

# BOISI CENTER INTERVIEWS



NO. 30: FEBRUARY 11, 2009



**JAMES BERNAUER** is a Jesuit priest who joined the faculty of Boston College in 1980, and currently serves as the director of the Center for Christian-Jewish Learning. He spoke with Boisi Center associate director **Erik Owens** before his presentation on the personal and impersonal qualities of a Catholic university's religious character.

**OWENS:** Let's begin the distinction between the personal and the impersonal. Why is that what you would consider to be the key distinction, as opposed to religious or not religious, secular or not secular, and some of the ways in which that manifests itself in the university?

**BERNAUER:** In terms of why I take it to be the most significant is that religions operate in different ways. I have come to the realization that God is personal. I believe in a personal God. The whole notion of Trinity, of course, is this relationship of persons. The 'personal' has theological depth, even though that wasn't the initial starting point for me.

We do take on philosophical perspectives for organizing our experience, and this is a way of organizing experience that I found more fruitful than much of the conversation that has taken place over the years. Although I think that conversation probably was necessary in order to get where we're at now. There was a type of Catholicism that we call "ghetto Catholicism." I don't necessarily mean that as a negative thing. At that time, they were ghettoized. But it seems to me that some brought with them into new settings, that old baggage. Part of it was worth having, but part of it was not, and "ghetto Catholicism" was alienating, and it had to be passed beyond.

For example, some thinkers became privileged, so some schools are still caught in a Neo-Scholasticism as the only route intellectually for a Catholic experience. We're broader here, and it may become increasingly broader. The ambition of the



Catholic is that. Catholicism isn't just one culture. This is the tension, of course, because you have Rome trying to avoid the differentiation between the classical mind and the historical minds.

**OWENS:** You see impersonal and personal forms of religion at play here within the community, within Catholic traditions, as well as across other traditions? The distinction is that you're

placing your weight behind the personal understanding of religion. How does that manifest itself theologically or religiously in a community like Boston College, with diverse faiths represented in the faculty, staff and students?

**BERNAUER:** I think the key is that what is most important about anybody is his or her personhood. And anything else, and as the talents the individual has that are to be recognized and supported by a university like this, it's the person who is being supported. That's why we have such things as policies for healthcare.

The activities of that individual are personal activities, for example the scientist in his lab and the humanist in his history. These are activities that many people have lost an ability to describe in non-pragmatic ways. That's what a religious university should always be providing people, an opportunity to embrace a rhetoric that's true to their experience. That is a faith-based rhetoric.

**OWENS:** To be clear for some readers, you're not speaking about a personal relationship of one person to their God, or to Jesus, or to that type of model that you hear from evangelical circles in particular? You're speaking about an understanding of the created order connecting people to people as a religious community?

**BERNAUER:** Right. That's the ontological priority. One can evaluate, one can use this as the norm for evaluating: Is this a religion that's impersonal, a kind of magic religion, or does it awaken within the person his or her talents and creativity and love? We are talking about love, personality. That's God worshiping. That should unify, harmonize us, rather than render us enemies of one another, or lesser citizens.

**OWENS:** So in terms of the enterprise of the faculty in a place like Boston College, scholarship is often portrayed as a solitary endeavor, and the *vita contemplativa* is valorized by many and assumed to be solitary. Can you say a bit about the overworking of that tension to the personal that you're speaking of, and whether that tension is resolved in that model? Does there have to be some tension inherent in the understanding of knowledge as individual and communal?

**BERNAUER:** The solitude of the scholar doesn't mean that he or she is not communal. It can be very communal, in the sense of connection, connectedness with others or being with others. We have our community when we are being inventive with language, and when we're in a foreign language situation, trying to communicate. The ease with which we normally operate mechanically in life is stripped away. And that's true with solitude as well. We're often more aware of the dimensions of being with another.

I re-read Martin Buber's *I and Thou* this past summer because I was doing this course on German-Jewish thinkers. I found that an incredibly powerful text. I read it in theology years ago. In the summer, I took my time reading it, and it's a text that has to be savored. I found it very rich. It's opening up to the realm of the personal, of being with others. In order to do that, you need to be on that personal level yourself, or else you don't recognize it in others.

I remember an experience years ago. I was in Germany, and I was going to the

Holy Land for the first time in 1974. I was living in the seminary at the time, and this Dominican asked me to say hello to an old nun he had met who was in a contemplative convent in Jerusalem and had lived there for decades. The last thing I wanted to do in my 20s was spend time at a contemplative convent in Jerusalem, but I went. Duty calls.

I went and the convent was like a prison we were going into. And eventually, they sat me down, and the curtain is pulled

---

**“We are talking about love, personality. That's God worshiping. That should unify, harmonize us, rather than render us enemies of one another, or lesser citizens.”**

---

away, there are bars and there's this woman, who is unbelievably radiant. She must have been in her late 70s or 80s. I was startled at her presence.

It was a moment that has always stayed with me. And her interests! You would think she was reading the New York Times every day. It's very powerful, that solitude in the contemplative, and what that can create in terms of personal openness. It was really a very powerful experience for me.

**OWENS:** Wow. For those people at Boston College who are a part of shap-

ing lives of young people here, which is almost everybody, students included, how is it that this sort of understanding of personal connection and community is transferred or shaped in an appropriate way for you? You mentioned in your talk the importance of understanding connections between me and people of another country experiencing profound suffering. How is it that that connection is fostered here?

**BERNAUER:** On a personal level, I used to bring in small groups of students to lunch almost every day. That's how we get through a class. Now, that isn't as regular as it used to be, and one of the reasons is the student is so overscheduled. It's very hard to get them at lunchtime. And also, probably part of it is the aging. Now it's like coming to see their grandfather. I still have a pretty good rapport with students, but I think it was easier when I was younger. You connect much more easily and our conversations would regularly touch on the plight of people elsewhere.

**OWENS:** The topics you teach cross over questions of the relationship and connections between an individual and a system, for example, the Holocaust, fascism and other modes of political bureaucracies, etc. How is it that you convey that connection in your classroom and in your conversations between this student and that person? How is that hook made, as opposed to seeing an impersonal understanding of one's moral obligations to the other that is well intentioned but not personal? And how do you change the sort of impersonal understanding that one ought to feel an obligation toward non-Americans, or non-privileged peoples, or whatever, versus a more personal, interconnected understanding?

**BERNAUER:** What I'm doing, teaching the concrete right now in my Holocaust course, is I've changed the nature of the projects so we have a common project. What we're looking at are the lives of

those who have been honored by the State of Israel.

They've just published a large collection of summaries of each of those people's lives, and what they did. I'm having the students read through them. Each student has a different section to read through. What we're trying to figure out is how to account for these people. It's much easier to account for those who just fell into line, but these people are the ones who risked their lives for strangers in most cases. They recognized a personal relationship and responsibility there, that they find very difficult to articulate, but I think everyone has this feeling.

We're going to look at that, and the students are interested in this, because they know that we're in a sort of morally chaotic situation in the world right now. That's why the Holocaust plays a special role in the moral imagination, thinking out good and evil.

**OWENS:** By personalizing the stories of other peoples around the world, you're able to share the complexity of thought.

**BERNAUER:** And the generosity of spirit.

There's a line that when I first heard it, I didn't quite appreciate it. It's an interview with Jan Karski, who was a very heroic Polish envoy during that period, who used to smuggle information between Poland and the Polish government in exile, which was based in London. He had some very sensitive projects, including being brought into the Warsaw ghetto so he could see it himself. When he came back, he met with Roosevelt, he met with the Western leaders, so he could tell them what he saw.


He was very heroic. He was tortured a number of times. He came back to the U.S. and became a professor at Georgetown University and never told about these tales. Then Claude Lanzmann, for his film *Shoah*, which is a nine and a half hour film on the shoah, tracked him down and got him on tape, talking about this visit to the Warsaw ghetto. In



one of the interviews that Karski gave, he said, "People did not fail during that time, their institutions did." And when I first read it, I said, what could that possibly mean? And he means exactly this—that there were 200,000 people willing to risk their lives for strangers, but their institutions weren't willing to risk anything.

That became clear to me, and this is what I'm trying to do with this exercise of studying the lives of rescuers, which is the common project with the class. Coming to grips with that type of moral experience and ability, it's a virtuosity they had that most people don't have.

[END]



Visit [bc.edu/boisi-resources](http://bc.edu/boisi-resources) for a complete set of the **Boisi Center Interviews** and audio, video, photographs, and transcripts from our events.

The Boisi Center for Religion and American Public Life  
Boston College  
24 Quincy Road  
Chestnut Hill, MA 02467

tel 617-552-1860  
fax 617-552-1863  
publife@bc.edu

 boisicenter  
 @boisi\_center