

BOISI CENTER REPORT



VOL. 21 NO. 2 • MAY 2021

FROM THE DIRECTOR



Friends:

We've been busy at Boisi. We've had a succession of highly successful webinars and Zoom events that have brought in some of our largest viewing audiences to date: a panel discussion

of "U.S.-Vatican Relations: An Historical Perspective from Reagan to Biden," which looked at both the past and the future (February 26); a superbly organized all-day graduate symposium on "Pandemic and Religion," planned and convened by our own redoubtable graduate research assistant, Zac Karanovich, which generated dozens of papers from Duke, the University of Chicago, Yale—and of course BC (February 27); a widely viewed webinar—"Three Pieces of Advice to President Biden from Catholics in the Public Square"—that included Bishop Robert McElroy, *Washington Post* columnist E.J. Dionne, and the very smart academics Massimo Faggioli and Amy Uelmen (March 4); a first-ever panel discussion on "The Development of Muslim Leadership in the U.S.," a brainchild of Boisi colleague Ann McClenahan and widely regarded as the best public discussion to date of that important topic anywhere (March 9); our most-watched event of the semester, a screening of the Emmy-award winning film *Spiritual Audacity: The Abraham Joshua Heschel Story*, followed by a riveting conversation between the film's producer Martin Doblmeier and the famous theologian's daughter Susannah Heschel (March 22); and another panel event on the Netflix documentary *The Social Dilemma* (April 21). All of these events can be viewed at the Boisi Center's webpage, under "Events." And all of them were the joint projects of the superb Boisi team: Susan Richard, Zac Karanovich,

and Ann McClenahan. To them, as usual, I owe a great debt of gratitude.

Rather than focus on these successful events in more detail, as I have in previous Boisi newsletters, I'd like to report on two new sets of initiatives that the Center undertook this year. The first of these new initiatives were two faculty seminars, both interdisciplinary and one inter-institutional. We undertook a faculty seminar series co-sponsored by the Boisi Center and the Center for Christian-Jewish Learning, very ably led by interim director Ruth Langer. Conceived as part of the broader, university-wide, "Forum on Racial Justice," Ruth and I sponsored three Zoom seminar meetings on discussions about race in the classroom to which all faculty and graduate students in the Theology and Philosophy Departments were invited to participate. The first meeting focused on "Cultivating Helpful Dynamics," on February 10, superbly convened by Marina McCoy of BC's Philosophy Department and Meghan Sweeney, director of BC's PULSE Program for Service Learning. The second focused on "Creating Constructive Conversations," on March 10, which was wonderfully led by Elizabeth Antus (Theology) and Gregory Fried (Philosophy). The third focused on "Developing Practical and Integrative Assignments," on April 7, masterfully led by Matthew Kruger (Theology) and Mary Troxell (Philosophy). Faculty and grad students from both departments took part, and the discussions were so rich and helpful that we're considering continuing the seminars during the 2021-22 academic year.

The second faculty seminar was both inter-disciplinary and inter-institutional: after numerous conversations over the summer with Mark Silk, a grad school buddy and now director of the Leonard E. Greenberg Center for the Study of Religion in Public Life at Trinity College Hart-

ford, Mark and I launched an inter-institutional faculty seminar that met once a month, composed of faculty from both BC and Trinity College Hartford. We read widely and engaged each other on texts as diverse as the lyrics of some of Leonard Cohen's famous songs of the sixties and seventies (which turned out to be full of religious symbols and tropes), articles which compared church/state separation in Ireland and the U.S., belle hooks' reflections on teaching as a transgressive activity, and two chapters from Timothy Morton's wonderfully provocative *The Ecological Thought*. The interchanges were rich and the "sides" that emerged during lively conversations had little or nothing to do with institutional affiliation (a happy realization). The "Marks Brothers" (as one participant referred to Mark Silk and myself) thoroughly enjoyed the conversations, and intend to continue the shared conversations next year.

Lastly, and by no means least in terms of time and energy exerted to get it off the ground, the Boisi Center initiated a new minor in the Morrissey College, called (unsurprisingly) "Religion and Public Life." Culling the names of talented freshmen and sophomores from colleagues teaching core theology and philosophy courses, students were individually invited into a six course minor, the required course for which is taught every spring semester by yours truly. We have, to date, seventeen minors, with three graduating seniors (off to Dartmouth, BC Law, and Officers' Training School at Fort Bragg). Each student's minor is worked out individually with the director, so each student crafts a concentration around their areas of interest and planned future study: Religion and Politics; Religion and the Law; Religion and Science; Religion and the Arts, etc.

(Continued on page 3)

U.S.-VATICAN RELATIONS: AN HISTORICAL PERSPECTIVE FROM REAGAN TO BIDEN

A webinar panel discussion explored the history of U.S.-Vatican relations and its lessons for the current administration.

The Boisi Center's spring events commenced with a panel entitled, "U.S.-Vatican Relations: An Historical Perspective from Reagan to Biden." The panelists included three members of the Boston College community: Charles Gallagher, S.J. (History); Peter G. Martin (special assistant to the president); and Oliver P. Rafferty, S.J. (History).

Mark Massa, S.J., the Boisi Center's director, moderated the conversation and began by asking the panelists how they would assess diplomatic relations since President Reagan, and whether the occupant of the White House had much impact on that relationship. Rafferty noted that the relations are managed by professionals, but the president at the time can matter, as evidenced by certain statements by Pope Francis alluding to President Trump. Martin, who worked for many years at the U.S. Embassy to the Holy See, said that the length and depth of the diplomatic relationship helped avoid some of those issues that might emerge from more visible members of each state. Gallagher, looking historically, observed that the Vatican archives that cover the period of this panel are closed, so we might not know much about the real relationship until those are opened. He also raised the re-arrival of "secret diplomacy" under Francis, especially regarding Cuba and China. Martin defended the importance of secrecy as a common necessity, pointing specifically to the communications about Cuba—the secrecy avoided any interference by other players. Rafferty added that the Vatican does have its own interests and, in China, for example, the Vatican's work could be complicated as they desire to better their relationship with China if Biden continues Trump's combative policies toward China.

Massa asked which president was best at diplomacy to the Vatican. Gallagher led with Nixon, explaining that Nixon flew to Rome in 1969 to meet the pope. That conversation led to a U.S. representative to the Vatican for the first time since 1950. This led to the 1970 appointment of Henry Cabot Lodge, Jr. as the representative to Paul VI, paving the way for full diplomatic relations. Rafferty voted for Reagan, who brought about the establishment of full diplomatic relations, doing



so with an idea that he and John Paul II would have a shared concern about communism in eastern Europe and a distrust of liberation theology.

Massa then asked whether the high point in U.S.-Vatican relations was between John Paul II and President George W. Bush. Rafferty said it was overshadowed because of clear policy differences over Iraq. But it was true that at one level Bush spoke the same language as the pope: no apology for being a Christian. Martin believed that Bush was the president that visited more than any other, though Martin also praised President Obama because, under his administration, there were many shared foreign policy goals, and John Kerry, Secretary of State at the time, had significant contact with Cardinal Secretary of State Pietro Parolin. Gallagher spoke of the publicity high point on July 20, 2015, when President Obama held a press conference to announce the normalization of diplomatic relations with Cuba and the first thank you is given to the Vatican diplomatic corps. The Vatican was seen as useful to a superpower.

Massa asked the panelists to assess the most contentious issues in the relationship between the U.S. and the Vatican. Rafferty brought up the Cairo Conference on Population and Development in 1994 where the U.S. was foregrounding abortion access in the Third World. The

Vatican asked them to not advocate for that as strongly. The U.S. backed down only after the Vatican sent a representative to the U.S. Martin brought up Wikileaks, when a U.S. army private got access to a database of diplomatic cables, including many from the Vatican embassy, and released them in violation of the confidence in which those communications are understood to be disclosed. This included the communications of a Venezuelan priest who had visited the U.S. Embassy at the Vatican and told them about the situation under Chavez. This was a situation when confidence would be very important given the potential danger to him and his family in Venezuela.

Questions were then taken from the viewers. When asked about Catholic presidents, it was noted by Rafferty that having a Catholic in the White House is not necessarily better or worse, though it is different this time, given the way President Kennedy had to deal with significant anti-Catholic bias. The bigger issue might be the relationship between the nation's second Catholic president and the U.S. Conference of Catholic Bishops, especially given their president's (Archbishop José Gomez) statement on Biden and abortion on Inauguration Day. Asked about whether there were any residual issues from the Trump presidency, Martin noted that it did less damage because it was less organized. The announcement of the "Muslim ban," which was learned by many embassies from the news, was an area that caused some difficulty, especially given Pope Francis's focus on the Vatican's relationship with the Islamic world. Further questions were asked about the significance of the move of the embassy to the same campus as the U.S. Embassy to Italy, whether the opening of the Vatican archives for this time period will reveal anything significant or cause any issues in the relationship, and whether Newt Gingrich's media/public presence caused any challenges.



Gallagher, Martin, and Rafferty (L-R)

PANDEMIC & RELIGION

This spring saw the first graduate student conference in the Boisi Center's history.

On a cold Saturday, February 27th, the Boisi Center hosted its first graduate student conference entitled, "Pandemic & Religion." The interdisciplinary conference was spurred on by the desire to reformat the Graduate Symposium on Religion and Politics, the Center's annual graduate seminar. The staff began planning in June of 2020, and the call-for-papers was distributed in early November. We were pleasantly surprised by the response.

While we were disappointed that the conference was forced online, the silver lining was that that format allowed for many more students from other parts of the country to participate.

The presenters represented sixteen institutions across the country, among them: Jesuit School of Theology at Santa Clara, Loyola University Chicago, Catholic University, Yale Divinity School, Princeton Theological Seminary, Harvard Divinity School, Boston University, and Boston College.

The day began with Mark Massa, S.J., the director of the Boisi Center, offering a welcome. Massa was followed by the Boisi Center's graduate research assistant and conference coordinator, Zac Karanovich, offering his own welcome. "COVID has touched the lives of each one of us and everyone throughout the world," he said. "It has been the most devastating experience many of us have or will experience in our lifetimes, the masks, the isolation, maybe some among us here have even had it. The unemployment, lost businesses, lost livelihoods. And this doesn't even begin to touch the tragedy of the nearly 2.5 million lives that have been lost worldwide." But he added, "With the rollout of vaccines in full swing, the end of the pandemic (at least in its current manifestation) is on the horizon, and the relative calm that has emerged now that the light at the end of the tunnel can be seen allows us to think a bit more clearly about some of its ramifications. Of particular interest today is how pandem-

ic has interacted with religion, from the ways past pandemics have been dealt with theologically to applications of biblical wisdom to our current situation, from the influence of quarantine on the commodification of persons to the challenges, legal or illegal, of restrictions on worship."

The papers were divided between six different sessions: Liturgical Theology and Ecclesiology; Historical and Contemporary Theology; Ethics; Contextual Perspectives; Law, Liberty, Disobedience; and Religious Institutions and Practices. Each session had a featured respondent: John Baldwin, S.J., Mark Massa, S.J., Kristin Heyer, Hosffman Ospino, M. Cathleen Kaveny, and Nancy Ammerman, respectively. These respondents offered their thoughts on each of the student papers and also determined the winner of the conference's "Award for Best Student Paper." The winners of the inaugural award were Anna Holleman and Joseph Roso of Duke University, who coauthored the paper, "Congregational Preparedness on the Eve of COVID-19."

We hope this is the first of many annual graduate student conferences, though as Karanovich said, "[we] pray that the theme of pandemic is never again relevant to explore."

Each of the paper sessions was recorded and is available to view on the Boisi Center website: bc.edu/boisi. Additionally, a special thanks is owed to the conference's co-facilitator, Nathan Wood-House, a doctoral candidate in the theology department here at Boston College.



FROM THE DIRECTOR

(Continued from page 1)

A committee of fifteen professors from ten departments helped to shape the minor in the early planning stage, and their advice has helped the Boisi Center to offer students individually-crafted areas of study that merge their personal interests, passions, and future vocational plans into a compelling academic program that seeks to fulfill Boston College's Jesuit and Catholic commitment to "shaping men and women with and for others."

Stay tuned: we have equally exciting things planned for next year.

~ Mark Massa, S.J.

STAFF UPDATES: WHAT'S NEXT?



Former undergraduate research fellow **Monica Orona** will graduate this year from Boston College. Following graduation, she will be working as an analyst at Russell Reynolds Associates in Dallas, Texas. We are grateful for her outstanding work and wish her well!

THREE PIECES OF ADVICE FROM CATHOLICS IN THE PUBLIC SQUARE

An amazing panel discussed how President Biden should handle some important Catholic issues.



Dionne, Faggioli, McElroy, and Uelmen (L-R).

On Thursday, March 4, the Center hosted an all-star panel of featuring E.J. Dionne (Brookings Institution), Massimo Faggioli (Villanova University), Bishop Robert McElroy (Diocese of San Diego), and Amy Uelmen (Georgetown Law) to offer “Three Pieces of Advice to President Biden from Catholics in the Public Square.”

Mark Massa, S.J., director of the Boisi Center, moderated the discussion and led by asking the panelists to offer their three pieces of advice. Dionne led by clarifying that Catholics who look at the president are doing so not as Catholics but as citizens. In that capacity, they are asking of him to focus on the virus, the economy, and taking care of jobs, education, and healthcare—a focus on real issues as opposed to culture wars, which would benefit the country and the American church. He continued by encouraging Biden to recast the conversation on family, which, understood through the Catholic lens, can influence much by way of social justice; to focus, with Pope Francis, on global poverty, climate change, human rights, and immigration; and to move toward more faith-based partnerships.

Faggioli encouraged Biden to be open to the U.S. bishops, challenging the minority of ideologues in the U.S. church and among the ranks of the bishops. Additionally, America should have something like a Jubilee, signaling human fraternity in line with Francis’s teachings, to address those things that cannot be met by policies. Finally, the church and the country should follow a “synodal path,” in which the president assures them his administration is not a reversal of fortunes, but will be about real healing.

Next, McElroy gave his advice, which

was, first, that Biden should reclaim patriotism from the “tribal mantra” of “America first.” Our aspirations are what constitute our patriotism, and the elements of that patriotism resonate with Catholic social teaching. Second, he urged Biden to remember that the fundamental moral challenge for a Catholic public official is not to align completely with Catholic teaching, but rather to use an authentically informed conscience to guide their decisions. And finally, he urged Biden to invite Archbishop Gomez (president of the U.S. Conference of Catholic Bishops) to dinner at which the two could talk about their jobs and their respective difficulties, and, from that, a very productive relationship could emerge.

Uelmen pointed to “On Dealing with Others,” by St. Ignatius of Loyola, a communication to the Jesuits who would be working at the Council of Trent. To do the job well, Ignatius encouraged them to, first, get out of the reactive mode, allowing the time for deep listening to inform their thought; second, to still find time to pay attention to those on the margins, which allows a deeper meaning to enter one’s life; and third, to treasure and nourish relationships with those that provide critical feedback.

Massa circled back to Dionne’s mention of the culture wars, asking the other panelists how Biden might avoid continuing them. Faggioli thought that he had done that already because there is no “pulpit” being used to give its voice, as the past president did. McElroy acknowledged that it is difficult to change the language of discourse, even though Biden and his administration is trying. That policies do not get Republican votes still says something about the

cultural war, even if only along the lines of political polarization. Uelmen added that many of us are caught in echo chambers without acknowledging the damage they cause, so one must attempt to dismantle them.

Massa then turned to Faggioli’s “synodal path,” asking about its meaning. Faggioli explained that it means a new kind of national conversation that reflects the aspiration of a people to be part of a national discourse about participation, involvement, and fundamentally about democracy being worth saving. It parallels the desire of Pope Francis to help engage participation in the church, but also one that will be mirrored in the participation of people in global democracies. Along these lines, McElroy thought that it reflects what Catholicism really is—something many Catholics do not actually know. Uelmen brought attention to the difficulty of having real conversations about politics in our current climate and she and Dionne wondered whether and how that might change.

Questions from viewers began asking about how one might initiate a conversation between Biden and Gomez, which McElroy said it would be about relationships and enhanced by a shared family experience and a shared concern about immigration. Another viewer flipped the question asking what advice should be given to the U.S. bishops, about which McElroy said that the first step as bishops is to try to approach the administration as they do all administrations, in dialogue and to advocate with a sense of supportiveness in the basic act of governance, not opposition. John Courtney Murray, S.J. was raised by another viewer, particularly his notion of “civil conversation.” McElroy and Faggioli reminded the viewers that Murray’s thought was always an ethical aspiration, one which was continuously worked upon, and that none of the American tenets should be dogmatized, even those aspects of religious freedom in the Constitution. Uelmen concluded by pointing to Murray’s “Towards a Theology for the Layman,” which offered resources for shifting the tone of laypeople around the Second Vatican Council, which encouraged a move away from apologetics to something more constructive that engages other disciplines and the world around us.

THE DEVELOPMENT OF MUSLIM LEADERSHIP IN THE U.S.

An important conversation about the Islamic community's challenges and growth in America.

On March 9th, the Boisi Center hosted Zain Abdullah of Temple University, David Grafton of Hartford Seminary, and Shabana Mir of American Islamic College for a panel discussion entitled, “The Development of Muslim Leadership in the U.S.” Natana DeLong-Bas, an associate professor of the practice of theology and Islamic civilizations and societies at Boston College, moderated the panel and opened by asking each of the panelists to describe what the panelists’ particular organizations are offering by way of training, how that might have changed over the years, what populations they are training, and how the understanding of Islamic leadership more broadly is changing in the United States.

Abdullah began by discussing the legacy of religious studies at Temple University, which includes Islamic studies. The religious studies department was established in 1961, and the Islamic Studies program was established in 1968. The leadership of that program shifted over time, broadening the view of the Muslim world beyond Arabism. Because the department more broadly values the interreligious nature of their work, which enriches the study of both the study of other religions as well as one’s own, Abdullah said. And the department appropriates both the scientific and humanities approaches, which lead to the study of Islam not from rote memorization but through Islamic fact—allowing everyone to investigate more objectively or scientifically the Islamic tradition. It was Dr. Ismail al-Faruqi who was central to the development of the Islamic Studies program at Temple. Because he also founded The International Institute of Islamic Thought (IIIT), wrote extensively, and started the Islamic Studies section of the American Academy of Religion (AAR), Temple is connected deeply in the history of the spread of Islamic thought and study throughout the U.S. Challenges remain, however, such as grappling with how to explain Islam and not expect that meaning to be a given. He noted the importance of interrogating what is meant by “Islam,” especially given the diversity in the U.S. Islamic community.

Grafton described how a Christian dean at a historically Calvinist Christian seminary is now training Muslims at an interreligious seminary. He not-

ed five distinct moments in Hartford Seminary’s history that explain how they have reached where they are: 1) From its beginning, Hartford Seminary held a traditional Protestant missionary perspective when teaching about Islam; 2) they then discovered a dialogue with Islam; 3) then they taught Islam and Islamic studies by and with Muslims; 4) they turned to the professional training of spiritual caregivers for Muslims; and 5) then the professional training of spiritual caregivers as Muslims. These shifts, he said, led to an interest in hiring Muslim faculty members, ultimately resulting in the 1991 hiring of the first Muslim faculty member at any Christian seminary in the U.S., Ibrahim Abu-Rabi’—who would become co-director of the Macdonald Center for the Study of Islam and Christian-Muslim Relations. In the fourth move, Grafton said that most students went to Hartford Seminary to study to be chaplains—not imams—and most Islamic chaplains in colleges and universities are graduates of the program at Hartford Seminary. Their public presence in spaces began to breed a new generation of Muslims who saw themselves doing the same thing in public settings, not just their own communities. He concluded by observing that his current and recent graduates go into leadership roles in Muslim “third spaces,” spaces outside of traditional religious communities.

Mir then discussed American Islamic College. The college has gone through many changes since its founding in the 1980s. They are not a seminary, but they are not teaching Islam as a given either. Instead, they try to incorporate standard, critical academic practice (including true academic freedom) in the teaching of Islam in a faithful space. The academic freedom allows Mir to

teach on Islam and gender, for example. While it is a largely Sunni faculty, the college is not identified with a particular sect. Instead, they take a multid denominational approach. The diverse student body, which represents both conservative and liberal positions, Mir said, allows for a more engaging conversation. A majority Muslim classroom permits greater critical reflection, instead of in non-Muslim majority classes, in which many more preliminary ideas have to be explained before reaching more critical topics. Mir noted that although there are many positive aspects of the college, they still must address challenges facing the broader Muslim world, including issues of gender and spiritual abuse and anti-blackness.

DeLong-Bas then asked what the challenges and opportunities are facing their institutions as we move forward.

Abdullah observed the tendency of society to think Islam is merely a mosque-based organization, but that is not the case. There are think tanks, advocacy groups, philanthropic groups, all of which have developed over time to give Muslims an alternative to just going through the mosque or being in conversation with an imam that does not understand these modern challenges and may turn to medieval thought to answer it. In light of this, it is important, he said, to find opportunities to partner with organizations that will provide funding to allow for new creative exchanges with Muslims and the other organizations. This shifts the focus from ideology to other things, like art. Citing Toni Morrison, he said that this new focus is less intellectual and allows interlocutors to feel, which has a more lasting impact.

(Continued on page 6)



(Continued from page 5)

Abdullah also noted how Muslims have internalized racism. He recognizes that many of the masjids are ethnically centered. Because the masjid helps assimilate new immigrants, the ethnic homogeneity is understandable. However, the problem is that it can become a place to “hide” from the rest of American society—an immigrant society, no less. Beyond this, he also sees cultural limitations in the running of masjids. Many imams do not know how to transition from masjids in their own country to the nonprofit form they take in the U.S., which would provide them greater benefits.

Mir added that there is still an ongoing lack of Islamic literacy in the U.S., giving as examples the times she has been questioned about her ordination status or gender. She does acknowledge, though, that this is all rapidly changing. She said that the further facilitation of this shift requires a focus on art, music, and literature because, through these channels, Muslims and non-Muslims



Abdullah, DeLong-Bas, Grafton, and Mir (L-R).

begin to expand their worldviews—lived religion is influential.

Grafton reflected on Mir’s comments, arguing that, while the U.S. has made advances, the country is still led by Christian-centric structures. Even with chaplains in the military, they are asked about ordination and denomination or the M.Div., which are Christian matters not relevant to either Jews or Muslims. This discomfort will continue, Grafton added, until the system begins to reflect religious diversity, which requires getting persons of different

religious affiliations into positions of leadership. He then returned to third spaces. He said that when the mosque (or church or synagogue) is not doing what the faithful need it to do, they will make their own space or find their own places or people to grapple with those questions and struggles and act. COVID has allowed those spaces to take off—Zoom and social media have normalized the gathering of new groups. Though DeLong-Bas warned that when that access is unavailable to certain communities, they can become even further marginalized.

SPIRITUAL AUDACITY: THE ABRAHAM JOSHUA HESCHEL STORY

A film screening and panel discussion explored the life of this prophetic figure.

On March 22nd, the Boisi Center welcomed back filmmaker Martin Doblmeier of Journey Films to view his new documentary film, *Spiritual Audacity: The Abraham Joshua Heschel Story*. The film attends to numerous chapters in the life of Heschel, including his being raised in Hassidism, his study at the University of Berlin, and his move to the United States during the rise of the Nazi Party. Central to the documentary’s narrative was its focus on Heschel’s involvement in three issues: the Civil Rights Movement, Vietnam, and Vatican II.

Rooted in his own work with the prophets, Heschel took a prophetic stand with black Americans in the Civil Rights Movement, marching in Selma, meeting often with Martin Luther King, Jr., and affirming both that racism is a sin as well as what Heschel believed of the African American community: they were the hope of Judaism’s future in the United States. The relationship with King continued as both began to speak out more forcefully against the Vietnam War, even against the request

of the Israeli Embassy to avoid this topic so as not to impact America’s support of Israel. However, Heschel was firm in his conviction that complacency was not an option: “In a free society, some are guilty; but all are responsible.”

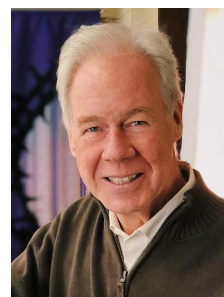
Heschel was invited to the Second Vatican Council at which he was consulted during the drafting of *Nostra aetate*, the Declaration on the Relation of the Church with Non-Christian Religions. Joining German Cardinal Augustin Bea—who had been suspected by the Jews of being sympathetic to the Nazis—Heschel urged that the document not include any language regarding the conversion of the Jews. In the second draft, such language was included, which led to Heschel’s trip to Rome to appeal personally to Pope Paul VI. While Paul left it to the council fathers, the bishops reverted to their earlier language, affirming Judaism’s covenant and not encouraging their conversion.

Following the film, Doblmeier was joined by Susannah Heschel, the Eli Black Professor and Chair of the Jewish

Studies Program at Dartmouth College and daughter of Heschel, for a discussion of the film and of Heschel. Mark Massa, S.J., director of the Boisi Center, moderated the discussion.

Massa began by asking Doblmeier why he chose Heschel and what makes him distinct. Doblmeier said that Heschel added a breadth and fruitfulness to the Civil Rights Movement and Vatican II that would not have been possible without him. And while his work often overlaps with that of other prophetic voices Doblmeier has made films about, Heschel was clear in his belief that indifference was not an option.

(Continued on page 7)



Doblmeier and Heschel (L-R)

(Continued from page 6)

Given the number of major figures Heschel met with, Massa asked S. Heschel what it was like to grow up in such a house. She noted that it was a remarkable experience, but of all those who thank her for her father's work, those associated with the Civil Rights Movement are most grateful.

Asked about where Heschel's voice would be today in both contemporary social issues and the Jewish community, Doblmeier noted that Heschel was a prophet never afraid to speak directly to issues and, he believes, that Heschel would be involved with immigration at the border as well as Black Lives Matter. S. Heschel argued that internal to Judaism, Heschel would continue to be a voice calling for greater faithfulness, but not in a uniform way. Instead, she argued, he would rely on his belief that each human being is unique to impress upon Jews the need for their own piety. To do it uniformly or like others do it is a form of "spiritual plagiarism," Heschel would say.

Massa then turned to the religious and cultural environment today and wondered whether someone like Heschel was possible in our current state of affairs. Doblmeier noted that in Heschel's time, people turned to their religious

leaders for insight and to help them think through major issues, but that is not the case today. While persons like Jim Wallis or Cornel West are leading religious voices, they are not as prominent as they would have been in Heschel's time. S. Heschel largely agreed, noting, however, that certain communities do still turn to their religious leaders, especially the black community and the evangelical community. She gave Rev. William Barber as an example. But she was quick to add that Heschel was "apolitical." He was more concerned about devotion, piety, and faithfulness.

Massa asked S. Heschel about the Holocaust and how that was thought of theologically by her father. She replied that it was not often that they would talk about the Holocaust. There were some issues so serious, that they could not be spoken about at just any time. But she was clear in noting that the Holocaust was not for him a question of theodicy, but rather of anthropodicy. Humanity is capable of atrocious things, but they are also capable of so much good, which Heschel's own life attested to.

The film began broadcasting on public television on May 5th, during Jewish American Heritage Month. It is also available on Amazon as well as directly through Journey Films.

ENGAGING THE SOCIAL DILEMMA: SOCIAL MEDIA AND THE POLARIZATION OF POLITICS AND PEWS

A panel contextualized and discussed Netflix's new documentary and offered some additional solutions.

On Wednesday, April 21st, Michael Serazio and Kristin Peterson of the Boston College Communication Department, and R. Zachary Karanovich, PhD student in the BC Theology Department and the Boisi Center's graduate research assistant, were participants in a lunchtime webinar entitled, "Engaging The Social Dilemma: Social Media and the Polarization of Politics and Pews," in which they discussed the recent Netflix documentary, *The Social Dilemma*.

Serazio began his remarks by raising up Marshall McLuhan as the "patron saint" of this film, who was a media theorist of technological determinism and argued that we have been problematically reshaped by media that renders us nearly defenseless to its influence. Serazio, however, questioned this determinism and its implications for human agency.

Regarding the documentary, Serazio praised it because of its comprehensiveness in addressing the many interrelated problems related to social media (mental health, polarization, addiction, etc.). It also clarifies the problematic role of algorithms, which lead us to certain types of information. It reveals the addiction logic that characterizes the success and use of the platforms. And it explores the business side—the way advertisement funding requires the platforms to demand our attention. Serazio was, however, surprised at how many former tech industry employees shared their insider information.

Yet, he also questioned the documentary. Determinism implies a paradise from which we fell, but, Serazio argued, there was misinformation well before these platforms existed.

(Continued on page 8)

THE BOISI CENTER FOR RELIGION AND AMERICAN PUBLIC LIFE

24 Quincy Road
Chestnut Hill, MA 02467

TEL: 617-552-1860

FAX: 617-552-1863

EMAIL: boisi.center@bc.edu

www.bc.edu/boisi

BOISI CENTER STAFF

MARK MASSA, S.J.
DIRECTOR

SUSAN RICHARD
ADMINISTRATIVE ASSISTANT

R. ZACHARY KARANOVICH
GRADUATE RESEARCH ASSISTANT


VISITING SCHOLARS


ERICK BERRELLEZA, S.J.


RACHELLE REINHART


THOMAS SANTA MARIA

Follow us on social media for Boisi Center news and events.

 [boisicenter](#)

 [@boisi_center](#)

 [Boisi_Center](#)

 [boisicenter](#)

 [Boisi Center](#)

For complete information and resources on all of our events, including audio and video recordings, transcripts, photos, videos, bibliographies, and more, visit our website: www.bc.edu/boisi.

(Continued from page 7)

Though groups do thrive on social media, conspiracy theories have flourished in other forms of media. But ultimately, he asked, what does blaming something external to ourselves imply about our own responsibility?

Peterson agreed that social media is not the first technology to cause these social and moral anxieties—think of the printing press and photography. And, because it is not new, many studies have shown the influences of media on our sense of self and have provided models for solutions that can be helpful for consideration in the case of social media.

She summarized the documentary's critique of social media as the way the platforms have been designed to capture and monetize our attention. This means that, on these platforms, information is created, shared, and used in emotionally charged ways and with little depth. How, then, do we regain control of that information intake and use on social media platforms?

Peterson argued that the path forward includes methods to regain human agency and recreate social platforms to be more humane. To do this, she used the example of communitarian models of social engagement that are less capitalistic, patriarchal, and monetized. And she also reminded the viewers that social media is neither bound to that form of communication nor our only mode of communication.

Government regulation is needed, she noted. But it is also necessary to move away from the current advertising model. As well, it is important to slow the conversation down and disincentivize spread and gut reactions by using emotionally charged and shallow information. Algorithms ought to be rethought too. The platforms should promote content that leads to more virtuous behavior. This implies that we have a responsibility to hold people accountable and recognize that this is a shared space where we all have a stake.



Karanovich, Peterson, and Serazio (L-R).

She offered some examples of “good” platforms or the good use of existing social media platforms such as Wikipedia or mutual-aid platforms (neither of which are advertisement based, and the information is still universally available) as well as the way Twitter and Facebook are used in new and egalitarian ways by marginalized groups in particular faith communities. These examples show how platforms can be non-monetized yet universally available, or how platforms can be molded to be more virtuous.

Karanovich turned a bit beyond the documentary to the implications for religion, focusing in particular in the way social media has impacted the Catholic church. Noting that polarization is not new, he stressed that most average Catholics have not even engaged in theological conversations that lead to such disagreement. However, he observed, social media has changed that. Pre-social media, the “theologian” most often trusted by the faithful was the parish priest—theology was local. But as social media grew and platforms increased, more individuals and organizations joined them, and the theological conversation expanded to include more voices but with a different tone.

While mainstream Catholicism was present, fringe Catholicism also found its way to social media: Church Militant and Michael Voris, Fr. Frank Pavone, Taylor Marshall, Fr. James Altman, etc. They have pit Catholics against Catholics, Karanovich argued, because their outlets 1) are well-funded, optically appealing, and widely-available (often

being “recommended” to anyone who clicks on Catholic material on these platforms); 2) provide information that resonates with their audience and reinforces biases against the “other side”; and 3) include priests—they have the patina of authority. Karanovich offered as an example the role of social media during the Pan-Amazonian Synod, which ultimately led to the criminal destruction of the cultural displays of Pachamama in certain Roman churches. The problem, Karanovich claimed, is that as these fringe Catholics have joined social media platforms, the most qualified “theologian” one knows is not necessarily my parish priest (who might now be a “liberal hack”) but are the people on these sites. They have become mainstream and, for some, more authoritative than the pope himself.

He offered a few initial solutions: 1) cultivating a virtue of humility by acknowledging the mixed good and bad of ourselves and others, 2) being responsible to the truth, and 3) focusing on those in social spheres closer to us with whom we have some power of persuasion. We have to acknowledge the gray of reality, he said, as opposed to trying to make the complex world black and white.

Questions from the audience touched on topics including how we address responsible technology use and mental health with students at Boston College, how social media platforms move away from advertising models, how to cultivate the virtue of humility amid such problematic disagreements and polarization built upon misinformation, and more.

FALL 2021 EVENTS TBA!

See www.bc.edu/boisi for an updated schedule later this summer.