

BOISI CENTER INTERVIEWS



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DAVID COWAN is a visiting scholar at the Boisi Center during the Spring 2014 semester, a senior tutor in politics and religion at King's Evangelical Divinity School and an approved tutor at the University of Chester. He spoke with Boisi Center associate director **Erik Owens** before his presentation on 21st-century religious communications trends at the Boisi Center.

OWENS: A big trend in American religion has been the rise of the “nones,” and the disaffiliation of people from religious traditions. Do you see any connection between the new, evolving landscape of social media and this institutional disaffiliation?

COWAN: Yes. The social media space and the way we have communicated in recent decades allows people to hear new ideas all the time from places they didn't before. One of the troubling questions is if God favors one set of people, what does that mean for those who have not had the opportunity to hear the gospel? That seems to be a problem that a lot of young people struggle with.

America had a very uniform culture until the 1950s or 1960s. Americans were not so exposed to different cultures, but today, they are all the time. For some young people, that is very exciting, but for others, it is highly problematic. There is a great sense of dissonance for them. So what do they believe? Today, everybody can make up their own religion, and they can pick and choose from what they like. That is one of the major ways in which religion has changed for people today.

The other side of it is the loss of authority. This is not necessarily a negative thing, because social media has given access to minorities, and people can

express themselves online that could not before. However, this gives rise to misinformation, and people are learning to cope with this now. It's not the pope telling you what to do, it's not the Archbishop of Canterbury telling you what



to do, and it's not even the president or prime minister telling you what to do. It's everybody, raising questions about what is credible and authoritative. How do you begin to process that in religious terms? It's quite a struggle for people entering into our social media special that it creates a fog of religious war.

OWENS: There have been many developments and revolutions in travel and

communication over the generations. Is the current revolution in communication different in scope or impact than those that came before it?

COWAN: The first great revolution was when we learned to write, and in terms of authority, there were those who controlled the writings. Early religious history is all about controlling and canonizing the writings, and defining what is authoritative and what is not. The next communications age was the Reformation, where the Bible was put into the hands of the people and they could read and worship in their own language. There was the spreading of ideas through printed literature and the Renaissance. This is a third communications age because we can access information as never before. Today, we can communicate at one-thousandth of the cost that we could in 1970. The speed at which we can travel to another part of the world has equally decreased, and we have truly collapsed our world.

Today, it is much harder to hide from ideas and from people who are different, and it is also harder to gain authority for your message. However, there is an opportunity to gain authority for your message through the way you communicate in that space, and get acceptance and engagement. I think communication is an opportunity in this regard.

OWENS: In this era of social networking, all communications seem to serve as public relations—people are projecting their brand and viewpoints, while gathering witnesses and likes. Are there modes of communication in this networked era that don't collapse into public relations?

COWAN: I think we have moved beyond that. There was a time in which communications was very much about how you manipulate the news, how you manipulate your message, and how you build your brand. But with the increased access, the transparency, and the speed of communications, you can no longer control the message.

For example, HMV, an entertainment retailer in the United Kingdom, fired sixty-five people in January 2013. In the old days, a communications expert would go to the CEO and the leadership, and they would draft an announcement. In the HMV case, an intern who designed the social media for HMV hacked into the system and live-tweeted the firing process. It hit all the major newspapers and news networks, so what was a minor event became a big story because of one person using a particular medium, and the organization not being able to control it.

OWENS: You work as a communications advisor to both large non-governmental organizations and large global corporations. How do you counsel them to function and communicate across religions and cultures?

COWAN: I've developed an approach called "the dialogue box," which is the basis of a book I've got coming out in June [[Strategic Internal Performance: How to Build Employee Engagement and Performance](#)], and has been used by a number of organizations and companies. It allows organizations to think through the intelligence of their decision, what they want to communicate, and then analyze the emotional impact that it is going to have. The next element of the dialogue box is interpretation. In the business

world, there are many different interpretations in the workplace. For example, in times of downsizing coworkers can see the CEO meeting with someone and think he's getting fired, while another person thinks they are just in a business conversation. What emerges is a fourth element, the narrative that many in the organization believe, which may be a counter-narrative to the implicit or explicit one in the decision communicated by the organization's leadership. Therefore, there is disconnect, and you need to find a dialogue.

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True dialogue is a meeting where the outcome sits in a neutral zone between two different views, and may create a new sense of knowledge, or a new idea, or a new emotion. But that can only happen if you meet in that neutral zone of dialogue.

OWENS: What is an example of a single word that represents a dialogue point between two disconnected narratives?

COWAN: I worked with one CEO and his leadership team through this process, and the word they used was "sorry." The CEO decided to apologize for what happened in order to move on and get the dialogue moving again. The dialogue box is a reiterative process—once you start with the word "sorry," then you look at

words like "trust," because that is where the dialogue is going.

Another example is "understanding," which was used where a major manufacturing company was dealing with an issue that would upset some employees. To keep them focused, the managers in their dialogue with employees said they understood the issue and why employees were upset. It gave the managers who were announcing this bad news a dialogue word that they could use to connect with employees.

OWENS: What do religious communities have to fear with regard to Internet-based communications or the social media landscape?

COWAN: The communications problem that the Church has is that their teaching has a certain degree of nuance, and social media is quite adolescent. There is not a lot of room for nuance in social media, nor is there on television and other mass media.

You can watch Fox News and MSNBC and it is a gladiatorial fight rather than a public debate about a serious issue. Much of the access is really just trite nonsense that goes on in the social media space that makes it rather difficult for a religious message to go through. Much of the language that the Church uses is considered archaic, and some of it has even been stolen, so "sin" becomes a joke word and "Jesus" becomes an epithet.

What the Church needs to do is draw people into a deeper understanding. I think Jesus had quite a good way of dealing with this, which was the use of parable. He made it very easy and accessible to people, and he'd talk about the theology of the kingdom of God, or about a mustard seed, or a woman who's lost the coin. These were amazingly simple things that the masses could appreciate and understand, an approach I built on in [Economic Parables: The Monetary Teachings of Jesus Christ](#).

OWENS: What then are the opportunities religious organizations have today?

COWAN: Churches and religious organizations are using YouTube to make good informational videos that anybody can access, because it can be difficult to go to a church or a religious meeting place that you are unfamiliar with. You can go online and you can see where you are going to sit and what it will look like. Therefore, somebody coming to church or a religious meeting can come with a degree of comfort. They can also make contact with an organization before they go, and get a sense of what these people and the religion are like.

I think churches have got it wrong when they use a hip, happening poster or idea as the way to become relevant, when actually they are entirely missing the point. When you create a brand, the brand promise is all the advertising and the education and the imaging, but it has to match the experience.

A few years back the Church of England launched a controversial campaign “Body piercing? Jesus had his done 2,000 years ago.” This was intended to be hip, but the only body piercing you would find in the average English congregation is a hip replacement. The Church has tried to create this appealing brand image, but in reality, you walk into a church and you see fifteen elderly folk mumbling the liturgy and moaning through hymns. They have not quite matched their brand promise and experience, and I think that is where the churches actually get it completely wrong.

OWENS: Pope Francis is a social media star. What grade would you give him in his first year? How would you rate the effectiveness or scope of his outreach?

COWAN: I would give him a B+, because I think he has been quite good. Pope Francis has taken on the church at a very difficult time when the image of the Roman Catholic Church is based on trusting priests, and the issues of



contraception and abortion. Compared to his predecessor, I think he is doing quite a good communications job in many respects.

My reservation about Pope Francis is there has been a certain degree of confusion in his messaging. He seems to make people see what they want to see in the Roman Catholic Church. Conservatives saw one thing and liberals another, if we put it in crude divisions. After a while, people will come to question that, and you will have a problem with authority.

If you look back to John Paul II, he was very much a media star, and did it in quite an engaging way by traveling around the world. However, he was

caught up in a particular era of the 1980s, because the same engagement was happening politically with the triumvirate of Reagan, Thatcher, and Gorbachev. I think Francis has come into a much more difficult situation.

He has come in as the man who pays his own hotel bill, washes feet, and does other humble acts. People have fixated on this, which I think is slightly trivial. It is a good signal to send but it is not the most important thing that I would wonder about. In my opinion, he has been sending mixed signals in his first year, despite the popularity of his actions.

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