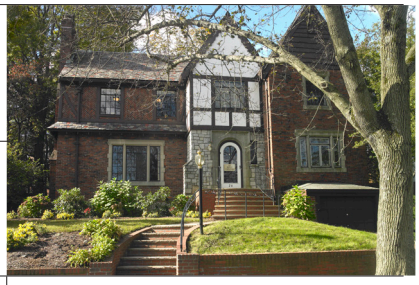
THE
BOISI CENTER INTERVIEWS



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KRISTIN HEYER is a professor of theology at Boston College, focusing on theological ethics. She is the author of several books, including *Kinship Across Borders: A Christian Ethic of Immigration*. She spoke with Boisi Center program coordinator **Suzanne Hevelone** before her luncheon colloquium at the Boisi Center.

HEVELONE: How did you develop an interest in immigration and Catholic ethics?

HEYER: After I finished graduate school at Boston College, I lived in Los Angeles and belonged to a parish in East LA that served many undocumented immigrants. Our parish had a sanctuary program that started in the 1980s during the Salvadoran war and subsequently expanded from welcoming political to economic refugees. About that time, some social scientists at UCLA published the first-ever nationwide study of day laborers, a particularly challenging population to measure. The more I read about the situation of day laborers and other immigrants, the more I became convinced that undocumented immigration is one of the most pressing civil rights questions of our time. I started doing work in the area from the perspective of theological ethics, which evolved into a book project.

I also participated at an interesting meeting in Belgium at Leuven this past fall (2015). The Europeans hosting the expert seminar felt that scholars and practitioners in the Americas, Asia, and Africa have developed more of a systematic migration ethic than they have on their continent, and they sought to bring us together to help shed light on the crisis Europe is facing with respect to migrants and refugees.

HEVELONE: What are some of the factors that cause migration to occur? How would you describe a Catholic ethical approach to migration?

HEYER: There has been a significant surge in migration worldwide, and the

reasons are many. Many remain economic push and pull factors: you are unable to feed yourself or your family and so you are pushed out of your country of origin and pulled toward economic opportunity. We also see people fleeing violence. People flee the absence of the rule of law, for example, many of the immigrants coming from the Northern Triangle countries (of Central America) to our own. Conflict worldwide is also a refugee-producing factor, and increasingly we encounter environmental refugees, which connects to your recent session with Laurie Johnston.

With economic refugees, migration patterns also depend on pull factors of willing employers. Even though we frequently hear "No Trespassing" rhetoric, we also hold up the "Help Wanted" sign if you do cross the border successfully here in the U.S. context. There is a disproportionate mismatch between available low-wage visas and the significant number of laborers we are willing to employ.

Your second question was about a Catholic ethical response. The vision of the person in the Catholic tradition as both sacred and fundamentally social grounds its immigration ethic. It stands against the dehumanizing tendencies or protectionist impulses that fail to see folks across borders as neighbors. A Catholic ethics of immigration starts with the right not to have to migrate. The right to be able to feed your family and remain free from violence in your nation of origin is its point of departure. Then robust rights to freedom of movement follow where that is not the case.

The Catholic position underscores the rights of nations to control their borders, but that right is not absolute in the tradition. A strong commitment to the com-

mon good grounds a Catholic immigration ethic and is threatened, for example, by shadow societies wherein residents are able to contribute to the economy, but not vote or receive benefits and always remain under the threat of deportation.

In terms of scriptural foundations, after the injunction to only worship one God, the injunction to care for the sojourner is the most repeated command in the Hebrew Bible. Compassion for the outsider is rooted in Israel's experience and in Jesus' teachings about other vulnerable populations. That doesn't mean we should respond with charity or largesse alone, but rather it enjoins justice. Undocumented immigrants experience a great deal of "un-freedom" and injustice. The Catholic tradition with its commitments to human dignity and solidarity offers as a counter-narrative to dehumanizing rhetoric and unjust practices.

HEVELONE: What are the particular challenges women face as migrants? These are two huge groups that are migrating to the U.S. and to other areas in the world.

HEYER: The typical image of an immigrant has been the single male traveling on his own, but increasingly women are migrating at the same rate as men, and in some countries more frequently than men. They do face particular vulnerabilities: unaccompanied women are vulnerable to sexual assault and abuse by coyotes (smugglers), by fellow travelers, in detention facilities and by employers.

Women are also less likely to have viable opportunities for legal migration than men. Some U.S. practices serve to further isolate women, for example, deporting spouses to different points of entry, (both of which are different from where they entered the United States) or separating parents from children when detained in detention facilities.

Increasingly sexual assault is a taken-for-granted part of the migration process. Women who have recently been deported to Mexico, for example, talk about advising other unaccompanied women to inject contraceptives – which is anathema to the beliefs of many of them – because they can readily anticipate assault, or to agree to be with a fellow traveler for "safe" passage. In some ways, people view migrant women as "perfect victims." They may lack contacts upon arrival, or face language barriers, or remain silent due to the threat of family separation via deportation. Farm workers sometimes dress in baggy clothing to hide their gender and deter assault given how pervasive it has become among field workers.

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HEVELONE: How much of anti-immigrant sentiment is motivated sheerly by racism? Now, at least momentarily, we have our attention turned to Syria and the Middle East in terms of migration and away from Mexico. How much is religious discrimination against Muslims too?

HEYER: Much of my recent work concerns the effects of social sin and ways in which fear and ethnocentrism distort what may start out as legitimate concerns, for example, carrying capacity or stresses on local resources. Security becomes elevated to a nearly idolatrous status in these conversations; we increasingly see its distortion by Islamophobia. Fear of difference is fairly easy to mass-market, and the ways in which those attitudes and lenses distort the full picture make for effective campaign slogans or sound bites.

The political rhetoric of this campaign season revolves around generalizations about immigrants I find unrecognizable when I think about people I have worked with at the border or in the desert or in deportation centers, or my undocumented students when I taught in California for years. The person-to-person encounter that can challenge those easy stereotypes is more difficult to mass-market, unfortunately. This is why not only shaping policy, but shaping imagination, should be one of the contributions of a Catholic counter-narrative or a Catholic immigration ethic.

Campaign rhetoric about building walls, massive deportations, rounding up Muslims, and all immigrants being rapists plays into the basest impulses, nativist tendencies (and often widespread misperceptions) of the broader electorate. Beyond the viability of such "policies," the rhetoric is wreaking harm on our communities right now.

HEVELONE: I'd like to talk more about the privatization of detention, so can we talk about that apart from the election? How big a danger is the privatization of deportation to addressing the immigration crisis that exists in our country and enacting a more robust policy?

HEYER: That remains a significant challenge. The privatization of detention is a multi-billion-dollar industry. On one level, it is feeding into a criminal frame for civil violations; it is also economically incentivizing the increased detention of immigrants. This raises questions about the significant financial stakes in the broken immigration system—detained immigrants fill beds, deportations fill private buses. For example, share prices for GEO group and Corrections Corporation of America spiked sharply with

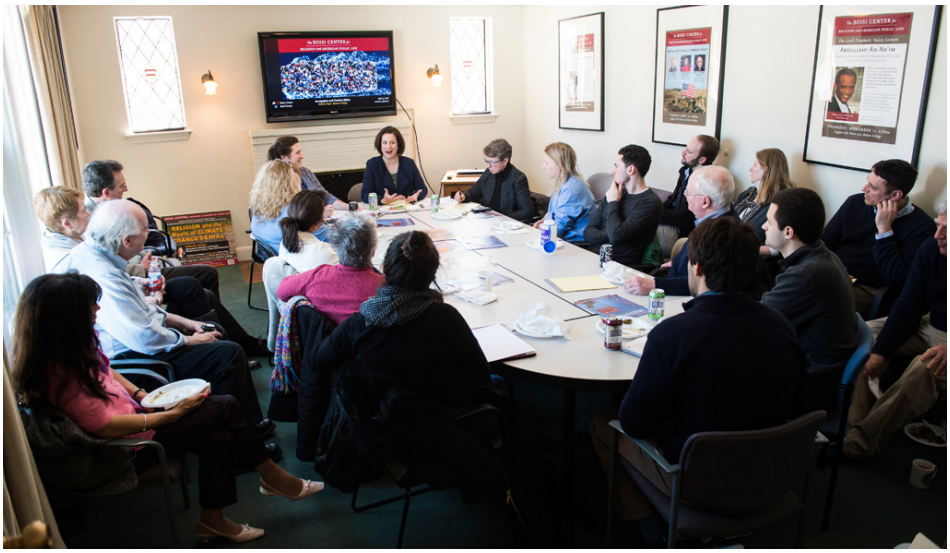
the influx of migrant children crossing the border recently in light of improved occupancy across their federal "real estate portfolios."

I find people are often surprised to learn that Homeland Security is outsourcing detention to the private sector. There's less accountability in those private centers when you talk about conditions and rights violations than you would have in public settings.

This lack of transparency and accountability (with the entire system, not just privatized prisons) is problematic. You can go to an "Operation Streamline" hearing and see folks shackled at the wrists and waists and ankles, being collectively herded through these deportation hearings. They might meet with a lawyer for ten minutes. Some of them lack adequate translation. Or the judge who recently said, "I can teach any three or four-year-old immigration law. They don't really need representation, do they?" That attitude and some of these practices make a mockery of the values that we purport to defend as a nation.

HEVELONE: What are the consequences of not documenting all migrants and having this sort of shadow society of undocumented migrants?

HEYER: Having two parallel societies, one with rights and one without rights, undermines the welfare of a society built on human rights. It commodifies the labor of people whose labor and taxes we are willing to accept without offering full participation or benefits. I worry about the common good of the nation in terms of education of children of irregular migrants. Plyler v. Doe provided the children of immigrants with public education through twelfth grade. Heading into the DMV for a first driver's license or completing financial aid applications is often when young people in this country—the only country they have ever known as home—learn for the first time about their irregular status. They also learn how few and far between



their options are at that point for higher education or entering the job market with any skills, even if their record and English proficiency are impeccable. It hardly serves our society to have kind of a subclass of undereducated citizenry, sub-citizenry, not to mention concerns you raised earlier about security. We should be bringing people out of the shadows rather than having them fearful to report crimes, for example fearful to report a domestic abuse complaint because the local law enforcement officer has been deputized to act as an immigration officer. In my view this does not serve public safety, much less a more robust understanding of the common good.

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