
The Boisi Center Report

the boisi center for religion and american public life at boston college

vol. 11 ▼ no. 2 ▼ may 2011

From the Director

For the first time, I am writing my director's letter from abroad. Four of my six months at Oxford University have passed, and it has been a great experience. Fortunately, the staff at the Boisi Center, especially Erik Owens, Susan Richard and Brenna McMahon, have kept things running amazingly smoothly.

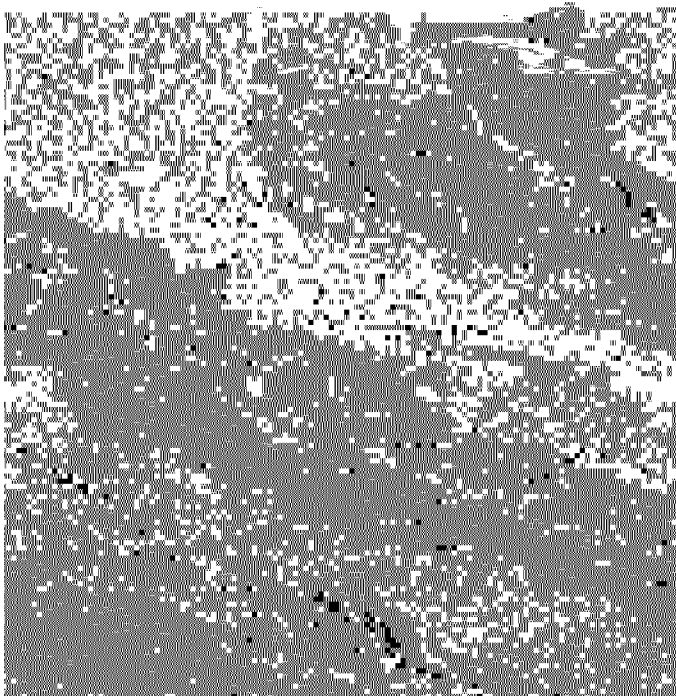
There is nothing quite like being associated with a university that has been around for some 750 years. Take, for example, the Snell dinner, an annual event that celebrates the relationship between Balliol, my college, and the University of Glasgow. It is one thing for people to show up in kilts and for bag pipe music to fill the hall—or for me to slip into the tux I bought second-hand in nearby Woodstock—but it adds another level of enjoyment to learn that Adam Smith attended the same Snell dinner more than two hundred years before me. Smith, though, is recent history. Dinners at Balliol take place in a Harry Potteresque hall featuring a portrait of John Wycliffe, the religious reformer and translator, who was elected master of the college in 1361. (I'll leave Balliol's religious history to others, but I cannot help mentioning that it was right in front of the college door that Thomas Cranmer, former Archbishop of Canterbury, was burned at the stake in 1556.)

It is not clear whether Oxford is such a beautiful city because the colleges are so breathtaking or the other way around; town and gown are intimately linked here. But there is no denying that I have had the fortune to spend considerable

time in one of the most enchanting places in the world. The dinners are so stimulating and the setting so idyllic that I feel my intellectual life renewed. At a typical dinner a Sanskrit scholar will sit on one side of me and a cardiologist on the other. The only problem with the conversations we have is that they distract from the fantastic food and wine we consume.

Being here has also enabled me to travel, and I have spent time in South Africa, Turkey, and France. Each, of course, has its wonders but from a religious standpoint, Turkey was by far the most interesting. I have always had an interest in Byzantine

perfect storm: crisis & possibility in higher ed



rule of law in the 1990 peyote case,

As the 2011 “Arab Spring” approaches summertime, conventional wisdom holds that the success of these revolutions hinges in large part upon the presence of a strong civil society, which provides cohesion to popular uprisings and allows the possibility of the orderly change of political power. The key cases are Egypt, where a relatively strong civil society has enabled communication and collaboration throughout the revolution, and Libya, where institutions of civil society had been systematically crushed for decades. Without question the current revolutionary fervor in the Arab world has reinvigorated a debate about the role civil society plays in democratization, human rights and international peace.

On April 14 Yonder Gillihan brought new historical perspective to bear on the question during a lunch colloquium that compared ancient and modern understandings of civil society. While researching the anti-statist Jewish sect believed to have written the Dead Sea Scrolls, Gillihan, an assistant professor of theology at Boston College, noted surprising similarities between this group and pro-state groups in ancient Athens, Rome, Egypt, and Asia Minor. He also found that although ancient Athens harbored very few voluntary associations (the core component of civil society), voluntary associations flourished elsewhere under Hellenistic and Roman imperial rule. Modern understandings, or models, of civil society, he argued, help explain when and why associations flourished in these ancient and medieval societies.

The core component of a thriving civil society is the voluntary association, Gillihan said. Through voluntary associations, civil

The Boisi Center’s final event of the year, on April 28, brought together a large panel discussion, co-sponsored by the Office of Marketing Communications and the School of Theology and Ministry (STM), on the history of “God talk” in America. Moderated by Boisi Center associate director Erik Owens (far left, above), the panel featured (continuing from left) Mark Massa, S.J., Dean and professor of Church history at the BC STM; Rachel Gordan, doctoral candidate in American Jewish history at Harvard; Cynthia L. Lyerly, associate professor of history at BC; Sarah Colt, writer, director and producer of a two episodes of the PBS Frontline and American Experience series “God in America”; and David Belton, series director of “God in America.” ■

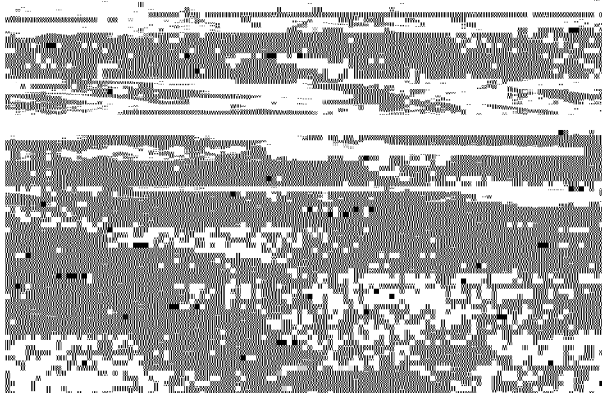
the boisi center for religion and american public life

Boston College
140 Commonwealth Avenue
Chestnut Hill, MA 02467
U.S.A.

ADDRESS SERVICE REQUESTED

non-profit org.
u.s. postage
paid
boston, ma
permit 55294

Follow us on Facebook ([facebook.com/boisicenter](https://www.facebook.com/boisicenter)) and Twitter ([@boisi_center](https://twitter.com/boisi_center))



The boisi center for religion and american public life

Contact

24 Quincy Road
Chestnut Hill, MA 02467

Tel: (617) 552-1860
Fax: (617) 552-1863

Email: publife@bc.edu
Web: www.bc.edu/boisi

Staff

alan wolfe
director

erik owens
associate director

susan richard
administrative assistant

brenna mcMahon
graduate research assistant

kara mcbride
research assistant

emily mccormick
research assistant

kelly cupo
web specialist

Advisory Board

nancy tatom ammerman
boston university

mary jo bane
harvard university

paul baumann
commonweal magazine

anna greenberg
greenberg quinlan rosner
research

rev. j. bryan hehir
harvard university;
archdiocese of boston

rev. j. donald monan, s.j.
boston college

ourida mostefai
boston college

cullen murphy
vanity fair magazine

kay l. schlozman
boston college