

# BOISI CENTER INTERVIEWS



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**ALAN WOLFE** is a professor of political science and founding director of the Boisi Center for Religion and American Public Life at Boston College. He is the author and editor of more than 20 books, including, most recently, *At Home in Exile: Why Diaspora Is Good for the Jews* (2014). Before his talk, Wolfe spoke with Boisi Center associate director **Erik Owens**.

**OWENS:** You grew up in Philadelphia and attended Philadelphia public schools. You've often spoken about what Central High has meant to you and Philly. Can you say in a sense what public education in general has meant to you as a scholar, now that you've been in so many elite institutions? Do you have a different view of what public education means?

**WOLFE:** It's worth saying that I didn't choose public education. There was no choice in my family when I was younger. It's only later in life that I discover that people even think about the choice between public and private education. Public school was just automatic. There are obviously exclusive private academies all around Philadelphia, which was an old WASP tradition, but it was never even on the radar and not for any of my friends either.

Maybe it was better not having a choice because there was no agony involved. It was just where you went. Maybe you learned something about doing your best with what's given to you. I watch people now, especially my friends in New York – the concern starts at four years old with which preschool their children are going to attend.

**OWENS:** One of the principle aspects of public education now is the freedom of choice within the system. Do you think

that its gone too far, or do you think it's a good thing to have this kind of choice within systems for specialized schools and charter schools?

**WOLFE:** I originally did not like the idea of vouchers and school choice. I eventu-



ally came around to the position that if white middle class people have the option of choosing where they live or where they go to school, then you can't deny school choice to others. You really have the worst of both systems. Gradually, slowly, and not in an extreme way, my guess is that school choice has improved education for kids. It's one of those ironies where in theory, if you could design a school

system with no choice whatsoever for anyone, it would be the best system because people wouldn't be able to take their wealth out of it.

**OWENS:** As a political scientist and a sociologist, you've always had your eyes on the state of American democracy. How much does the world of political science affect the act of democracy today?

**WOLFE:** You can probably see a shift over time in my work between looking at democracy and then looking at how we look at democracy. That's a good way to characterize it.

Currently, we're in the middle of the Republican contest for the nomination, and it looks like Donald Trump has won. While I greatly respect well-done work in political science, no one has come even close to predicting, much less to giving us a warning, that this would come about, including me. I certainly couldn't have.

That just reinforces something that we need to keep in mind: empirical political science often does not explain all. Sometimes things just happen. They happen because we're funny, complicated creatures, and we don't act predictably. You develop all these complicated measures about the economy determining how people vote, and then this guy comes along and he shatters everything. We're talking

now about how Trump has shattered the Republican conservative consensus. He's also shattered the political science consensus about what's important in elections.

**OWENS:** Are those who study politics simply taking evidence from the past or do they have an obligation to be thinking about shaping democracy as a whole? Your writing has been very fraught with moral implications of what is right and wrong, and what to do in politics.

**WOLFE:** Probably the single most cited work in academic political science the last couple years is a book called *The Party Decides*, which essentially argues that candidates don't matter and that issues don't matter. The parties make decisions about who is going to be nominated, and then the economy essentially decides who is going to win. You couldn't find anything more contrary to the way things have worked out at the moment because this is a pure candidate-driven phenomenon. The parties are trying to catch up.

On the other hand, I have been really impressed by some of the work done by political scientists. Larry Bartels does really careful work about how our democracy is failing us. Using sophisticated quantitative work, Bartels (and scholars like him) demonstrates how unrepresented Americans are by their representatives in Congress. This type of research is terrific. It's worth all the grants that support them to study this kind of information because these political scientists come up with hard numbers that are convincing.

**OWENS:** Does all of this make you more or less hopeful about the trajectory of democracy as such in our country?

**WOLFE:** That's another thing altogether. Right now, for the first time, we're talking seriously about a genuine authoritarian personality achieving a position of great influence. I think a lot of things are up in the air. Andrew Sullivan, in his long return to public life, published a *mea culpa* about how democracy is

being threatened. I wouldn't share all of his pessimism, but I do worry. We have already have enough to be pretty worried about in how certain things are going. How did this man get the nomination of a major party? You can afford that in a country that has 10 parties. You can't afford it in a country that has two. Any accident could occur, and Trump could win the presidency.

**OWENS:** In your study, you developed a real attentiveness to the particular contours of religion in our society. How did

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**"I never stay with one subject, for better or worse. Other people will take one thing and spend their whole life studying it. That's just not the way I do it."**

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that come to get your attention? It's obvious that religion is interesting to lots of people, but what caught your eye there?

**WOLFE:** It wasn't a return to religion personally. I'm still as unreligious as I've always been, if not even more so. I don't like to use harsh exclusive words like atheist – I'm just a nonbeliever. A straightforward answer to your question is Jimmy Carter's emergence on the scene. I had no possible way to even begin to think about who he was and what he represented. I didn't even know what a born-again Christian was. I didn't know what the word evangelical meant. I didn't know any of those things. Yet, he

touched some root somewhere in a way that Walter Mondale didn't.

I never stay with one subject, for better or for worse. Other people will take one thing and spend their entire life studying it. That's just not the way I do it. With Carter running and religion in the air, I said, "This is kind of interesting." One of my earlier books, *Whose Keeper*, was reviewed in the *New York Times* by Peter Berger and raised this subject. At the time I did not know Berger, and he said something like "Wolfe – very interesting book, but he writes a book about morality and the word religion never appears in it." I said, "You know, he's right. He caught it."

**OWENS:** One of the arguments you raised in your book *Transformation of American Religion* addresses depolarization, fringe, and the influences of fringes on American public life. There seems to be more of core agreement among Americans today. Do you still feel that way fifteen years after the publication of your book?

**WOLFE:** Yes. When I wrote *Transformation* and *One Nation, After All* – a sort of companion to the former – I argued that there was more agreement than commonly perceived. Indeed, there was more agreement than what everyone hysterically had claimed. I teach a course on the culture war, so I've been coming back to that often. My conclusion is I was right then and am wrong now. I accurately described the situation I was studying, but in the 20 years since the polarization, it's just grown by leaps and bounds. We are not really one nation after all now.

On the religion front, a lot of what my leftist and secular friends saw as wild-eyed Bible belt religion has moderated itself. On the culture war thesis, it's hard to say. I couldn't write a book called *One Nation, After All* today, and there are reasons for that. From what I've read and looked at, Fox News is a huge factor. It has created a permanent class of angry people who hear nothing else and come

to accept that fodder as the gospel. That's a big change since I wrote that book. We had Russell Moore of the Ethics and Religious Liberty Commission of the Southern Baptist Convention visit us here. His exchanges with Trump on Twitter have been absolutely glorious. They have been more interesting than Elizabeth Warren's.

**OWENS:** What are some of the themes of your career as a public intellectual that have become the biggest trends defining our era? As you look back on some of these big topics you've covered, such as the arc of polarization, are there any others that come to mind as especially meaningful to you?

**WOLFE:** The work of the public intellectual. What they do and how they work and all the related questions about writing books versus blogging and all these new means of communication. I just cannot see myself starting in this age now as a writer with Twitter and Facebook. It feels totally foreign to me. I was lucky because Leon Wieseltier at the *New Republic*, discovered me, and he asked me to write for him. I'd turn in an immensely long thing, and he'd say, "Make it longer." That fits my way of writing. That's the way I was trained. That's the way I've done it all my life. If I were doing it over again, maybe I'd learn how to do it in the 140-character model, but it is hard to fathom.

**OWENS:** In the past 15 years, you've thrived as a public intellectual. You haven't created your own blog, and you're not tweeting, but the work that you're doing is immediately accessible to people. It gets forwarded around. It has impact quickly in a way that waiting for your *New Republic* every Tuesday wouldn't have.

**WOLFE:** Thanks. While I'm somewhat critical of the means that we're using to communicate, it's also true that communication of ideas is enormously important. Ideas are just as important now as they were when I entered this work – in



some ways, more so, because when I started, it was the age of consensus and the end of ideology. Young writers, like me at the time, would write iconoclastic pieces. That's limited after a while. Now, there's so much more room for creative thinking about what are we going to do with this country and the world and where's it going to go and how we handle these things. That's a testament to the fact that people are still interested in ideas.

**OWENS:** Is the era of the public intellectual over or is it simply that the media of public intellectuals is shifting?

**WOLFE:** It's shifting. I don't think it will ever be over because I think there will always be ideas and people expressing them. I was just saying that it has shifted in certain ways. As I assess my strengths and weaknesses, media plays more to my weaknesses than my strengths. I'm saying I have one particular way of doing things. More attention grabbing, short, powerful kinds of statements, I would say is not my strong point. I try to write in a more nuanced fashion. I run into this problem constantly for all of my continued writing. These days, if I run an idea by an editor, either a magazine or a book, I often hear, "Condense it. Get it down." I have a lot of trouble with that.

**OWENS:** You have played many important professional roles over the years. One of them is clearly as public scholar and the other as the public intellectual. Indeed, as an essayist, you are especially well known for your extended book essays. In regards to that kind of writing – where you'd gather a handle of books together and describe them and critique them collectively or as they interrelate – what did that let you do that other kinds of writing didn't let you do?

**WOLFE:** I don't know how I developed that knack, but I just started and hopefully something interesting came out. The words speculate themselves. "Speculative" gets at the heart of it. I like to speculate. Other academics like to nail things down. I like to raise questions and go in unusual places. I can see great value in the other kind of work. I could probably say over my career, I've never established one single social science finding that was uniquely my own and proven beyond a doubt that it exists. I have never done that. Other people have in economics, political science, psychology, and the like. Good for them. These are things that are personal. I just happened to like to speculate. My mind is always wandering off in speculative dimensions. One opportunity that the emphasis on being more concise plays to some of my advantages is that



publishers are no longer looking for the big blockbuster books. They want short books that are really long essays. People I admire, like Michael Sandel, have been writing books like that. I could mention a whole lot of other names. Those books are the academic version of a TED Talk. If they can get out there and raise a point, and get people discussing it, they've done their job. The other day I was reading a very famous essay, which used to be widely discussed, by C.P. Snow called "The Two Cultures" about science and humans – it was 60 pages long or something like that. I envision something like that.

**OWENS:** It's also probably less well-known that you have also edited a number of book series, and you've been an editorial contributor to a number of academic and more public journals. Have you considered that a form of service to the profession – where you also see it as a way of shaping things and making your own contribution? Or is it merely thanking the scholarly guild by giving them some service?

**WOLFE:** More shaping. The one I did for the University of Chicago Press, *Morality and Society*, was a deliberate attempt to give qualitative and ethnographic sociology more of a face at a time when things were going quantitative. Yes, I had a particular idea about that. That series really helped make space for it. People these days are obligated to write a so-called tenure book, and having a book published by the University of Chicago Press helped lots of people get established. There's one person in particular I'm thinking of at a major research university that nonetheless works in the book-writing tradition. I helped him get that position through that series. When I look back, I'm proud of being able to carve a little space for that kind of work.

**OWENS:** One of your other core roles professionally has been as a teacher. What's led you to favor teaching under-

graduates over graduate students, at least here at Boston College?

**WOLFE:** I've only mentored – a word I don't like – two graduate students in my life. One never got an academic job and the other isn't finished yet, so you can't say that's a great record. I knew all along that's not my strength. I did become dean of the graduate school at the New School. I wound up not working with many graduate students there, which, since it's a graduate school, raised some interesting questions. But I've taught graduate

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students. I don't keep up with job markets, so I don't know that I can help them when they finish. Because the way I read, it's not my strength to read deeply and seriously and spend lots of time with one manuscript. It's just not what I do, for better or for worse. The speculative thing we talked about, the kind of speculative work I like, is not often what graduate school communities want to see.

**OWENS:** It might seem strange to outsiders that you found such a meaningful home at a Jesuit Catholic university. What has it meant to you to be here at Boston College? What does the Jesuit tradition mean to you here?

**WOLFE:** I wanted to come here. I pursued BC until they finally took me. First of all, it looked like a happy place. Around the Boston area, there's so many

universities, and everyone's complaining about everything. I never heard those things really from BC, which struck me as interesting.

At the time I came, the university was in the process of changing law school deans. The dean who was on his way out was a man named Avi Soifer, who I've known for a long time. There were rumors that there was antisemitism, that the law school wasn't Catholic enough. Some of my friends said to me, how could you possibly go to Boston College? It's a Catholic school and you write about abortion. How can you possibly do that? I paid no attention to that because I knew in my field of political science, Catholic universities were strong in political philosophy, which is a field that always has appealed to me.

In the so-called "behavioral revolution" in political science, which is turning everything quantifiable, Catholic universities were still in fields outside political theory. They were dealing with international relations or American government, and asking big questions. That was very attractive to me. I had been at BU before and the promise of free tuition for my kids wasn't attractive to me there. But BC, it was eye opening. It turned out to be the smartest thing I ever did. In many ways, it became a natural fit. There's misunderstanding about Catholic universities. One of my biggest articles for the cover story of *Atlantic Monthly* was about the misunderstanding of evangelical colleges by the general public. I also wrote about the misunderstanding of Catholic colleges. On almost all dimensions, it worked out. It couldn't have worked out better.

**OWENS:** Has your interaction with colleagues here at BC changed your views or scholarly directions?

**WOLFE:** If I were starting my academic career now, I would be interested in theology. To friends who have known me all my life, that might sound like an absolutely maddening statement.

I mean it because I've learned the questions I ask, since I'm not that interested in the answers. I'm interested in asking the questions. Theology in some ways is perfect for that because you begin with big questions. I assume you begin by knowing that the biggest question of all is never really going to have a definitive answer. That prepares you for a different way of thinking. That's been the biggest change because I knew nothing about academic theology before I came to Boston College. BU has something, but it was still tied to the church, in ways more direct than at BC. New School had nothing at all.

**OWENS:** What were your hopes for the Boisi Center when you started it as a founding director in 1999? What did you envision the Center doing on campus and outside of this community?

**WOLFE:** A number of things. Externally, I hoped my coming here would give BC a certain recognition in work involving religion because this is a great place to study religion. It always struck me as a little odd that while Boston College is a well-known Jesuit Catholic institution, it didn't have much in the way of social scientific study of religion in either sociology or political science before I came. There was a sense of vacuum that something like the Boisi Center could fill. This was at a time when academic centers around religion were being established due to the generosity of Pew and Lilly Foundations all over. We never got that money here at BC, which was definitely for the better in the long run. I wanted to keep a moral, ethical approach to social science and keep the big questions alive. This was a good way to do it. Academic centers and the social sciences are generally devoted to promoting academic research. I saw this as more of promoting public conversation, both inside and outside the university.

That grew out of a longstanding conviction on my part that universities have been generally weak in responding to

the ethical obligations of the people who pay for the students to come here and the taxpayers who support public universities. These parents are putting up money for their kids to come here, and we owe the general public something in return. We've tried to open up our scholarship to the community, and we've done it successfully. It always thrills me at the luncheons when people identify themselves as "Oh, I'm just a neighbor." I get a real kick out of that.



**OWENS:** What do you see as some of the center's greatest successes in your time here?

**WOLFE:** I don't want to insult anybody by not naming them, because we've had so many things, but we were very fortunate that the state department called upon us to do seminars for Muslim scholars. These scholars from the Muslim world come to the U.S. and talk about separation of church and state and issues like that. What a great beginning that was. It was just absolutely terrific. We had the funding to help us bring all kinds of people to campus that we didn't know. It felt like an air of discovery as they talked about connections with other institutions like Fuller in California or Hartford Seminary. What a model to start with.

The lunches, which you've been so involved with, are great. Everyone talks about them, and I know they're going to continue forever in my absence, and, hopefully, I'll come to many of them as former director.

I still think the event where we had people talk about conscience clauses in the military and in medicine was just so eye-opening for me, especially when that high-powered doctor from Mass General talked about his relationship with a Jehovah's Witness patient. That's humanizing things and bringing them down to a really comprehensible level. The thing we did with Jean Elshtain and Andy Bacevich, that was also a major event.

**OWENS:** That event was terrific. What are the things you wish we'd have done or done better over the years?

**WOLFE:** That's a good question. There is an issue I know you've been thinking about and Mark Massa's been thinking about, and that's the almost total neglect of the curricular side since I've been here as the director. We've not played any real role, either as developing an undergraduate minor or as being a place that sponsors courses. It is something that I unfortunately neglected and could really serve as a source of improvement. Nonetheless, having said all that, I'm always amazed at how students know who we are, where we are. They want to work here. They want to be involved with us.

**OWENS:** What's your hope for the Boisi Center for the next 15-17 years?

**WOLFE:** It's somebody else's now. I'm not going to answer that. I'd love to say build on what I've created, but no, that shouldn't be the case. Somebody new should have their own vision, so I'm going to take a pass on that one.

**OWENS:** What are you looking forward to doing in the coming years?

**WOLFE:** That's a big question. I think the best way to answer it is "Nothing"—especially for the first six months to a

year. I walked into a classroom in 1967 to teach, and I've been walking in the classroom to teach ever since with only one or two years off. I've loved every moment of it. After this interview, I'm going to give my last final exam and wrap it up. I just want to get my thoughts together, travel a little bit, see where things go. Am I going to write more? I don't have a project at the moment, but I wouldn't be surprised if one comes to me very soon.

**OWENS:** It's been a privilege to work with you for 10 years now myself, and an honor. The place won't be the same without you.

**WOLFE:** But it will go on. It still has all kinds of people, including you. The Center has the generous support of Geoff Boisi. Let's see what magic Mark Massa can perform.



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