

# *The* BOISI CENTER *Report*

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THE BOISI CENTER FOR RELIGION AND AMERICAN PUBLIC LIFE

DECEMBER 2006

The main news to report in this issue of our newsletter is the hiring of Erik Owens to be the Boisi Center's Assistant Director. We had a huge number of responses to our ad for this position, and the quality of the people on the short list was stunning. Nonetheless it was clear to me and other members of the search committee that if Erik did not exist, he would have had to be invented. His experiences organizing conferences for the Pew Forum, his intellectual interests in religion and education, his take-charge organizational abilities, his familiarity

*The BOISI CENTER for*  
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## Religious Freedom and the Pledge of Allegiance

panel to discuss the Pledge's invocation of a nation "under God," and its implications for religious freedom in this country.

First among the panelists was Michael Newdow, a lawyer, physician and First Amendment activist who sued the U.S. Congress over this issue and 1dRELIGIO4pubn rg the coun vistCu s

Every day millions of Americans, many of them schoolchildren, are asked to pledge their allegiance to the American flag and to "the Republic for which it stands, one Nation under God, indivisible, with liberty and justice for all." By invoking God, does this familiar act of citizenship constitute a profession of faith or simply an acknowledgement that Americans have historically believed in God? In either case, does it imply that a good citizen must believe in God? On October 9 the Boisi Center hosted a

## “Intelligent Design” in the Classroom and the Courts

Our fall semester opened with a lunch colloquium on September 27 with Jay Wexler, Associate Professor at the Boston University School of Law. An expert on constitutional issues involving religion and education, Wexler spoke about the recent controversy over teaching the theory of “intelligent design” as part of a science curriculum. His presentation, “Judging Intelligent Design: Should the Courts Decide What Counts as Science or Religion?” drew an interdisciplinary audience of physical and social scientists, theologians, and educators.

In a federal court case last year that many compared to the 1925 Scopes Monkey Trial, a federal judge barred

a Pennsylvania public school district from teaching the theory of intelligent design (ID) in biology class, ruling that ID is a religious (not scientific) theory and therefore its teaching represented an unconstitutional establishment of religion in public schools. Wexler argued that the court’s 139-page opinion was a comprehensive and complete victory for ID opponents, but that it nevertheless presents a serious philosophical and jurisprudential problem: it puts judges in the position of definitively ruling what is—or is not—both science and religion. Legal precedent did not require the court to define “science” in order to declare ID a violation of the establishment clause;



this judicial overreaching was thus both unnecessary (since the definition of non-legal terms are usually

*Continued on page 6*

## Integrating Islam into Western Culture

On October 4 the Boisi Center welcomed Professor Jonathan Laurence of Boston College’s Political Science Department, who presented his latest research on the integration of Islam and Muslims into French society. Laurence began by debunking several myths about Islam in Europe, including the idea that Islam is growing at an alarming rate and the perception that French Muslims generally hold extreme cultural and political attitudes. Laurence then raised the question: Are the present conflicts arising simply out of poor communication between immigrant Muslims and their “host societies,” or do they manifest a massive failure of the system to integrate this new population?

Drawing upon his recent book *Integrating Islam*, Laurence put the current issues in historical perspective by recalling the first round of discussion about headscarves in the late 1980s and early 1990s, the controversy over Salman Rushdie’s work, and the initial Gulf War. Now, as Muslims become a larger and more established group in European soci-

eties, new questions are being asked about the impact of their presence. Is a new continent emerging which might be called “Eurabia”? Do the meetings between government and religious leaders in castles around Europe evoke the ghosts of Napoleon and Mussolini? In this era of communications technology and easy travel between countries, has the assimilationist urge of immigrants subsided in a way that might allow a new kind of multi-ethnic state to emerge? In other words, to what extent do Muslims want to become “French,” “German”, and so on? What about the pluralism within Islam itself and how these various groups are represented in the host



societies? Finally, are these concerns encouraging a more right-leaning or conservative host state, and what might be the wider implications of such a tendency?

The group engaged in a lively discussion about these and other issues, considering the history and implications for Muslims and other groups in the U. S. In the end, the group observed that although there is some policing going on in societies where Muslims have arrived more recently, this has usually happened with the process of emancipation of new groups: increased oversight is often the tradeoff as greater freedom is achieved. What all this means for the future of interstate and intrastate relations remains an urgent question. ■

## Religious Illiteracy in Public Schools

At a luncheon colloquium on November 2, 2006, Diane L. Moore, Professor of the Practice of Religion and Education, and Director of the Program in Religion and Secondary Education at Harvard Divinity School, discussed ideas from her new book, *Overcoming Religious Illiteracy: A Cultural Studies Approach to the Study of Religion in Secondary Education*.

Moore posited that education's main purpose is to prepare students for life in civil society. Noting that religion is a major aspect of that life, but that religious illiteracy is widespread in the United States, she considered how schools might begin to teach students about religion more effectively. She argued that in this country, there is an unfortunate ideological divide between religious people who believe there is a secular conspiracy to get religion out of the schools and secular humanists who think that all religion is right-wing fundamentalism. She observed that Americans who know little about religions other than their own often become impatient with efforts at tolerance. Moore proposed that this reli-

gious illiteracy and impatience could be diminished by teaching religion in a nonsectarian fashion in secondary schools; this would advocate knowledge and tolerance of the many different religious faiths practiced in American society.

The ensuing lively—and, at times, contentious—discussion revolved around big questions: What are the purposes of education? What role does religion play in these purposes? What are the civic implications when parents remove their children from the schools for religious reasons (in order to home-school them, for example)? Is “deliberative democracy” a useful paradigm for education? Concern was raised as to whether an “objective” approach is desirable—or even possible—in the study of reli-

gions. Wouldn't it be appropriate, one questioner asked, for teachers to make value judgments in the classroom, such as “Terrorism is wrong” or, more provocatively, “Roman Catholicism oppresses women by refusing to ordain them”? Ultimately no consensus was reached about what to do when ideas that are intellectually coherent or historically important but morally reprehensible—such as racism—are put forth in the educational setting. Some of the participants believed that

## Ethics and the African Refugee Crisis

Our final luncheon colloquium of the semester featured David Hollenbach, S.J. and Elizabeth King, the Director and Assistant Director, respectively, of Boston College's new Center for Human Rights and International Justice. Hollenbach and King had recently returned from Nairobi, Kenya, where the Center had sponsored a conference on ethical responsibilities toward forced migrants and internally displaced persons in Africa.

Fr. Hollenbach, the Margaret O'Brien Flatley Professor of Theology at Boston College, provided an overview of the issues raised

at the conference. He began by noting the urgency of the refugee problem: there are 33 million refugees and internally displaced people in the world today, a high percentage of whom are in Africa. He then outlined five principles that ought to guide the treatment of refugees in every country. First, there should be respect for the right to freedom of movement by refugees in order to alleviate the dehumanizing experience of confinement in camps. Thus confinement should be a last resort; it should be temporary; and it should be introduced only if the harm it causes is proportionately

less than the harm that would otherwise occur. Second, richer countries have a moral responsibility to share the burdens of aiding the displaced. Third, such countries should share in addressing the deeper causes and consequences of displacement. Here Hollenbach stressed the (admittedly partial) success that the United States has achieved in southern Sudan with the peace agreement of 2005; the situation there remains unstable, but it shows that Western powers *can* make a difference. Fourth, the responsibility to protect the rights of displaced persons necessitates peace-making efforts in

## Foreign Delegations Visit Boisi Center

This semester the Boisi Center hosted three delegations of foreign visitors from the Netherlands, Kyrgyzstan, and Saudi Arabia. The visiting Dutch scholars—three theology professors from Utrecht University—were founding faculty members of the new Utrecht Center for Religion and Society. They met with Alan Wolfe and Erik Owens on November 15 to discuss how university-based research centers can serve both the academy and the wider society by studying the global religious landscape. After a collegial discussion about the two Centers, the scholars headed south to Washington D.C. to attend the annual meeting of the American Academy of Religion.

The Kyrgyzstani delegation visited the Boisi Center on August 21 as part

of a three week cultural exchange program funded by the U.S. Agency for International Development (USAID) and administered locally by WorldBoston, a nonprofit group that brings emerging leaders to Boston to discuss important issues. About half of the group were professors or students of Islamic studies, while others work for religious organizations or media outlets in the former Soviet republic located in central Asia. Nine of the ten visitors were Muslim, with one Eastern Orthodox Christian among them—a rough approximation of the Kyrgyz Republic's religious demographics. The conversation that followed Owens' presentation on religion and American public life was lively and good-natured, thanks in part to the able assistance of two expert translators. Several

delegates were intrigued by the Jesuit governance of Boston College as well as the religious roots of many other American universities, asking if these religious ties shaped avenues of scientific inquiry or the presentation of Islam in classrooms. Extended discussion was given to issues of church-state separation, religion in political campaigns, and Americans' perception of Islam since 9/11.

September 8 marked the arrival of five female educational leaders from Saudi Arabia traveling under the auspices of the International Visitor Leadership Program of the U.S. Department of State (with local assistance from WorldBoston). Owens spoke to the group about the legal, cultural and educational challenges that religion presents to American

*Continued on page 6*

cause. As an atheist herself, Kaminer said, "We can't afford to win this case" because the public backlash would likely result in passage

(particularly Christian) religious beliefs, making belief in God a component of good citizenship. Atheists and other non-theists are treated as unequal citizens who must suffer in silence as the majority robustly declares its faith to be integral to its patriotism.

Author, attorney and social critic Wendy Kaminer sympathized with Newdow's principled argument for equal treatment of atheists, but said that his legal challenge was doing more harm than good to that

## African Refugee Crisis *(continued from page 4)*

The Boisi Center for Religion and American Public Life invites graduate and undergraduate students from all the schools at Boston College to join its Student Advisory Panel. We seek up to 15 students from across the university—at least one from each school—to meet monthly with staff members to discuss current issues in religion and public life, and how the Center can address them in its programs and publications. Panel members will then help to promote the Center's events among the university community.

Benefits for panel members include the opportunity to meet visiting speakers before events, help shape the Center's programs, and join lively and informed conversations about current events with Alan Wolfe and the rest of the Center's staff. This will entail a relatively minor time commitment, so if you or anyone you know—students, colleagues, or friends—might be interested in this opportunity, please contact us via e-mail at [publife@bc.edu](mailto:publife@bc.edu).

affected regions. Finally, protection of the rights of internally displaced persons likewise demands a response from neighboring countries, regional organizations, and the United Nations.

King spoke at a more practical level about the particular vulnerability of women in refugee camps. She pointed out how a "gender lens" might be used to address issues such as food distribution and camp security. But she also admitted the dangers of focusing on women's issues in this way; it might appear as a chal-



lenge to the traditional culture and prompt an unforeseen reaction. As she concluded: "there are no easy answers."

outside the bounds of law) and unfortunate (since it leaves these definitions open to future manipulation by judges and lawyers who might not be so conscientious). Finally, said Wexler, the decision also implied that religion and science are somehow mutually exclusive—something many scientists and theologians alike would contest.

A robust conversation brought



## Midterm Elections (continued from page 2)

sion of such conservatives added positive “cross-currents” within the Democratic Party. He envisaged a vigorous debate regarding abortion in the 2008 Presidential election.

Wolfe also agreed with much of what had been said, but raised two issues. First, he was not sure that the

country remained as closely divided as the previous two speakers claimed. He pointed out that the Senate turns over only a third of its seats each election cycle, and that capturing six of these seats was a Herculean task that demonstrated broad support for Democrats. More

Republican Senate seats will come into play in 2008, and the Democrats can therefore expect to consolidate their gains there—and indeed in numerous state elections as well—two years from now. Second, Wolfe argued that the election signaled a major repudiation of Karl Rove's strategy to

appeal to the ardent conservative “base” of the Republican Party rather than its broad middle. Rove's strategy, which once seemed to epitomize political genius, Wolfe noted, ironically may have doomed the GOP to the status of a mere “Southern party” rather than a true national coalition.

The discussion following the presentations focused on whether evangelicals would continue to be involved politically, and if so, in what capacity. All agreed that Democrats now face a huge challenge to produce results, not least with regard to the war in Iraq. The conversation ended on a hopeful note as Wolfe suggested that Deval Patrick's victory in the Massachusetts gubernatorial race may have demonstrated to other candidates around the country that negative campaign advertisements are not a requirement for electoral success. ■



## Staff Notes

**Alan Wolfe** is Professor of Political Science and Director of the Boisi Center for Religion and American Public Life at Boston College. In



October his book *Does American Democracy Still Work?* was published by Yale; in November, Brookings Institution

Press published *Is There a Culture War?* (co-authored with James Davison Hunter). His recent articles on “Free Speech, Israel and Jewish Illiberalism” (*Chronicle of Higher Education*) and “Why Conservatives Can't Govern” (*Washington Monthly*) were much-

discussed. In the Spring he will teach a class on “The American Culture War” (PO 358) in the political science department.

**Erik Owens** is Assistant Director of the Boisi Center and Adjunct Assistant Professor of Theology at Boston College. This fall he delivered lectures on religious pluralism and civic education at the annual meetings of the American Political Science



Association and the American Academy of Religion. He also contributed a chapter on “Religion

and Civic Education in American Public Schools” to the forthcoming book *German and American Perspectives on Religion and Public Life*. In the Spring he will teach a theology course (TH 486) on religion and citizenship entitled “For God and Country?”

**Susan Richard**

serves as the Center's administrative assistant and handles reservations for our regular lunch colloquia. If you would like to attend any of

these events, please email her at [susan.richard.1@bc.edu](mailto:susan.richard.1@bc.edu).



