

BOISI CENTER INTERVIEWS



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E.J. DIONNE is a columnist and political commentator for *The Washington Post*, a fellow at the Brookings Institution, and a professor at Georgetown University. His most recent book is the *New York Times* and *Washington Post* bestselling *One Nation After Trump: A Guide for the Perplexed, the Disillusioned, the Desperate, and the Not-Yet Deported*. He spoke with Boisi Center associate director Erik Owens before he delivered the 17th Annual Prophetic Voices Lecture entitled “Truth and Lies in a Polarized Time.” The following conversation touched on the current political landscape, the benefits and dangers of religious conviction in Trump’s America, and present-day prophets. It has been edited for length, clarity, and content.

OWENS: I wanted to start by asking about your most recent book. It is a subject of much of your writing and your columns as well. How bad is it today? What kind of mess are we in with Trump?

DIONNE: Let me invoke the Dickensian cliché—it is the best of times and the worst of times. It is the worst of times because I truly think the president is someone with profoundly autocratic tendencies. It does not mean he will get there. I like to hope that our system will have enough checks in it. But the checks are only as good as the people occupying the positions to exercise them, and I do not think the Congress has done as much as it could. The courts, up to now, have done quite a bit.

And I worry about the spirit that he represents. His approach to politics is profoundly divisive. His strategy is divisive. And all politicians in a democracy trying to create majorities are divisive in some sense—even when they do not want to be. I think Barack Obama had enormous hopes of being a unifier, and yet his presidency ended up dividing us. But he was not consciously trying to do that, and I think went out of his way not to.

President George W. Bush, whom I very strongly opposed in so many ways, went out of his way, at certain critical moments, to avoid divisions in the country.

One of the most honorable moments of the presidency was when he visited



the Islamic Center in Washington and very strongly and in very plain language insisted that Muslims were our fellow citizens. At a time when we could have had enormous outbursts of hatred in the country, he pushed back very hard against anti-Islamic feeling.

In Trump, you have someone who, if there is not a hot button there to push, he is going to go into another room and

rummage around and try to find one. He takes every opportunity he can to divide the country. People talk about it as being done in the name of sort of solidifying his base, but it also really means governing for a minority of Americans. It is no accident that his popularity has hovered around 35% to 40%—except for Rasmussen polls—because he is only really claiming to speak for that share of us. So, in that sense, it is the worst of times.

The best of times is in an extraordinary outburst of engagement—of civic engagement, of pushback, Americans who did not think the political process mattered or were unhappy with it or pulled away. There is an enormous amount of new activism. What is fascinating about the activism is so much of it is “small-D” democratic activism. It is people understanding how important elections are, and they are organizing all the way down to the local level, from very local races, with an eye toward national politics—the number of organizations formed in communities all over the country, no matter what the politics of the community is.

Theda Skocpol, over at Harvard, has a project going with a couple of other great colleagues. One of them is my Brookings colleague Vanessa Williamson. They have gone into eight Trump counties in four states, and as of a few months ago,

they had already identified 10 anti-Trump organizations that formed spontaneously. Interestingly, all were either led or co-led by women.

Theda told me that, also interestingly, a lot of the leaders came out of main-line Protestantism. A lot of them were active in their churches. And these were brand new organizations, so Trump has reminded anyone who doubted it that politics in general, and electoral politics in particular, matters a great deal. I think we might see the results of that this November. But at least it is a sign of certain civic antibodies in the country.

OWENS: There has been a lot of conversation about whether Trump is cause or effect—whether he is representative of a certain ethos, an identity movement that will persist long after Trump is gone, or whether he was a result of a sort of regrettable explosion that happened at just the right time with the right candidates and the right external forces. Has Trump’s election caused something that people will respond to with lessons learned, or is it a reflection of a persistent movement that we need to think about?

DIONNE: On the one hand, Trump is clearly the product of developments on the right end of politics starting at least during the Gingrich years. I think we have seen a radicalization of American conservatism first visible in 1994, but steadily ratcheting up. Trump’s birtherism was an idea—though it does disrespect to ideas to call it an idea—that had pretty wide resonance on the right. It is one thing to oppose a president or disagree with his policies, but to insist against the evidence that he is actually ineligible to be president of the United States is pretty shocking.

He is the product of this long period of radicalization. He is also the product of the economic crisis that began in 2008, and the product of an anti-immigration movement that predated him and you saw that when President Bush’s immigration bill got voted down, primarily by

Republicans. So that feeling was already there. He took advantage of a lot of forces.

But then he pushed things much farther along than they were before. To think back to the very first day of his campaign, where he declared Mexican immigrants rapists: There is a way in which Trump has opened the door to public expressions of prejudice and divisiveness that we had shot to some degree. I mean some of these sentiments were already there, but we believed that public figures had some

“Religion is potentially a deeply unifying force, and it’s also potentially a deeply divisive force.”

obligation to bring us together and to avoid demeaning significant parts of our population. Suddenly, that is now open to us. Also, the autocratic language—“I only can fix it,” that you’ve seen all the way through—that’s a Trumpian creation.

In a lot of ways, I think of Trumpism as a marriage of what American conservatism was becoming. Sadly, because it is a noble tradition in many ways, even though I am not a conservative and I think there are some radical critiques of conservatism as an ideology designed to keep those with power in power. Corey Robin’s critique in *The Reactionary Mind*—there is a lot to that. Nonetheless, there is another side to conservatism which is about literally conserving institutions that are of value, and so I suppose every Catholic – even the most radical kind – is a little bit of a conservative, because we are people who respect institutions of long standing.

But the radicalization of conservatism predated Trump. He has also imported European blood-and-soil right-wing views to the United States. I’m not sure the

Charlottesville march would have happened with a different person as president of the United States, and that is very disconcerting. Now, in fairness, those folks in Charlottesville do not speak for the entire group of Americans who voted for Donald Trump by any means. Nonetheless, I think some doors have been opened here that are very troubling.

So, I think he both took advantage of a moment and then pushed it into an even more radical place.

OWENS: What are the ideas that are going to move American culture back to a more appropriate place – to restore a measure of civility, or to more deeply embed the roots of respect that are at its bedrock? What are some of these ideas? You mentioned that there is a lot of activism that has been inspired—the “small-D” movements. What ideas are they carrying with them, and where are those coming from?

DIONNE: I think the first thing is to try to learn the nature of the discontent that led 46% of Americans, who happen to live in the right places, thus tipping the electoral college, to vote for Donald Trump. I do think that the long-term effects of the great recession were important to Trump’s election.

In our book, *One Nation After Trump: A Guide for the Perplexed, the Disillusioned, the Desperate, and the Not-Yet Departed* (St. Martin’s Press, 2017), we spent a lot of time on the debate about whether Trump’s election is primarily owed to racial reaction and reaction on immigration or a reaction concerning economics. Our conclusion was that the picture was complicated.

On the one hand, Trump united the Republican base behind him. Some of that was because a lot of Republicans wanted to vote against Hillary Clinton, and they were even willing to vote for Donald Trump. Even Republicans who had expressed opposition to him before were willing to vote for Donald Trump, so you cannot leave out the partisan factor.

Then there is clearly a racial—and, in some cases, racist—component to the vote, and a really strong anti-immigration feeling. One of the most interesting studies we have in the book is that, even among Obama-to-Trump switchers, there was some racial motivation. That is partly because Trump ran a much more explicitly racialized campaign than either John McCain or Mitt Romney had run before.

But there was no doubt that there was economic discontent here as well. One of the things we pay a lot of attention to in the book is the increasingly sharp divides between prosperous and less prosperous parts of the United States. The nature of the economy we have now—the economy the world has now—has tended to produce sort of winning areas, cities, and then cities that end up on the radically wrong end of the economy.

I suppose I have sympathy and empathy for those cities, because I grew up down the road in Fall River, where we have found ourselves on the wrong end of the economy since about the 1920s. We have to grapple with these regional disparities—that Clinton counties represented 64% of the GDP in the country, even though she only carried about 450 or 460. Trump counties represented only 36% of GDP in the country. That tells us something.

So, in the first instance, we have got to grapple with economics in general and the economics of place in particular. That should be a racially unifying project, even though it is not now, because even within these wealthy metros there are substantial numbers of neighborhoods that are heavily African American or Latino that are left out of the metropolitan prosperity. So that is on the one side. On the other side, you do have the old industrial towns—places like Erie or Reading, Pennsylvania or Flint, Michigan—that have been hammered by economic trends. So, we got to start there.

I am probably giving away the fact that I am, in some deep sense, social democratic in my orientation, so I immediately



go to economic inequality as part of the cause.

The second thing is how in the world—in a country so divided by region, religion and education—do we rediscover empathy, because empathy is necessary for a successful democratic republic. The nicest thing that happened to me during the campaign was when David Brooks and I were giving a talk together in St. Louis before one of the debates at Washington University. I said, if I made a hat, my hat would say, “Make America Empathetic Again.” This nice man came up to me afterward and said I love that, and you’re going to hear from me.

About three weeks later, I got in the mail my “Make America Empathetic Again” hat. And my son looked at it and said, “Dad, that’s an awesome hat, but you can’t wear it. He did such a perfect imitation of the Trump hat that no one, unless they’re really close, will know what it actually says.”

There is this enormous empathy gap in the country right now. Some of it is cultural. Some of it is class. Some of it is educational. In principle, at least, it ought to be possible to empathize simultaneously with a parent of an African American kid who is shot by the police when that kid is unarmed, and to empathize with someone who is white, who had a well-paying job, and then suddenly found all of his footing, because of radical economic change. It ought to be possible to look at those two situations and say,

“Can’t we see ourselves in the place of either that African American parent or that white worker?”

In recent days, there’s been a lot of talk about Robert Kennedy, partly because of his great speech when Martin Luther King died. I am sure many of us romanticize Robert Kennedy in some ways, but that attempt he made to speak simultaneously to white working-class people and to African Americans was really powerful. It’s a model that we need to sort of study to figure out. How did that happen? How do we do that again?

OWENS: What do religious communities and religious leaders have to offer in this project?

DIONNE: Religion is potentially a deeply unifying force, and it’s also potentially a deeply divisive force, as we’re seeing. At the risk of oversimplifying by creating two broad categories: Religion that is a call to conscience, a challenge to us, that speaks of our obligations to think of the other is a unifying force. Religion that becomes a form of identity—often linked to ethnic identity or racial identity—that says we are saved and others are lost, that is the sort of religion that can make our situation much worse. As a Catholic, I think we are lucky to have Pope Francis because he is very much the first kind and speaks very forcefully against the use of religion in the other way.

In some ways, it is very instructive to think about the Confessing Church

versus the German church when Hitler was in power. Our model should certainly be the Confessing Church. That, in a particularly dramatic and extreme way, illustrates what can happen with religion.

OWENS: Who are our prophets today then? If the Confessing Church represents a strident resistance to the powerful norms of the day, and especially when perceived as wicked or detrimental, who are our prophets today who come draw upon religious traditions to give that voice?

DIONNE: Well, I'll start with two easy ones. One is Pope Francis, obviously. He has pulled a lot of people back and forced them to rethink a lot of things. For people inside the church: about the priorities of the church. For people outside the church: to take a second look at the church. He speaks to some of the people who have left the church. But he speaks to the whole world, and so I am a Francis fan.

And not just because I am in Boston, but I have to mention Cardinal Séan, partly because he was the Bishop of Fall River, Massachusetts, where I grew up. But he is a fascinating figure because, in certain ways, Cardinal Séan is deeply conservative. Yet I think he has had a strong appeal to many more progressive Catholics because he has been so outspoken about poverty, immigrants, and labor rights. He is just somebody I deeply respect.

You know, I think Bishop [Robert Walter] McElroy is a fascinating figure. And Cardinals [Blase J.] Cupich and [Joseph W.] Tobin. Cupich I've known a long time. Tobin I've gotten to know more recently. He has a wonderful way of speaking simply, and it turns out his simple talk is profound talk. It is fascinating, particularly these days, because of his job on the immigration issue.

William Barber. He is setting up a new campaign around poverty, and what is interesting is that I have always been fascinated by what I call, "civil rights Christianity," which was what Martin Luther King is most associated with.

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He spoke of something about King that we forget: King was very invested not simply in opposing injustice, but also in converting adversaries. There's a powerful sense of conversion in his narrative that did not take away from his militancy. I worry a lot that we sanitize Dr. King because we made him a national hero. We forget the moments when he was angry, and we forget that, in the period when the Vietnam War escalated, his anger took the movement North and ran into enormous resistance from northern whites. So, we should not sanitize King. But this belief in conversion was powerful, and in William Barber you have someone who is equally militant. There is no lack of militancy in William Barber, but it also does have a strong conversion element.

One of the people I admire most in the world is Sister Keehan, the head of the Catholic Health Association, who is so warm-hearted and tough-minded and extraordinarily thoughtful about how does a religious institution operate. How

does a social service institution that is also religious, in her case the Catholic hospitals, operate in a very complicated environment where government funding is absolutely essential, but its religious underpinnings are important? She is someone I enormously admire.

Sister Simone Campbell moved a lot of people around the country. Among American Jews, David Saperstein, who was for a long time the head of the Religious Action Center and then was President Obama's ambassador for religious freedom. David had one of my favorite teaching moments. Whenever I can, I match David, who is a Reform Jew, with Nathan Diamond, who is Orthodox and essentially the chief representative of the Orthodox in DC.

David happened to visit my class when *The Passion of the Christ* came out. David was a great critic of the movie and the anti-Semitic tropes in it. I had my students respond to readings ahead of class, and I discovered that a whole discussion on *The Passion of the Christ* had broken out. David was very involved in the arguments over the film, so I asked him to address it. This models a kind of behavior that we should all kind of seek.

First, he insisted on hearing out all the students before he said a word. But before he lectured anybody, he looked at the students and said, if you believe that the birth of Jesus Christ is the most important event in human history, you cannot

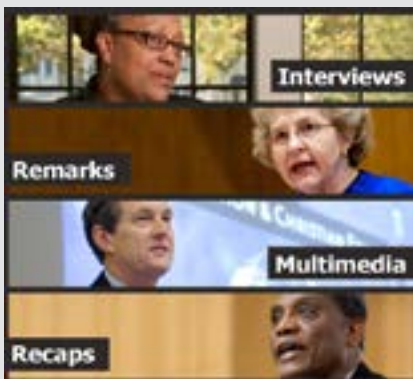


help but be moved by this movie. Now here is one of the leading critics of this film saying to the students who liked the movie: “I do not think you are bad people. I utterly get where you’re coming from. Now, let me tell you what’s wrong with the film.”

Also: Arnie Eisen, who is head of the Jewish Theological Seminary, is an incredibly thoughtful person and old friend of mine. We were talking before about Russell Moore. He certainly was a strong voice during the election, and I think my friend Mike Gerson, a columnist for *The Washington Post*, represents voices within the evangelical community who have challenged Trumpism in important ways—Michael even more than Russell Moore. Pete Wayner, Mike’s good friend, has done some of that.

And then at BC: I cannot help but mention my friend Cathy Kaveny. I think Cathy is a very, very important voice. I think her most recent book, *Prophecy without Contempt* (Harvard University Press, 2016) is such a powerful idea at a moment when politics is so full of contempt and when so many people on all sides feel so much contempt for each other. Boy, is she a welcome voice in this conversation.

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