

BOISI CENTER INTERVIEWS



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DAVID DIPASQUALE is an assistant professor of the practice in the Boston College Political Science department. After his September 12 lunch lecture at the Boisi Center, entitled “What’s So Political about ‘Political Islam’?”, DiPasquale spoke with Boisi Center associate director Erik Owens about political Islam, the danger of an overly Westernized view of the world, and the complications of contemporary liberalism. The conversation has been edited for clarity and content.

OWENS: When Americans use the phrase “political Islam,” what do you think they mean?

DIPASQUALE: I think the use of that term and similar terms reveals more about us than about Islam. That is to say, we tend to view religion in a very circumscribed way in the West, and to speak of “political” Islam or to modify the religion in this way is, on the surface, just interesting. I wanted to dig a little deeper in regards to knowing the fundamental bases of our prejudices. The same occurred to me with regard to the term “Islamism,” because I started to notice the increased frequency of the use of this term.

OWENS: When you say that it says more about us than it does about Islam, who do you mean by “us”? And what are “we” trying to say about Islam when the term “political Islam” or “Islamist” is used? What’s the thing that it’s refracting back to us?

DIPASQUALE: I think we intend to suggest that religion should be a private affair and that one’s religious belief should not have the veneer of legislation, a political system or action. That is entirely in keeping with our fundamental biases as liberal Westerners, wherein religion is a matter of the heart and not, for the most part, of politics as we use

that term conventionally. It should not be the basis of a state, because the modern conception of the state demands that we submit to the sovereign, who is—to put it bluntly—us.

Hobbes’ *Leviathan* speaks of the Leviathan or the new state as a “mortal god.” This is the world in which we live. For



the most part, the majority of human beings on the planet agree with that.

Ultimately, I think much of my scholarly work revolves around this: We have to confront the rational foundation of our own political life and therefore our values. If we can’t, then what does that say about the health of liberalism? Has it degenerated into another kind of faith? That wasn’t the intention at the outset. Spinoza’s theological-political treatise and Hobbes’ *Leviathan* drip with condescension towards the conventional view of the Bible. Make no mistake, they knew what their enemy was.

I think now it’s high time for us, given the current challenges, to confront the possibility that those principles are still viable. If they are, let’s recover them and ennoble them, perhaps revivify them. If not, I don’t know what. A very small minority within the global Muslim community—the so-called extremists—are, in a fashion, an opportunity for us in this way, because they remind us of the fact that liberalism is relatively new on the world historical stage.

OWENS: Many of the people who still criticize Islam embrace a broad view of the role of Christianity in public life. Is that cognitive dissonance, theological animosity, or something else?

DIPASQUALE: I think there’s a qualitative difference. It’s my understanding that the majority of Christians, even those who are making arguments of this kind, aren’t suggesting that the United States Constitution be overthrown and replaced with the New Testament, for instance. But what’s distinctive about these extremist Muslim groups is precisely that secularism itself—the separation of churches and state—is a blasphemy in this context.

OWENS: We also see arguments that Islam is political as such and therefore not a religion in some sense. Yet those same people think that Christianity has

political impact, but isn't an ideology in the same way. The direction that leads me in is to say that this is about religious bigotry, not about private versus public. But how does this look from your perspective in Islamic Studies?

DIPASQUALE: I will say that Muslims and non-Muslims alike use the term “political Islam.” This isn't just something that is hoisted upon them. I think it does speak to our biases and prejudices and also the unnatural character of politics in the modern context. If Plato or Aristotle were somehow magically to emerge in 2017, I think a government like the Islamic Republic of Iran would be much more intelligible to them than, say, the United States of America, because there is a continuity that goes back throughout the pre-modern period, that sees the human as placed distinctly within a legal framework that is comprehensive. That is a helpful possibility in today's context.

OWENS: Let's talk about how rights fit into the Islamic legal context that you study. Are human rights a religious inheritance of the Abrahamic traditions, and thus consonant with the Islamic worldview? Or a modern invention?

DIPASQUALE: I'm sympathetic with that view, because I'm someone who wants to believe that there is this consanguinity between these faith traditions. On the other hand, I'm also forced to confront the possibility that our concept of rights really begins in the 13th chapter of Hobbes' *Leviathan*, and it was born at a certain time and at a certain place, and the soil from which that springs is a godless soil that places man in a distinctly nonpolitical state of nature.

I think the question is: are we using the term “rights” loosely or with technical precision? If we're talking about the technical aspect of rights, this is precisely what the so-called extremists target in their literature. *Dabiq* by ISIS and even less intense journals and scholarly works coming from the Middle East: there is a suggestion that the usurpation of God's legislative capacity is at the heart of the

chasm that separates the Muslim world from the Western world. If you go back to the concept of rights, I would say the idea that we have rights just by virtue of the fact that we're human, not because they were given by God, is very modern.

We're in a state of nature originally, but we have a kind of unalienable right, to put it in the Jeffersonian language, an unalienable system or compact of rights. That is distinctly modern and very radical. Even if its radical quality is somewhat

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lost on us today because it's the baggage we carry around every day of our lives.

It's who we are. It's how we breathe. That was the reason I decided to today focus on nomenclature, because I think it's revelatory. We use words and formulations that we rarely, if ever, examine because they're just so native to us.

Not a single one of my students ever calls into question his or her rights. We love rights. We want to even give rights to other people. But what are they and where do they come from? I think that's a good question. In my classes, I try to remind my students that it's a fairly recent coinage. There is that view that maybe this goes back to a Biblical origin, but I am not convinced.

OWENS: What can we in the West do (or avoid doing) to encourage a liberalizing revival in Muslim societies across the world?

DIPASQUALE: I think we've made a mess of it, to be perfectly honest. That is to say, we've misunderstood—perhaps purposefully, perhaps out of ignorance—the nature of what we're facing. I think, out of well-meaning notions of generosity, we've, in a way, demeaned this very rich civilization. To be more precise, perhaps we in the West, though proud of our liberal heritage, have to consider the possibility that, within the Muslim world, there may be reformist movements that don't parrot Western movements – and that is we might be forced to accept the fact that individuals in Iraq or Libya will not be walking the streets with copies of *The Federalist Papers* in their back pockets.

I think when we speak of “political Islam,” we're saying that's the “bad” Islam. When we say Muslims, we mean the liberal Muslims. But I'm asking how well that has worked for us? In terms of the events since 9/11, we've made things worse and not better. It's been a catastrophe in many respects to the Muslim world, particularly in places like Libya and Iraq. A lot of that desire of ours – the reasoning behind it – is due to a misguided notion that our fundamental principles are uniquely transferable, that they are universal. Maybe they are, but maybe they're not. To suggest that there is some sort of tension between liberal principles, on the one hand, and Islam, on the other, means to most people to suggest a criticism of Islam as in: “How dare you suggest that Muslims can't be liberal?” But that's only a criticism if we're the peak moment in all human history.

Why is it that a religion born a millennium before the invention of liberal principles has in every respect to ape those liberal principles? Is there not something indigenous to Islam to provide an opportunity for encouraging those liberal reforms? I don't mean the modern liberal democratic reforms, but maybe a kind of liberal reform that was regnant during the so-called classical period, where there were philosophers, scientists, theologians

and various legal schools that began from the standpoint of the law. These reforms would begin from a submission to God's divine and eternal word, and the literal word 'God' as displayed in the Qur'an.

If there is an opportunity for reform, perhaps it will come from within. I've been encouraged, at least in recent years, to note that some groups have attempted precisely that. For instance, there is a group known as the Ibn-Rushd, after Averroes' patronymic. To my mind, they do a nice job of attempting to idolize Averroes and his attempt to combine intellectual life with obedience to the law in their own way. I may have my own criticisms of their approach. Nevertheless, I think that kind of movement is to be encouraged. I think this may engender a kind of sobriety perhaps on those of us in the West who expect everyone in the world to look exactly like us. Maybe we have to be content with that kind of diversity in the end.

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