

Boston College  
Boisi Center for Religion  
and American Public Life  
140 Commonwealth Avenue  
Chestnut Hill, MA 02467  
U.S.A.

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BOSTON, MA  
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*The BOISI CENTER Report is produced by Media Technology Services, Boston College.  
Designer, Cindy Adams. Art Direction, Mike Swanson.*

# The BOISI CENTER Report

VOL. 6 NO. 2 THE BOISI CENTER FOR RELIGION AND AMERICAN PUBLIC LIFE

MAY 2006

## FROM THE DIRECTOR

First of all, I want to use this semester's director's letter to thank Andrew Finstuen for filling in so superbly as assistant director this past year. Knowing a good deal about us and what we do, Andrew came in at the last moment and used his considerable energy and knowledge of American religion to organize luncheons, help write grant proposals, and keep us organized and on our toes. Somehow, Andrew also managed to finish his doctoral dissertation in history and he has accepted a postdoctoral appointment as a Lilly Fellow in the Humanities at Valparaiso University for the next two years. All of us at the Boisi Center express our appreciation for his work here. Thanks as well to Shannon Cozzo and Tom DeNardo, both of whom are moving on to other pursuits.

Joining us in the fall will be Erik Owens as assistant director. Erik is finishing his degree in religious ethics at the University of Chicago with a dissertation on civic education and religious freedom. He spent the 2005-06 year as a fellow at the Center on Religion and Democracy at the University of Virginia. Erik has already edited two books, *Religion and the Death Penalty* (Eerdmans 2004) and *The Sacred and the Sovereign* (Georgetown 2003). He will bring to us the experience of having worked with the Pew Forum on Religion and Public Life. I am delighted we could snatch him.

Meanwhile, much of our focus this year has been devoted to writing a series of pamphlets on American

religious practice designed to help our foreign visitors, many of them Muslim, understand our tradition of separation of church and state and the way we manage religious diversity. This project brought to the Boisi Center for a day-long discussion Ingrid Mattson (Hartford Seminary), Jay Wexler (Boston University Law School), Stephen Prothero (Boston University), James Toth (Northeastern University) and Jytte Klausen (Brandeis University). Their help in the development of these materials was invaluable.

Besides our regular programs, I want to highlight two particularly well-attended events: a panel discussion on Pope Benedict after one year featuring four members of the 51E Theology Department (Kenneth Himes, James Weiss, Mary Ann Hinsdale, and Thomas Groome) and a lecture and slide-show presentation on *The DaVinci Code* featuring Harold Attridge, Dean of the Yale Divinity School.

My own travels took me to Florida State University to keynote a conference on college student values, a two day meeting at the Brookings Institution on political polarization in America, a presentation at the American Enterprise Institute, and a couple of trips across the river to comment on Harvard's Tocqueville lecture delivered by Hugh Heclo and to present a talk on religion in Europe and the United States at the Kennedy School of Government.

We are all looking forward with great excitement to next year. My best wishes for a good summer.

- Alan Wolfe

## Debunking The Da Vinci Code

Dan Brown's *The Da Vinci Code* is nothing short of a cultural phenomenon. With forty million copies sold, it is one of the most widely read novels in history. Its influence reaches beyond sales, however. The novel has blurred the line between fact and fiction for many of its readers. The novel's discussion of a Catholic conspiracy to cover up such issues as the marriage of Jesus have delighted some, appalled others, and raised questions for still others. Accordingly, the Boisi Center invited Harold W. Attridge, Dean of Yale Divinity School and Lillian Claus Professor of New Testament, to assess the novel and its many claims about Christian history. Dr. Attridge delivered his lecture, "Truth and Fiction in *The Da Vinci Code*," to a full house in the Fulton auditorium, with late arrivals standing in the aisles.

Dr. Attridge, an alumnus of Boston College (A&S '67), has become an expert in unveiling the problems with Brown's imaginative tale. Attridge noted that there are facts in the book, but that the facts are taken

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## Pope Benedict XVI After One Year

In early April, the Boisi Center marked the one-year anniversary of the election of Pope Benedict XVI—formerly Cardinal Ratzinger—with a panel discussion on his tenure thus far. Professors James Weiss, Mary Ann Hinsdale, and Kenneth Himes of the Department of Theology and Thomas Groome of the Institute of Religious Education and Pastoral Ministry were the featured speakers. Each offered brief commentaries on Pope Benedict XVI's papacy and fielded questions from the audience during a vibrant question and answer period.

Professor Weiss opened the panel forum with remarks about the general continuity between Pope John Paul II and Pope Benedict. Weiss, an expert on the papal conclave, noted that Pope Benedict has not yet "lowered the boom" and has instead presided over a somewhat uneventful first year. Hinsdale, Himes, and Groome echoed this theme in their remarks. Weiss's colleagues also agreed with his observation that Pope Benedict has so far shown great humility in his stewardship of the papal office, demonstrating a less autocratic, more self-effacing approach to his leadership of the Catholic Church in comparison to his predecessor.

Hinsdale, Himes, and Groome moved the discussion from the

broad outlines of Weiss's comments to specific assessments of the past year. Dr. Hinsdale rated Benedict's performance with a grade: C+++.

According to her, Benedict deserves the average grade, with the exception of three areas: culture, consultation, and continuity. On each of these counts, his papacy warrants a "+." Hinsdale explained that Benedict appears to have reduced the antagonism with which he views culture, has adopted an active "listening" approach as pope, and seems intent on staying the general course of Pope John Paul II. She wondered, however, whether Pope Benedict

over the pope's inconsistent position regarding the Islamic faith, citing the weak Vatican response to a new large mosque in Rome despite strong pronouncements on the lack of religious freedom for Christians in Islamic Saudi Arabia. Finally, Himes raised questions about the pope's first encyclical, *Deus Caritas Est*. Although complimentary of the first half of the document and its articulation of Christian love, he objected to its discussion of charity and justice. Pope Benedict too easily distinguished the Church's role of offering charity from the state's role of securing justice. To Himes, the

Church has and should be involved, even if indirectly, in matters of justice.

Dr. Groome closed the panel. He affirmed the comments of Weiss, Hinsdale, and Himes, and offered a wish list of issues he hoped the pope would address. Groome would like to see Pope Benedict reinstate the power of bishops; take an aggressive

stance on women's rights in the Church; address the problem of the shortage of priests; and actively restore the public's trust of the Catholic Church in the wake of the abuse scandals. He concluded with a prediction, one germane to his wish list. He believes the current pope will preside over the ordination of women to the diaconate.

After a round of questions, the audience warmly thanked the panelists for their insights with extended applause.

Himes expressed concern



From left: Thomas Groome, James Weiss, Mary Ann Hinsdale, Alan Wolfe, Kenneth Himes

## The Spiritual Lives of Children

Our final luncheon of the spring featured Robert Orsi, Charles Warren Professor of the History of Religion in America at Harvard Divinity School. Orsi shared his latest research concerning the religious lives of children in the post-World War II era. With this project, Orsi is once again pioneering a new field of historical inquiry. Very little exists on the nature of children's religion, even though they, as Orsi emphasized, have always constituted a large portion of the churchgoing population. He noted the special peculiarity of their absence from Catholic historiography. Catholics not only had more children, but also provided them with more institutional guidance than other faith traditions. The parochial school system that expanded after World War II represented the most obvious intersection of the Catholic faith and Catholic children.

Orsi devoted the early part of his talk to explaining the lack of understanding of children's religion in accounts of American religious history. The gap in knowledge, according to Orsi, has several explanations. Although adults spent a lot of time grooming the religious imaginations of children in the 1950s and 1960s, rarely did they solicit feedback from their young pupils, so it is difficult to track how young people experienced their Catholic faith. Furthermore, children's religion is often naturalized; that is, we assume that the spiritual lives of young people fit the patterns of the religious instruction given to them. Finally, the lack of historical sources specific to children, Orsi surmises, has kept scholars from exploring the religious sensibilities of children in the past.

Orsi admitted the difficulty of capturing the religious experiences of children because of the lack of traditional historical evidence. In response to this problem, he has drawn from four types of evidence: memory groups, popular periodicals, material culture, and archival documents. Since archival materials are scarce, Orsi described the vast array of periodicals, children's literature, Catholic comic books, Catholic board games, and other religiously-themed toys as a way to unlock the religious world of young people. The memory groups, consisting of adult Catholics from around the country, were of particular interest to the audience. Orsi explained that although one must always be guarded about the reliability of memory, he has nevertheless gained valuable insights about Catholic childhoods from the recollections of these groups.

He closed by commenting on the moral and ethical implications of his study. He focused on the question of religious expectations and pressures placed on children by adults. Children, he argued, are extremely vulnerable in religious contexts. The close proximity to adults and the seriousness of religious ceremony and language are not easily digested by children. Such issues are worth considering, Orsi contended, in the wake of, but also independent of, the recent sexual abuse crisis in the Catholic Church.



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## Religion and Second-Wave Feminism

On March 15th the Center welcomed Ann Braude, director of Harvard University's Women's Studies in Religion Program, to speak about the "Faith of the Feminists: Religion in the National Organization for Women" (NOW). Braude's work explores the role religion and women theologians played in the life of NOW in the 1960s and 1970s, and the reasons why NOW has been understood as hostile toward religion. Braude acknowledged that the study of women's religious history and feminism in the late twentieth century is a controversial topic. Conventional views of NOW hold that these feminists viewed religion as a component of patriarchal society, and interrupted the historic partnership of women's activism and religion in advocating for social change. Braude argues that this tradition did not simply die out in second-wave feminism.

Rather, according to Braude, religion and feminism were intertwined—sometimes antagonistically and sometimes cooperatively—in the 1960s and 1970s.

Braude's presentation explored the ways in which religion was both absent from and an important part of the creation of NOW. An enduring image of the supposed clash of religion and feminism occurred at The Catholic University of America in 1971. Braude showed a photograph

of ardent Catholic Patricia Buckley Bozell (*National Review* founding editor William F. Buckley's sister) attempting to slap Ti-Grace Atkinson, the former New York chapter president of NOW, as she inveighed against the Catholic Church's view of women. The story



behind the incident, Braude noted, is more complicated. The fact that Atkinson spoke at a Catholic school and was actually a popular speaker at other Catholic universities demonstrated that religion and second-wave feminism comingled in this period.

Braude highlighted the founding of NOW in 1966 as another moment of intersection between religion and feminism. Pictured at the inception of NOW were its first president, Betty Friedan, and other lead-

ing figures of feminism, including, Sister Joel Read, S.S.S.F. In fact, Friedan wished to involve religious women in the activities of NOW, and understood the movement as an effort for women's rights irrespective of belief or non-belief. Indeed, part of NOW's founding charter outlined eight task force issues, including one on religion. The organization's platform was that sexism destroys religious values, and this was a particularly important idea for Catholics to consider as they witnessed the end of the Second Vatican Council. The task force on religion was led by a Catholic theologian, Elizabeth Farians, Ph.D. who understood NOW as an opportunity for female leadership in the Catholic Church. Ultimately, organization members disagreed about the need for trained female theologians, and divisions within NOW over the religious question intensified regarding the abortion issue. Braude invited the audience to share stories and memories of both women's religious experience and the development of NOW.

Several attendees reflected on the development of trained Catholic women theologians, and the extent to which these theologians were and continue to be involved in leadership positions within their religious communities. Overall, the luncheon offered an opportunity to reflect on women's religious history in the United States and to rethink the role of religion in the history of the supposedly anti-religious National Organization for Women.

## The Leibniz-Spinoza God Debate and Contemporary Society

For our first event in 2006, independent scholar Matthew Stewart discussed his new book, *The Courtier and the Heretic: Leibniz, Spinoza, and the Fate of God in the Modern World*. Stewart's book recovers how dangerous the business of philosophy could be in the seventeenth century—especially when the issue was the nature of God. Stewart traces these debates about God through the lives and thought of Baruch de Spinoza and Gottfried Wilhelm Leibniz. Spinoza, known as the “atheist Jew” for his critique of the God of traditional piety, suffered excommunication from the Jewish faith and ostracism from Dutch society. Leibniz, Stewart's other protagonist, was a prominent defender of orthodox Christian views of God, and yet he was privately obsessed with Spinoza's work. He risked his social position and reputation by writing clandestine letters to Spinoza and by visiting his counterpart in secret.

The differences in Spinoza's and Leibniz's views regarding God, according to Stewart, reshape the way we understand the history of ideas. Among other things, the intellectual exchange of Leibniz and Spinoza challenges two common perceptions of the Enlightenment: first, that the Enlightenment rejected the notion of a divine or transcendent power at work in the universe. And second, that the movement we call the “Enlightenment” has been overplayed as a historical phenomenon. Stewart argues instead that the Enlightenment did happen but that it was not necessarily hostile to belief in “God.” As Stewart shows, Spinoza “crossed a line,” re-imagining God outside of orthodox Christian doctrine. Yet, Spinoza hardly lost belief in the supernatural. Stewart's narrative also turns attention away from the eighteenth-century French Enlightenment that too often dominates the story of the development of the modern world. Spinoza wrote in the context of the Dutch Enlightenment, while Leibniz was a figure of the German Enlightenment. Stewart, then, affirms the existence of the Enlightenment as a movement but broadens its scope both in terms of geography and intellectual content.

Stewart stressed that he hoped the book might further illuminate why debates about God from the seventeenth century matter today. For Stewart, Spinoza's unorthodox definition of God has much to teach contemporary America. Spinoza resisted precise characterizations of the Divine because of the many faces of religion in the seventeenth century. He doubted not the existence of God but the certainty with which the Christian Church perceived God.

Meanwhile, Leibniz sensed the power and coherence of Spinoza's ideas, but ultimately could not publicly acknowledge such a view of God. He held fast to the ordered God of seventeenth century Christianity.

For Stewart, much of modern thought about God “simply wanders in the space between” the positions of Spinoza and Leibniz. Leibniz's views, however, have bested Spinoza's ideas as humankind has pursued the security of a doctrinal God that provides certainty despite continued scientific discovery and philosophical inquiry that challenge traditional views of God. The turn toward Leibniz and away from Spinoza over the past three centuries is curious, particularly in America. Spinoza's God, Stewart argues, is most compatible with modern life. In societies that value religious toleration and freedom of conscience, his is the “religion that works.”



## Faith and Poverty in Boston

On February 8th, Susan Crawford Sullivan, associate professor of sociology at the College of the Holy Cross, shared her research concerning the religious lives of poor women in Boston. Through forty-four in-depth interviews in the Boston area, Sullivan uncovered that low-income, urban mothers have higher levels of personal religiosity—almost exclusively Christian—than the non-poor, and yet they participate less in organized religion. Based on data collected in her interviews, she explained this paradox as a function of two obstacles: minimized capacity to attend church services and a perception of disapproval from church leadership and fellow worshippers. Her study breaks new ground regarding the relationship between the churches and the poor. Scholars have primarily focused on religious social service programs provided for the poor, not how the poor connect with and understand their participation in churches.

From a practical standpoint, urban, poor women do not attend church regularly simply because their circumstances inhibit active involvement with a congregation. Transportation presents the first problem for many of these women. Since most lack a car, they must rely on the bus or the subway system. But these public services can be unreliable or inconvenient to a desired church location. Unpredictable and inflexible job schedules, along with the challenges of single motherhood, also prohibit easy access to Sunday morning services.

Even if the practical hurdles to church attendance are successfully managed, one-third of Sullivan's sample

of low-income mothers felt stigmatized and unwelcome at church. Some of these women encountered judgmental attitudes—both spoken and unspoken—toward single motherhood, cohabitation, and poverty itself, while others feared such opinions would prevail in churches. The reality and perception of stigma was particularly difficult for these women, the majority of whom have a history of strong ties to Christianity. Furthermore, recent scholarship, according to Sullivan, has demonstrated the advantages of church involvement, including the social network of support, interaction with members of other social classes, and the personal transformations that can occur in religious settings.

Sullivan concluded her talk with suggestions for churches to better include low-income, urban mothers, and also commented on the public policy implications of her research. For Sullivan, congregations could be more pro-active with implementing or improving transportation assistance and outreach programs for poor women. As a matter of public policy, Sullivan argued that her research cautions against viewing the church as a panacea for the poor, even the religious poor. In the end, religious programs designed for these populations can only be of service if they have the capacity to attend church and, once there, feel welcomed.



## American Foreign Policy and the Divine

Are the comparisons drawn in the media over the past year between the war in Iraq and the Vietnam War tenable? Seth Jacobs of Boston College's history department believes so, but with an important qualification. For Jacobs, it is the Vietnam War of the Eisenhower years, not the Vietnam of the 1960s, which offers a striking parallel to the Bush administration's Iraqi policy. The Eisenhower administration placed God at the center of American political life in the 1950s just as Bush has in the new millennium. Eisenhower invoked God early and often in his presidency. “God's Float” led his 1953 inaugural parade. In the mid-fifties, he supported the insertion of “under God” into the pledge of allegiance and oversaw the change of the national motto from “E Pluribus Unum” to “In God We Trust.” Bush's public statements about his faith and his many references to God are well known. And his foreign policy, like

Eisenhower's before him, is informed by his understanding of Christianity.

During his February presentation at the Boisi Center, Jacobs outlined a substantial record of similarities between the two administrations. Eisenhower and Bush both staffed their administrations with people of faith. John Foster Dulles, Ike's secretary of state, was a devout Presbyterian, renowned in the press and among foreign dignitaries as a man of God first and Secretary of State second. Bush's staff has consisted of John Ashcroft, an active member of the Assemblies of God, Condoleezza Rice, daughter of a Presbyterian minister, Andrew Card, whose wife is a Methodist minister, and head speechwriter Michael Gerson, a born again evangelical. Eisenhower often opened cabinet meetings with prayer. Bush has followed suit and Bible studies are attended by over half of the White House staff. Both administrations take

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## Debunking *The Da Vinci Code*

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out of historical context and spun wildly to fit the conspiratorial theme of the novel. After briefly interrogating Brown's sources, including *Holy Blood, Holy Grail* (1982) which was based on false documents deposited in the Bibliotheque Nationale in Paris in the 1950s, Attridge launched into an investigation of four of the novel's claims: the art of Da Vinci as a secret code; the worship of goddesses in antiquity; the formation of belief in Christ as divine; and the interpretation of Mary Magdalene as a romantic companion of Jesus.

Attridge began by contextualizing the art of Leonardo Da Vinci. Brown's book exploits the fact that the Last Supper painting includes a figure at Jesus' right who appears more feminine than masculine, thus supporting the claim that Mary Magdalene was romantically attached to Jesus. Attridge explained that such feminine depictions of males in the Renaissance were quite common, and he showed works by Da Vinci and other painters of the period to demonstrate his point. Next, Attridge exposed Brown's oversimplification of goddess worship among Jews and early Christians. The majority of Jews and Christians, he argued, criticized such practices as heretical in light of their monotheistic beliefs. In addition, contrary to Brown's account, goddesses in the ancient tradition were not simply beneficent but were also warlike and judging gods. From there, Attridge dismissed the novel's assertion that the Christian Church developed the idea of Jesus' divinity in the fourth century at the urging of the Roman Emperor

Constantine. The Christian Gospels, as well as texts external to the Christian faith from the second century, identify early believers professing Jesus' divinity.

Attridge concluded with discussion of the probability of Mary Magdalene's marriage to Jesus. He contended that the marriage was possible but not at all likely. According to Attridge, Brown's use of non-canonical gospels that record the disciples at one point proclaiming "He [Jesus] loved her [Mary] more than the rest of us," is taken out of context. Biblical scholars understand the quote as a move by the authors of these gospels in support of female leadership in the church by alluding to Jesus' support of Mary, rather than a clue to any special relationship between Jesus and Mary.

During the question and answer portion of the program another fallacy of the novel came to light. A student asked about Brown's claim that the name Mona Lisa (the novel begins in the Louvre with a corpse stationed below Da Vinci's famous painting) is an anagram of two Egyptian fertility deities Amon and L'isa. Attridge informed the student that not until years after Da Vinci painted his masterpiece was it actually called the Mona Lisa. At that point, the extent of Brown's creativity with history seemed to fully register with the audience, leaving little doubt about the book as a work of fiction.

## American Foreign Policy and the Divine

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their respective conflicts in the loaded religious language of crusade, and too easily divided the geopolitical landscape between "good" and "bad" nations.

The staunch religious rhetoric of the current administration worries Jacobs. He points to the "mind-lock" the Eisenhower administration suffered in its understanding of the complexities of Vietnam. The crusading mentality made it difficult for Eisenhower and Dulles to reexamine their policies and consider alternative plans when it came to intervening in Vietnam. It also clouded their analysis of Ho Chi Minh and his communist followers, a movement more about the fight for indigenous independence than a puppet of the Soviet Union. As Jacobs sees it, there are similar patterns in

work in America's involvement in Iraq. Bush's refusal to admit any mistakes concerning the Iraq war may be a function of Bush's "religiously-based certitude." For Jacobs, Bush's rigidity will bequeath the second most tragic and unnecessary "quagmire" after Vietnam.

The discussion following Jacobs's talk was lively. Some argued that Bush's neo-conservative ideology, rather than his religious belief, seemed the more likely origin of his Iraqi policy. Others debated the sincerity of Bush's faith, viewing it as a mask for political manipulation. Jacobs fielded the questions and concluded that political strategy and genuine faith were not necessarily mutually exclusive.