisi Center, 24 Quincy Road  
*RSVP required: susan.richard@bc.edu*

### **Religion and the Roots of Climate Change Skepticism**

Katharine Hayhoe, Texas Tech University  
Response by Stephen Pope, Boston College  
Wednesday, April 8, 2015, 5:30-7:00pm  
Location TBD

### **Religion, Peacebuilding and U.S. Foreign Policy**

Shaun Casey, U.S. Department of State  
Thursday, April 23, 2015, 5:30-7:00pm  
Location TBD