

# The BOISI CENTER Report

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THE BOISI CENTER FOR RELIGION AND AMERICAN PUBLIC LIFE

DECEMBER 2004

## FROM THE DIRECTOR

When I agreed to spend the fall 2004 semester at the American Academy in Berlin, I was not sure whether it would be a good idea to be out of the country during the presidential election, by nearly all accounts one of the most important in our history. Now that it is over, I think I made the right choice.

Watching the campaign from my European vantage point certainly was good for my health, as I managed to avoid the sturm und drang of daily cable television coverage; from this distance, reality -- Iraq, the redistribution of income from the poor to the wealthy -- inevitably impinges. Over here, I could maintain the hope, which perhaps is an illusion, that Americans will at some point come to realize the rest of the world cares deeply about who they choose for their leaders -- and that their decision has implications far

beyond their own pocketbooks and convictions.

I certainly have fulfilled my patriotic duties while in Germany. Explaining American religion to Europeans is as important as it is challenging, and I have been called on to do so by newspapers, universities, think tanks, politicians, and transatlantic organizations. Although I nearly always disagree politically with American evangelicals, I tried as best as I could to present the world as evangelicals understand it to Europeans. I also found myself frequently pointing out that separation of church and state has religious as well as secular roots and that Europe's record on dealing with issues involving religion -- especially the challenge from Islam -- has not been the most positive of successes. Although there is considerable defensiveness on that last point, the mutual exchanges, as diplomats like to say, have been positive and respectful. The American Academy

in Berlin is a great institution and Berlin is an exciting and vibrant city.

A number of important speakers stopped by the Academy to share their thoughts, including Joschka Fischer, Mary Jo White, U. S. Ambassador Dan Coates, and former Nebraska Senator Bob Kerrey. While here, I spoke at an election breakfast at the Adlon Hotel, at conferences sponsored by two of Germany's main political parties, met former Chancellor Helmut Kohl, and travelled to numerous German cities to give talks. The Boisi Center is now well known in Europe and I hope the relationships made here will continue.

While I was away, our luncheon programs continued thanks to the work of Patty Chang. In the spring Susan Richard will return from maternity leave and I will return from Berlin and our full range of activities will pick up again.

- Alan Wolfe

## Sister Helen Prejean to Speak at "Prophetic Voices of the Church Lecture" in Spring

The Boisi Center for Religion and American Public Life is pleased to announce that Sister Helen Prejean, internationally known author of the book *Dead Man Walking: An Eyewitness Account of the Death Penalty in the United States* and perhaps one of the most well known spokespersons against capital punishment today, will give the fourth annual "Prophetic Voice of American Religion" lecture on March 16th, at 7:00 in Robsham Theatre on the Boston College campus.

Sister Helen's perspective of the death penalty began to be shaped in 1981 when she began a prison ministry in New Orleans as part of her work with the Sisters of St. Joseph. During this time she became the spiritual advisor and pen pal of Patrick Sonnier who had been sentenced to die in the electric chair in Louisiana's Angola State Prison for killing two teenagers. Her relationship with Sonnier, and the views she consequently developed on the issue of capital punishment lead her to write *Dead Man Walking*, a powerful and moving account of her experiences with the death penalty in the Louisiana prison system. This book was nominated for a Pulitzer Prize in 1993 and made the 1994 American Library Associates Notable Book List. It has been a national and international bestseller and was number one on the New York Times Bestseller List for 31 weeks. It has since been translated into ten different languages. In 1996 the book was developed into a major motion picture starring Sean Penn and Susan Sarandon and received four Oscar nominations as well as an award for "Best Actress" for Susan Sarandon. Four years ago material from the book



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## Saudi Educators Visit the Boisi Center

On September 20th, 15 scholars and educators from the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia visited the Boisi Center as part of a tour sponsored by the State Department to study issues related to “Religion and Public Education in the United States”. They met with Professor Patricia Chang to inquire about the role of religion and moral education in America’s schools and universities. The conversation, which was wide ranging and facilitated by interpreters, revealed a general curiosity about the religious landscape of America as well as more specific question about the role that Catholic universities such as Boston College play in public life. General questions included queries about the differences between Protestants and Catholics and whether Catholics or Protestants would be most open to inter-faith discussion. Questions more specific to Boston College included questions about how we get our funding (is it funded by the Catholic Church), whether we teach non-Catholic students, and how we get our students to be open minded towards other religions. There was great interest in what we teach students about other religions and especially the kinds of introductions we give to our students about non-Catholic religions. The group included scholars from a variety of institutions and a variety of ideological viewpoints within Islam emerged during the discussions.

The scholars included Dr. Mesfer Gormallh A. Aldomeny, Professor from the Islamic Education Department, Imam Mohammed Bin Saud Islamic University; Dr. Ahmed Abdullah Aldwihy, Assistant Professor from Imam Mohammed Bin Saud Islamic University; Dr. Abdulaziz F. S. Alfawzan ,Professor, from Imam Mohammed bin Saud Islamic University; Dr. Abdulkarim Senaitan K. Alharbi, Professor, Islamic Education Department, Islamic University; Dr. Ibrahim Nasser M. Alhumood, Professor, Islamic Education Department, Imam Mohammed Bin Saud Islamic University; Dr. Zohair Ahmedali A. Alzazmi, Dean, College of Education, Umm Al-Qura University; Dr. Saeed Faleh M. Almaghamsi, Associate Professor, Department of Education, College of

Da'wa and Theology, Islamic University; Dr. Mohammad Sulaiman O. Alminayei, Associate Professor, Islamic Education Department, Umm Al-Qura University; Dr. Ali Abdulaziz Alshebel, Assistant Professor, Imam Mohammed bin Saud Islamic University; Dr. Abdullah Mesleh M. Althamaly, Vice Dean, College of Sharia and Islamic Studies, Umm Al-Qura University; Mr. Abdulhakeem Dahash A. Altwijri, Educational Supervisor, Ministry of Education; Mr. Hussain Ali Baras, Curriculum Supervisor, Ministry of Education; Dr. Saleh Durwish H. Meamar, Dean, Madinah College of Teachers, Ministry of Education; Dr. Abdulrahman Jamil A. Qassas, Professor, Islamic Education Department, Umm Al-Qura University; Dr. Hasan Ayel A. Yahya Dean, Teachers College, Jeddah.

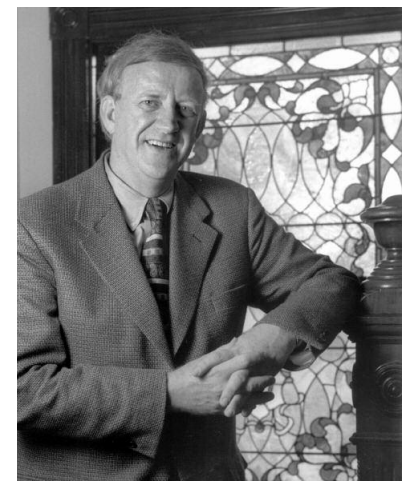
## Graduate Student Reading Groups

The Boisi Center invites proposals for interdisciplinary and inter-institutional graduate student reading/writing groups on themes related to the study of religion and public life. In order to facilitate interdisciplinary conversations we will offer limited support to reading groups in various forms. Proposals for support should include a brief outline of the group’s theme and reading list, a list of members, and a list of activities it would like the Boisi Center to support (e.g., bringing in speakers, photocopying, book subsidies). To submit a proposal or for further information, contact Patricia Chang at changpc@bc.edu.

## Thomas Groome Speaks on Handing on the Faith

On September 29th Professor Thomas Groome, Director of the Institute for Religious Education and Pastoral Ministry at Boston College spoke on the topic of “Handing On A Faith: The Challenges and Opportunities of our Time”. Groome’s comments reflected, although did not try to summarize, the Church in the 21st Century Conference on “Handing on the Faith” held earlier in September (see [www.bc.edu/church21](http://www.bc.edu/church21)). He outlined three challenges Catholics face in handing on the faith in contemporary American society: context, content and communication.

Groome began by describing the assumption that the postmodern context offers many challenges to an American Catholicism that is no longer isolated in Catholic ghettos and can no longer rely extensively on the socializing influence of parish institutions such as schools, CYO’s, altar societies etc. to convey the



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## Boisi Center Hosts Richard Chacon, Deputy Foreign Affairs Editor of the Globe

Taking a break from his studies as a Nieman Fellow at Harvard, Richard Chacon, Deputy Foreign Affairs Editor of the Boston Globe came to Boston College on October 12 to address a lunch seminar at the Boisi Center. His topic was “Religion, Foreign Policy and the Media in a Post 9-11 Context” and his remarks centered mainly on the challenges that the media faces in reporting global events since 9-11.

In Chacon’s view, prior to the destruction of the Twin Towers, much of America’s foreign policy focus was still influenced by an east vs west and communism vs. democracy mindset. Since the fall of communism we struggled to define where our foreign policy priorities lay and consequently were slow to get involved in Bosnia, Rwanda, and Haiti. The attacks of 9-11 produced shock, anger and a search for explanations and the simplest explanation that could be found was in religion.

Whether or not the religion explanation is a useful one, Chacon believes that some adjustment to current media coverage is still required. On the one hand, conversations are often too quick to skip over a deeper understanding of the goals and motives of the religious mind and reduce explanations to economic and political inequality. On the other hand he also feels that the Globe and other media outlets get too caught up in demonizing small religious minority groups, neglecting the larger majority which might be moderate. As a corrective, he pointed to a recent in-depth analysis of moderate Islam submitted by the Globe’s Jerusalem bureau chief.

Chacon also spent time talking about the appalling lack of resources devoted to global issues in most media corporations. The Globe has six full time foreign staff



reporters which is relatively small for a regional paper. Two are in Baghdad, one is in Johannesburg, one is in Jerusalem, one is in Beijing and one is in Bogota. As the emphasis in foreign policy has moved from an east/west axis to a north/south axis the role of the foreign correspondent has also changed dramatically. When Chacon covered Latin America he used to cover 40 countries. Correspondents in these positions are now asked to develop a thematic expertise as well as covering a regional specialty. Yet despite the thinness of resources on the ground, economic constraints are making it harder for newspapers to financially justify supporting foreign bureaus, meaning that places like Dallas and Houston no longer offer first hand coverage of global issues and rely instead on the AP, Reuters or NY Times wire services. This means a narrower range of stories and styles dominating our media content.

Chacon’s perspective has been shaped by his role as the Boston Globe’s deputy foreign editor since July 2001 where he helps coordinate the paper’s international news coverage. Prior to this he served the Globe covering Latin America, higher education and Boston politics. Chacon has also served as an editorial writer for New York Newsday, where he specialized in cultural affairs, local politics and sports between 1992-1994. In 1992 he served as deputy media director for the 1992 Democratic National Convention, and as a speechwriter in the New York City Mayor’s office. Chacon is currently a Nieman Fellow at Harvard University, where he is studying the relationships between religion, public health and the shaping of American foreign policy around the world.

## Student Paper Competition

The Boisi Center for Religion and American Public Life is proud to announce an annual competition for the best student paper (Graduate and Undergraduate) on a theme related to the activities of the Boisi Center.

This year the theme of the paper competition is Religious Freedom or Religious Tolerance?. Papers are welcomed from any disciplinary background and must address the distinctions between religious freedom and religious tolerance and the issues this

raises. Possible paper topics can address how religious freedom is being defined in America’s domestic or foreign policy, whether freedom or toleration is being espoused in various political arguments both in the US and abroad, and whether the distinction is important. Papers should include an abstract of no more than 100 words on a separate page, and run no more than 2000 words in length excluding figures and bibliography. Three copies of the paper, plus a cover

letter should be submitted to the Boisi Center for Religion and American Public Life, 24 Quincy Road, Chestnut Hill, MA 02467 by April 1, 2004.

The winning essay will receive a prize of \$200 for the undergraduate competition and \$400 for the graduate competition.

Questions can be directed to Professor Patricia M.Y. Chang at the Boisi Center for Religion and American Public Life. 552-1861 or changpc@bc.edu.



## Women Changing the Face of Christianity

On December 2, Collen Griffith, Faculty Director of Spirituality Studies at the Institute for Religious Education and Pastoral Ministry at Boston College, reflected on the changes that have been made in contemporary Christian thought since women began to enter the seminaries in large numbers in the 1970's.

Griffith began by pointing out that 50 years ago it was almost impossible for women to enter the field of theology and yet today women outnumber the men in most divinity schools. She also noted that in enrollments at IREPM the ratio of women to men is 4:5. This has brought about a number of changes in the way theology is thought about, studied and discussed. Griffith argues that the contributions of women theologians have shifted our understanding by bringing more diverse images of God into our thinking and conversations. It has also shifted us to more sensitive and more contextual modes of spiritual

engagement that have brought the link between theology and spirituality closer together.

Griffith illustrated her theme by focusing on four contemporary women theologians: Elizabeth Johnson, Elisabeth Schussler Fiorenza, Sandra Schneiders, and Sallie McFague. Each of these women have sought to broaden our classical theological understandings to be more inclusive in our conceptualization of



God and the created order. Johnson highlights God's relationality and brings more attention to the concept of Wisdom. McFague has developed a theology of the environment and challenges accepted theological anthropologies that see ourselves as apart from, and different than, the rest of nature. Fiorenza's work calls attention to the more democratic aspects of communal life and worship that challenge modern conceptions of church and spiritual authority, while Schneiders' work calls attention to misogynistic texts and the importance of focusing on, and reinterpreting understandings of women's leadership in the Scriptures.

The discussion following the talk was engaging and ranged across a variety of points. In response to the question "...outside of seminaries and classrooms, have women significantly changed the institutions of the Church?" Griffith replied that she believed that "women have changed the Church, which changes the institutions."

## Thomas Groome

*Continued from page 2*

nuances of Catholic identity. Individualism, materialism, moral relativism and a general rejection of universal truths, are all seen as working against the traditional sense of what it means to be Catholic. This pessimistic view was well represented at the Church 21 conference in early September but it is a view that Groome disagrees with. Groome argues that seeing contemporary culture as an enemy is not necessarily useful or true. He feels that one of the geniuses of Catholicism has been its ability to integrate itself into a particular time and place, resulting in the rich diversity you see in French Catholicism, Irish Catholicism, American Catholicism, etc. Groome sees the union of faith and culture as a happy result, quoting Pope John Paul II's statement that a faith that does not become culture is not yet a living faith.

Nevertheless, Groome does not underestimate the problems associated with transmitting a living faith.

He went on to address the related issues of content and communication beginning with the Vatican II's insight about the "hierarchy of truths", and distinguishing between the "core constitutive truths" and "local truths or practices". He agrees that one must be faithful to the constitutive truths but that to be communicated effectively presenters must take into account the culture of the audience receiving it. Today these truths must be presented in ways that are "life giving" for the society and the common good, not just for one person; they must be presented in ways that encourage interfaith understanding; and they must be presented as part of a process of lifelong formation.

The talk elicited much discussion with many people taking up or questioning the speaker's cause for optimism, and also elaborating on the theme of interfaith understanding and how other religious traditions struggle to hand on the faith.

## Sister Helen Prejean

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was also presented as an opera written by Terence McNally, premiering in San Francisco in October 2000.

Sister Helen's work can truly be described as prophetic. In the past twenty years almost all of the mainstream religious bodies in the United States have spoken out against the death penalty including the Catholic Church. For the previous 1500 years the Catholic Church had supported a states right to punish criminals, including punishment by death. But in 1997, reversing 1500 years of Catholic teaching, the Vatican issued a statement removing those sanctions from the Catechism. In 1999 Pope John Paul II spoke out against the death penalty, for the first time positioning it as a "life issue" alongside

abortion, euthanasia, and doctor assisted suicide and upholding the criteria of the inviolability of human life. At this time he stated, "A sign of hope is the increasing recognition that the dignity of human life must never be taken away, even in the case of someone who has done great evil."

The Boisi Center is pleased to work with the student run Community of Sant'Egidio here at Boston College to bring Sr. Helen to speak on campus. This student group is a public lay association that has worked in the past to bring attention to death penalty issues on campus and is dedicated to evangelization, prayer and charity. For more information on this event please see our website [www.bc.edu/boisi](http://www.bc.edu/boisi)

## The BOISI CENTER for RELIGION and AMERICAN PUBLIC LIFE

24 Quincy Road  
Chestnut Hill, MA 02467  
(617) 552-1860  
Fax: (617) 552-1863  
e-mail: [publife@bc.edu](mailto:publife@bc.edu)  
web site: [www.bc.edu/boisi](http://www.bc.edu/boisi)

### Boisi Center Staff

Alan Wolfe  
Director

Patricia Chang  
Assistant Director

Susan Richard  
Administrative Assistant

Tom DeNardo  
Research Assistant

## Staff Notes



**Alan Wolfe** serves as the director of the Boisi Center and is a professor of political science at Boston College. Professor Wolfe is the author or editor of more than 12 books,

including *The Transformation of American Religion: How We Actually Practice Our Faith* (2003) and *An Intellectual In Public Life* (2003). Professor Wolfe is a contributing editor of *The New Republic* and *The Wilson Quarterly*. He also writes frequently for *The New York Times*, *Commonweal*, *Harpers*, *The Atlantic Monthly*, *The Washington Post*, and other publications. Professor Wolfe has been a Fulbright Professor of American Studies at the University of Copenhagen and is currently on leave at the American Academy in Berlin. He will be at Boston College in the spring semester.

**Patricia M.Y. Chang** serves as the assistant director for the Boisi Center and is an associate research professor in the sociology department at Boston College. Professor Chang specializes in research

that examines the organizational aspects of religion. Her past work has focused on the institutional aspects of gender inequality among Protestant clergy and democratic processes in Protestant denominations. She is currently working on a book that examines how religious and moral values are passed down from parents to children in the context of the family. In addition to her work at the Center, Professor Chang teaches courses on Religion in a Global Context, Sociology of Religion and Research Methods.



**Susan Richard** serves as the Center's administrative assistant. Susan is currently on maternity leave after giving birth to her daughter Keira Fawn Richard on October

23rd. She will be returning in January.

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Boston College  
Boisi Center for Religion  
and American Public Life  
140 Commonwealth Avenue  
Chestnut Hill, MA 02467  
U.S.A.  
ADDRESS CORRECTION REQUESTED

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## Calendar of Events

### January

26 "Religion and aging: Findings from a sixty-year longitudinal study"

**Michele Dillon**

Sociology, University of New Hampshire 12-1:15pm

24 Quincy Road, The Boisi Center

### February

8 "Local Islam Gone Global: The Roots of Religious Militancy in Egypt and Its Transnational Transformation"

**James Toth**

Sociology-Anthropology, Northeastern University 12-1:15pm

24 Quincy Road, The Boisi Center

24 Topic: "TBA"

**Francine Cardman**

Weston Jesuit School of Theology. 12-1:15pm

24 Quincy Road, The Boisi Center

### March

15 "Good and Faithful Service: Findings from the Boston College Survey of Undergraduate Experience and Implications for the Religious Mission of Catholic Universities"

**James Fleming**

Lynch School of Education and Office of University Mission and Ministry 12-1:15pm

24 Quincy Road, The Boisi Center

16 "Dead Man Walking: The Journey Continued"

**Sister Helen Prejean**

Sisters of St. Joseph

Robsham Theatre 7-9:00pm

### April

13 "Hearts of Darkness: American Protestants and the Doctrine of Original Sin, 1945-1965."

**Andrew Finstuen**

History 12-1:15pm

24 Quincy Road, The Boisi Center

27 "The Press and Faith Based Politics"

**Stephen Burgard**

School of Journalism,

Northeastern University 12-1:15pm

24 Quincy Road, The Boisi Center

*The BOISI CENTER Report is produced by Media Technology Services, Boston College.  
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