

# The BOISI CENTER *Report*

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THE BOISI CENTER FOR RELIGION AND AMERICAN PUBLIC LIFE

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## FROM THE DIRECTOR

This fall was the most exciting semester in the life of the Boisi Center since we began our activities almost three years ago. The visit of our Muslim scholars provided an opportunity to combine scholarship, public outreach, and diplomacy at one and the same time. I am sure that our visitors learned a great deal about American religion, but so did I. The opportunity to hear experts on all the world's religions from throughout the Boston area gave me a chance to enjoy the intellectual riches of the area. Boston truly is a great city for the study of religion and we are pleased to be part of it.

The State Department program also enabled us to engage in a bit of (amateur) diplomacy. I do not think we should be telling other countries how to run their affairs, but I also think that, when it comes to living with religious diversity, America has

much to offer the world. Separation of church and state is not always well understood. Religious pluralism is a difficult idea to put into practice. Yet at a time of significant population movements, we have a pretty good record, especially compared to societies in Europe, such as France, Holland, and Denmark, who have significant anti-immigrant movements. There is no backlash against Muslims in the US comparable to that of Jean Marie Le Pen. Europeans are right to criticize the US for its fascination with capital punishment. But we can challenge them to live up to the promise of religious tolerance better than they have.

Finally, our program continued our efforts at outreach. I traveled with the scholars to LA and worked with two other institutions, Fuller Seminary and the University of Southern California. The scholars met with two rabbis in the LA area with great success. I was able to write an

article on their visit for The Chronicle of Higher Education. The State Department wants the results of the program to be more widely known, and I am only too happy to oblige.

Of course we did other things this year, including our lunch colloquia. The project on school choice reached its conclusion and the resulting volume, *School Choice: The Moral Debate*, will be published in January 2003 by Princeton University Press. My own research and writing continue apace and I have submitted another manuscript, *The Transformation of American Religion: How We Actually Practice Our Faith*, to the Free Press. It will appear in the fall of 2003.

We look forward to an equally intense spring that will involve our usual program of events as well as planning for the possible repeat of the State Department program in the summer of 2003.

## Boisi Center Hosts Fulbright Seminar For International Muslim Scholars

In a program funded by the public diplomacy branch of the U.S. Department of State, the Boisi Center hosted a month long Fulbright seminar this fall titled "Religion in Contemporary America: Church,

## Former Senator Gary Hart Speaks on the Restoration of a Jeffersonian Republic

On September 18th former U.S. Senator Gary Hart gave a public lecture on ideas presented in his new book *Restoration of the Republic: The Jeffersonian Ideal in 21st Century*



*America* (Oxford 2002). In his talk, he offered his view of the current crisis in the United States and possible structural changes that

could address them. Hart argued that globalization has brought important changes in the world, cit-

ing the decline of nation-states, the rapid spread of information, and new forms of conflict as examples of these changes.

Hart focused on terrorism as a new issue we must confront, not only from abroad, but also from domestic sources. Reminding the audience that terrorism is not just an international issue, he cited the Oklahoma City bombing as an example of domestic terrorism that we need to protect against as well. The solution, from Hart's view, is that Americans need to recognize that this country was formed as a republic and that it needs to return to ways that encourage the participation of

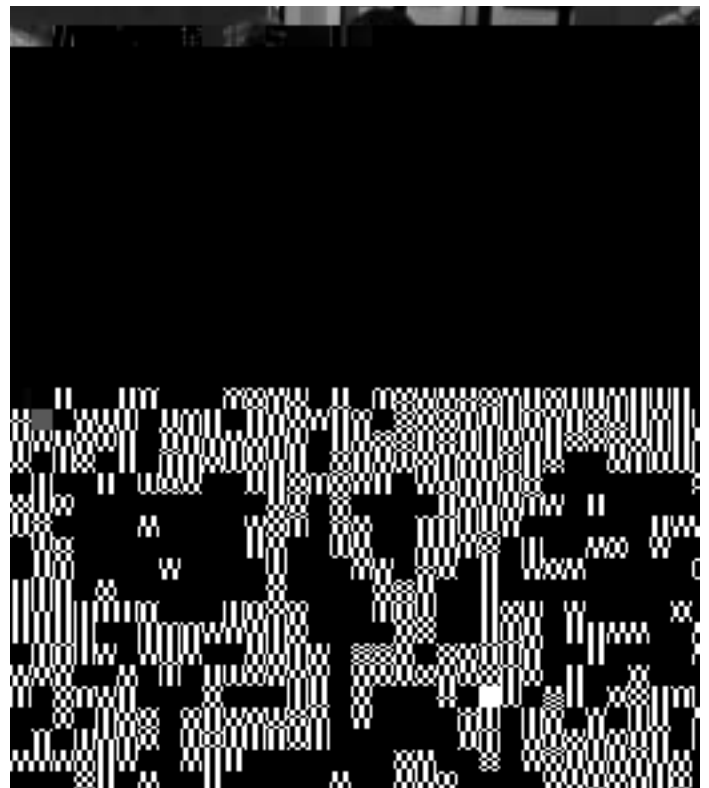
citizens as a key to the continued success of the nation. He cited activity in town meetings, participation in schools, voting, and serving in the National Guard as examples of republican behavior that needs to be nurtured in local communities. Hart recalled Jeffersonian ideals of citizen participation, civic virtue, and the common good and argued strongly that a strengthening of these ideals is what our nation needs to succeed in the new century. Hart argued that Jefferson's republic, if fully implemented in the United States, would better help the U.S. to deal with the challenges it faces now and in the future.

## Inter-Religious Dialogue in Action: Muslims and Jews Engage Scripture at Hebrew Union College, L.A.

One of the many high points of the Church, State, and Society Seminar occurred on the afternoon of Tuesday, October 8th, when our Muslim guests were invited to join faculty and students in their weekly Torah study under the direction of Rabbi Reuven Firestone at the Hebrew Union College in Los Angeles. Director of the Louchheim School of Jewish Studies, Rabbi Firestone is also a scholar of early Islam, focusing particularly on Islam's relationship with Jews and Judaism. Rabbi Firestone invited our Muslim guests and his Jewish students and colleagues to engage the story of Noah both in the Hebrew and Qur'anic texts.

"As people of the book," Rabbi Firestone explained using a phrase to describe the common heritage of the Abrahamic religions, "we should be able to sit down and engage one another's texts." At small tables, groups of four or five were instructed to read and discuss the texts describing the story of Noah and the flood. Each table was given the Old Testament texts in both Hebrew and English translation, along with the original Arabic and English translations of the parallel stories from the Qur'an.

The mood was exciting, for many reasons. Certainly, after three weeks of dialogue about non-Muslim religions, the visiting scholars were thrilled to engage the Qur'an with North Americans, especially Jews. Moreover, the Jewish students were excited to read and hear about Noah and his particular significance to the Muslim faith. For nearly everyone in the room, this was the first opportunity to sit down with a member of the other faith and dialogue about their scriptural traditions. After the English translations of the stories were read aloud at each table, the participants were invited to discuss what about each story seemed distinctive, what points of contact the stories



shared, and where the narratives diverged significantly.

Interestingly, many of the Jews found the character of Noah in the Qur'anic story to be more interesting than the Torah account. They valued Noah's passionate concern for the other humans who would be killed by the impending flood. Similarly, many Muslims were fascinated by Noah's righteousness and obedience to God's will in the Genesis account. In this small way, people of both faiths came to a new relationship both with their own

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On September 18th the Boise Center hosted a panel on “Varieties of Muslim Experience in America” featuring the Reverend Don Muhammad of the Nation of Islam (NOI); Mohammad Ali Salaam whose faith journey has lead him from Christianity, to membership in the NOI and finally to Sunni Islam; and M o h a m m a d Louzanni, a member of the Islamic Society of Boston, an upper middle class suburban mosque in Wayland. Together, these panelists offered a spectrum of Muslim experiences in the United States. Louzanni spoke of his experience as a foreign born Muslim who consciously made the decision to live in the US. He spoke of the difficulties of living faithfully in a secular

society that is not oriented around God, yet was also critical of Muslims in the United States who “act like they are a majority, even though they are a minority.” Salaam spoke positively about his work with the Islamic Society of Boston in Cambridge, its rapid growth through conversion, and the ethnic and cultural diversity of its membership. Muhammad, a local leader of the NOI, spoke of how the Nation of Islam has brought empowerment to African Americans in the US and spoke of how their national leader Louis Farrakhan was traveling through Africa and the Middle East and trying to encourage Muslims to work together.

Many of the Muslim scholars were familiar with the Nation of Islam and had the impression that the NOI represented the experience of American Muslims. They also believed that the African American experience portrayed by Farrakhan was the experience of all Muslim-Americans. The views expressed by the panel members caused many of our visitors to rethink this perspective. Many found it heretical, for example, that the NOI teaches that Elijah Mohammad, the founder of the NOI, is a messenger of God and is sometimes referred to as the

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On October 22nd, Jay Dolan, Professor of History at Notre Dame, gave a talk at the Boisi Center from his new book *In Search of An American Catholicism: A History of Religion and Culture in Tension* (Oxford, 2002). The talk offered a timely historical perspective at a time when grass roots movements calling for the greater empowerment of the laity are gathering momentum. Dolan's book addresses the contemporary and historical conflict between American democratic values and the authoritarianism of the Catholic Church. In trying to understand how American Catholicism has been shaped by the cultural context of the United States, Dolan has written an "interpretive essay" focusing on the intersection of Catholicism and culture in five areas:

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## Church, State, and Society Seminar Visits Hartford Seminary

On Thursday, September 19th, Muslim scholars participating in the Boisi Center's Church, State, and Society seminar visited the Duncan Black Macdonald Center for the Study of Islam and Christian Muslim Relations at Hartford Seminary in Hartford, Connecticut for a day of panel discussions. In the morning, the scholars met with Professor Ibrahim Abu-Rabi, co-director of the Macdonald Center; and Professor Ingrid Mattson, Professor of Islamic Studies. Abu-Rabi, a Palestinian citizen, began with a brief overview of the Macdonald Center's history, after which Dr. Mattson spoke about the benefits of pursuing Islamic studies at a non-Muslim institution. She highlighted the freedom of thought available to Muslim thinkers, a freedom which allows one to transcend the usual terms of debate in the Muslim world (e.g., secularism v. orthodoxy). This relative freedom is embodied in Mattson herself, who was elected as the first female

## Members of Muslim and Jewish Lobbies Discuss Their Role in US Politics

As part of the Church, State and Society seminar, the Boisi Center organized a number of panels addressing the theme of religion and democracy. This included two separate panels of religious lobbyists. The first, on



September 25th, featured Keith Weissman of the American Israel Public Affairs Committee (AIPAC), and Rob Leikind of the Anti-Defamation League (ADL) and was moderated by David Little, the Dunphy Professor of Religion and International Affairs at Harvard. Many Muslims believe that America's foreign policy towards the Middle East is largely engineered by American Jews and this session was a unique opportunity for the group to directly address these issues in an intellectual setting. Weissman explained that lobbying is one way that Americans have of making their interests known to their government officials but that it can never guarantee outcomes. He acknowledged that AIPAC is considered one of the most effective lobby groups in Washington DC and that some reports claim that American Jews contribute 50% of the Democratic party's budget and close to that percentage to the Republican party.

Rob Leikind presented another aspect of the Jewish lobby, explaining that the ADL was founded in 1913 in response to the lynching of a Jewish man in the South. Since this time, the ADL has fought to support the Jewish community in America by protecting constitutional freedoms for all groups, not just Jews. Leikind described how his organization combats anti-Semitism on a national level by promoting general goals of human rights

and tolerance. This has led the ADL to make common cause with a number of underrepresented groups including the poor, labor, and ethnic minorities on a wide range of issues. Leikind attributed the success of the ADL to its support of broad based principles rather than narrowly Jewish interests, yet both lobbyists stressed that their main job is to mobilize the Jewish population in America to fight for rights of Jewish citizenry at home and abroad. While there was clear disagreement around the table over the handling of recent events in the Palestinian Authority, the conversation was respectful as well as lively and contin-



ued over food and drinks at a reception following the panel.

The following day, Jason Erb of the Council on American-Islamic Relations (CAIR), Eric Vickers, the Executive Director of the American Muslim Council (AMC) and Sohail Hashmi, a professor of International Relations and Islamic ethics at Mount Holyoke College, convened in a second panel on the "Muslim Lobby in the U.S." Professor Hashmi gave an overview of the political mobilization of Muslims in the US (see our website for a copy of his paper) and Erb and Vickers spoke on the activities of their organizations, which have largely been involved in anti-discrimination advocacy and support for the civil rights of American Muslims. When asked about the issue of Palestine, both lobbyists explained that perhaps 10% of their agenda was focused on international issues. In part this is because of ethnic and national differences among the Muslim population in the United States, which make political mobiliza-

tion difficult to achieve. Mobilization around issues related to Palestine has also lagged because most Muslims in the US are not from the Middle East and have differing views of the politics in that region. Both lobbyists focused on the need for Muslims to unite and form a strong political base as a minority within a majority, much as Jews have done. Erb stressed that Muslim lobbies were only formed in the last 10-12 years, but have started to have a larger political influence both in respect to direct lobbying, and in voter turnout. Vickers advised that Muslims need to develop their political influence by forming alliances with other groups so that the Muslim voice could be better heard in the political arena. He used the ADL as a model that American Muslims would do well to follow and pointed out that the AMC has collaborated with the ADL on a number of social justice issues.

Hashmi spoke on more general themes related to the political experience of Muslims in the United States. He spoke of an anti-Muslim stereotype that he felt existed in America that keeps Muslims out of political life. He also said that the beliefs of Muslims

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also make it harder for them to mobilize within the existing two party system. Muslims do not have a natural home in either major political party as they tend to be conservative on cultural and moral issues but liberal on economic and social justice issues. Nonetheless, all three speakers expressed an optimism about the growth of the Muslim lobby in America.

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