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Every other semester I teach a course called “The American Culture War.” Beginning with Robert Bork’s Slouching Towards Gomorrah, we look at the role moral and cultural issues such as abortion and gay rights have played in recent American politics. The students seem to like it. I love it.

This year I began by asking whether I would be teaching the course in the future. For when we began in January, it really did seem as if the culture war had come to an end. Iraq and the economy — these were going to be the issues in the presidential campaign. Finally, Americans seemed to have tired of hysterical charges and symbolic politics. They were going to focus on the real world.

And so what do we have now? Bittergate, Rev. Wright, charges of elitism, and precious little attention to Iraq and the economy. It seems I will be teaching this course for some time to come, with plenty of new material to add.

We do our part at the Boisi Center to examine these developments. Our panel on gay marriage was a big success: large audience, thoughtful conversation, plenty of passion along with gobs of reason. We had an equally successful panel discussion on what Americans owe the Iraqis. And, in conjunction with the Provost’s Committee on the Catholic Intellectual Traditions, we hosted John DiIulio, first head of the White House Office of Faith-Based and Community Initiatives. John’s talk was wonderful, and he was accompanied, in song, by Boston’s Rev. Eugene Rivers. It was a terrific evening.

My biggest role in the presidential primaries ended when John McCain locked up the Republican nomination. Fascinated by Mormonism, I learned as much as I could about this faith, participated in conferences on the subject, and spoke to the media about Romney’s campaign. I do believe that he was to some degree victimized by religious discrimination within his own party, Southern Baptists continue to distrust Mormons, and a lot of Southern Baptists vote in the Republican primaries.

No doubt the election will be a major focus on our fall events. But as we start to think about our upcoming tenth anniversary (in the 2009-10 academic year) we will have a lot more on our plates this coming year as well. As always, nothing cox — the home page been redesigned and refined, we have also posted a wide array of content (audio and video interviews with speakers, links to further reading, etc.) generated from nearly all of our events in the last two years. Just click on “resources” or “public events” on the main navigation area to browse by media type or date.

— alan wolfe

reassessing gay marriage

The Boisi Center's final event of the academic year brought a robust crowd on April 22 to a panel discussion on "Gay Marriage in Theology, Law and Politics." The panel took stock of the issue four years after Massachusetts became the first—and still the only—state in the U.S. to legalize gay marriage. Erik Owens moderated the vigilera rle
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The extraordinary level of interest in the presidential primaries and their unusual scheduling this winter prompted the Boisi Center to arrange a post-primary panel discussion featuring members of the political science faculty — Professors Marc Landy, Kay Schlozman and Alan Wolfe. Scheduled for Wednesday, February 13, eight days after “Super Tuesday,” the panel was envisioned as a recap of the election results and discussion of how the presumptive nominees engineered their triumph. Of course, while McCain had emerged as the clear Republican front runner, the Democratic nominee remained in doubt.

Braving the torrential rain, a large contingent of Boston College students filled the Fulton Debate Room. Schlozman opened the panel by noting that she is a professor, not a pundit, so she focused on providing historical context for the arcane primary system that has perplexed so many voters, young and old alike. Wolfe and Landy, both active pundits, traded good-natured and entertaining jabs from the left and right. All three panelists discussed the effect of last year’s American military “surge” on McCain’s bid, the role of anti-Mormon sentiment in the demise of Romney’s candidacy and the massive missteps of the Giuliani campaign.

Although unable to predict for the large, hopeful audience of Boston College undergraduates the eventual Democratic nominee, the professors provided context and discussion of the Clinton and Obama candidacies. They discussed the looming questions of whether the United States is ready for either a black or female president, and whether race or gender would prove to be the greater handicap to electability. (The consensus: ghhcc ve to be the great° e

immigration challenges the scandinavian welfare model

Scandinavian countries are deeply committed to egalitarianism and offer some of the world's most generous social welfare programs. But their recently burgeoning "new immigrant" populations present great challenges to national unity around these core principles. On April 10 Boisi Center visiting scholar Grete Brochmann, professor of sociology at the University of Oslo, discussed her research on the dilemmas of the contemporary Scandinavian welfare state.

Immigrants have made their way to Scandinavia for centuries, but in the 1970s Sweden, Denmark and Norway each instituted immigration reforms designed to stem the flow of workers then flooding domestic labor markets. As a result, most immigrants since that time have come to Scandinavian countries as refugees or asylum-seekers from non-European countries, or to be reunited with family members who were refugees. Approximately ninety percent of these new immigrants are unskilled.

Once admitted into the country, immigrants receive nearly identical welfare benefits as citizens. The core principle behind this policy is the belief that equal rights promote social integration.

The present challenge for Scandinavian societies, said Brochmann, involves balancing principles of equality and pluralism. Can Muslim immigrants from outside Europe integrate into Norwegian society without losing their distinctive identity? This has become an important political issue, but one that Brochmann believes can be addressed without abandoning the egalitarianism that in many ways defines Scandinavian culture. ■

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