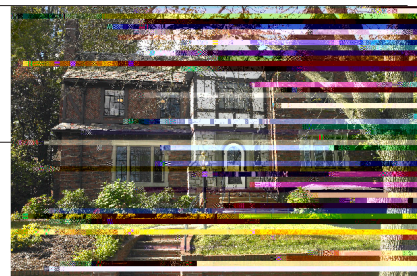


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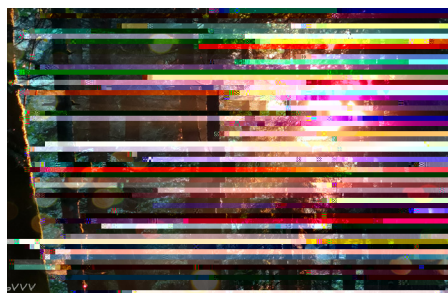


AVI DECOSIMO is an Assistant Professor of Theology in the Boston University School of Theology. After his November 2 lunch lecture at the Boisi Center, entitled “What’s Wrong with the New Genealogy of Religious Freedom?”, Professor Decosimo spoke with Boisi Center Associate Director Erik Owens, Graduate Research Assistant Jack Nuelle, and Undergraduate Research Assistant Susan Kourtis about the problems and arguments surrounding current conceptions of religious freedom while offering a potential way forward. The conversation has been edited for clarity and content.

Q : What’s not to like about religious freedom?

A : There are some things not to like about it, and the work of those in the politics of religious freedom project have called our attention to some of those. Two things stand out in particular. One is that in many cases, religious freedom is one face of a particular liberal vision of freedom and politics. This brand of liberalism is marked by a failure to acknowledge its own situated, particular, and contextual character and a tendency to prize individualistic or even hyper-individualistic conceptions of what it means to flourish or what it means to realize justice. To the extent that religious freedom is a face of something like Rawlsian liberalism, it has all of the vices that are typically associated with Rawlsian liberalism. So, that’s one big thing not to like.

The other big thing – and this is another thing those studying the politics of religious freedom have done a good job of alerting us to – is that fairly often, religious freedom, as it’s pursued by the U.S. in other places, is sometimes obviously and sometimes in a more veiled way:



Is the problem the particular type of religious freedom that we export or that we claim to embrace here and abroad, or is it the construction of the very possibility of religious freedom that these critics are worried about?

A : I think to the extent that religious freedom is a version of Rawlsian liberalism, it’s problematic full stop. It is more problematic still when it is also a tool of U.S. imperialism or colonialism.

But I think it’s almost silly to think that all religious freedom would need to be a kind of Rawlsian liberalism, and I don’t think that there’s something necessarily wrong with the U.S. or some other

government caring about and supporting movements for religious freedom elsewhere. Just as I don’t think it’s problematic for the U.S. to care about civil rights in some regime, even if it’s true that the U.S. fails in a lot of ways to realize those ideals, I don’t think it’s necessarily problematic for the U.S. or some other authentically democratic regime to see and want for the kinds of goods that are worth calling religious freedom or civil rights or human flourishing.

I think, in contrast, it can sometimes seem like those associated with the politics of religious freedom project can only imagine religious freedom as an expression of a vicious sort of liberalism on the one hand, and on the other as a tool of the worst sort of Western or U.S. imperialism. If you thought that were the case, you could understand why you would think that religious freedom would need to be resisted. But we needn’t understand religious freedom in that way.

Q : These powerful deconstructions of the conceptions of religious freedom, and even of religion that underlies it and of freedom that underlies it, and concepts like rights, are parts of a very powerful academic project. Yet how can these constructions, as they’re intended to be used perhaps by good-willed people, be redeemed, if at all? What is

the constructive project that follows this deconstruction?

CIM : That's a great question. I see the move forward involving at least two kinds of considerations and happening on at least three different axes. First, there's movement to understand and critically examine and correct our ideals. Ideals serve our ends and our aims. They give us something to pursue. They allow us to rule certain things out, to make judgments between alternative options. Let's do the best we can in getting those things right.

But let's say we do have some of the right ideals. The question remains of how we actually go about realizing them in some community? Those are both equally important, and I think they also do have to be held together. That is, I don't think that it's enough just to have the right ideals or just to have some ideas about implementation. Instead, a thorough-going, complete constructive project is going to have to have both and have to recognize that they're both symbiotically related and mutually reinforcing. Ideals and their implementation are dynamically, dialectically related – our efforts to implement some ideal can transform our understanding of the ideal itself and

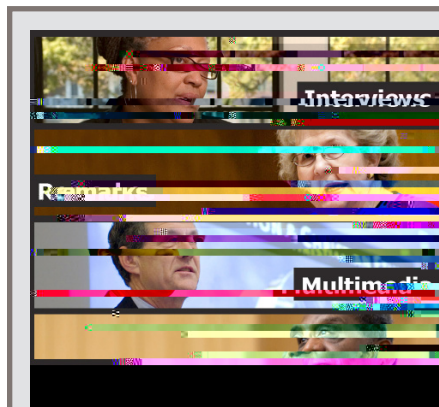
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CIM : I do think that, and one of these is the ways in which religious traditions have wanted to say things such as “no matter what it is that you are experiencing in your social world or in your community, in virtue of standing in a certain sort of relationship to God or the sacred or the holy or the ultimately real, you can experience a kind of flourishing or happiness that is worth caring about, even when things are genuinely bad.” Of course, it’s that line of thought that Marx and other critics see as being something that’s really dangerous about religion, if religion says be happy with just that and don’t do anything to change your circumstances. And I’m sympathetic if that’s all that a religion is saying. But if a religious tradition is also saying here’s one kind of freedom and one thing that is good in even the worst and most oppressed human life, and here is another thing – namely, trying to make your political



anything else operating in the world or history than the will to it. Thus, you get hesitancy on the new genealogists' part about giving a full-throated condemnation of what its quite clear they reject or about making fully explicit their normative commitments and normative claims. To do that would be inconsistent with the inescapability of the will to power – and would thus require revising what their genealogy purports to show about the modern world, the secular, and the state, let alone religious freedom. All things, by the way, that a more thoroughgoing genealogy would actually say should not be essentialized in the way they are.

What I think is valuable about Douglass or Truth, in contrast, and what I wanted to lift up about them, is that, unlike maybe a purely historical form of genealogy that only means to uncover how things came to be as they are, that seeks maximal truthfulness, but isn't throwing in for certain normative aims, they do have explicit normative aims – liberation of the oppressed – and aims for



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