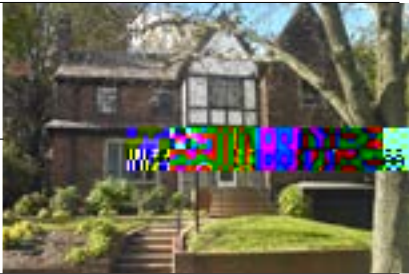


the

# boisi center

# report



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## from the director



Exile.

The past semester was exceptionally busy—and stimulating—at the Boisi Center. In one

of our best-attended sessions, we asked three prominent religion journalists to discuss the nature of their craft. Rod Dreher of *The American Conservative*, Mark Oppenheimer of the *New York Times* (and, for this current academic year, *Boston College*), and Sarah Posner of *Religion Dispatches*, discussed questions about whether religious leaders receive too much or too little scrutiny, how to write about religions that are not your own, and how to write about religions that are not your own. Michele Broemmelsiek of Catholic Relief Services and Rev. J. Bryan Hehir of the Boston Archdiocese. Our own Alberto Godenzi, dean of BC's School of Social Work, moderated.

Finally, the Boisi Center held a panel discussion on my own book, *At Home in Exile: Why Diaspora Is Good for the Jews*. Ben Birnbaum and Kevin Kenny of BC joined Dartmouth's Susannah Heschel in a vigorous discussion of the issues I discussed, especially the theme of exile and the questions it raises for Jews and non-Jews alike. The book, I am happy to report, was reviewed in both the daily and Sunday *New York Times* and was discussed at similar panel discussions at the Brookings Institution and the Manhattan Jewish Community Center.

I wish to add here a note of sorrow at the passing of Jonathan Trejo-Mathys, a BC colleague in political philosophy who spoke at the Boisi Center just one year ago, and who died tragically at an all-too-young age in late November.

In closing I want to thank our staff. Susan Richard gives the Boisi Center the tone of friendliness that has marked it since its inception. Cheryl Chang has fostered and sustained our Religion and Politics Symposium, and Erik Owens showed his remarkable capacity for turning suggestions into ever-interesting realities.

At Home in Exile

in this issue

- At Home in Exile: Why Diaspora Is Good for the Jews
- 2014-2015

On November 12 Alan Wolfe presented his new book *At Home in Exile: Why Diaspora Is Good for the Jews*, and received feedback from a distinguished panel of respondents. Billed as an “author meets critics” event, Wolfe’s critics for the evening were Ben Birnbaum, editor of the *Boston College Magazine*; Susannah Heschel, Eli Black Professor of Jewish Studies at Dartmouth College; and Kevin Kenny, professor and chair of the Boston College History Department.

In *At Home in Exile*, Wolfe argues that there is a bright future for Jewish universalism—a strand of Jewish thought that emphasizes concern for all, in contrast with a particularistic concern for the Jewish people. Jewish life in the Diaspora is vibrant and thriving. The tension between Jewish universalism and particularism is not new but has taken on a new urgency in recent years. With the Holocaust and the founding of the State of Israel now nearly seventy-five years in the past, Wolfe argues, the Jewish people have reached a moment in their history in which they can once again go beyond the particularism inherent

in these events and once more consider their broader obligations to humankind. He suggests that the Jewish people ought to embrace their broad acceptance in Western society and view the Diaspora as a viable and positive site of Jewish existence.

Ben Birnbaum praised the book for being enlightening, well-researched and fair. At the same time, he explained, Wolfe’s argument pitting universalism against particularism ultimately left him cold. Particularism and universalism are, in fact, two sides of the same particularistic coin—universalism maintains the notion that the Jews are the chosen people with an obligation to be a “light unto the nations,” only without God. Birnbaum said he long ago rejected the notion that Jews had some special calling, citing it as onerous. The Jewish people are no more special, with no more obligations, than any other people. All peoples, not only Jews, do best when they live up to their own ideals. He concluded, “I am not in exile, I am not in Diaspora. I am where I was born, and where I want to be.”

Susannah Heschel’s remarks focused on the understanding of exile in Wolfe’s book. Heschel agreed with Wolfe that Jews in America are different than they were even forty years ago, let alone a century and a half ago in Europe: they are more at home with—no longer neurotic about—their Jewish identity. She asked, though: Was it exile they enjoyed, or the benefits of living in a multi-cultural democracy? She also wondered whether Jews in Israel were not still also in exile since, by design, the modern Israeli state was created in a spirit contrary to that of pious Judaism.

Kevin Kenny began his remarks with a careful articulation of Wolfe’s thesis. He then evaluated Wolfe’s book from his perspective as a historian of diaspora. Diaspora involves exile and banishment, but can also entail great flourishing, as in the case of the Jews. In assessing Jewish Diaspora today, assimilation is a factor that needs to be considered; more than half of non-Orthodox Jews in the United States are marrying non-Jews. Kenny noted, moreover, that while Judaism without a state is a concept being celebrated by a minority of Jewish academics around the world, in practice this arrangement brought with it much adversity for the Jewish people. The tragic irony is that the ending of one diaspora (the Jewish) marked the beginning of another (the Palestinian). A diaspora that is to be good for the Palestinians depends on the Jewish universalism that Wolfe advocates.



## prophetic rhetoric in the public square

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Boston College theologian and legal scholar Cathleen Kaveny spoke at the Boisi Center on October 1 about her upcoming book, *Prophecy without Contempt: An Ethics of Religious Rhetoric in the Public Square*.

She began by describing the 2004 presidential election cycle as the height of recent culture wars. Embedded within vicious arguments over issues like

abortion, Kaveny noted, was an increas-

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Theology and law professor M. Cathleen Kaveny addressing a Boisi Center lunch on October 1.

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## women and interreligious dialogue

Catherine Cornille, professor and chair of the BC theology department, joined the Boisi Center on October 14 to discuss her scholarly work about women and interreligious dialogue. Her talk touched on two recent book projects, *Women and Interreligious Dialogue* and *The Im-Possibility of Interreligious Dialogue*.

Cornille noted that women have been generally excluded in formal interreligious dialogue efforts, whether between faith authorities or among scholars in academic settings. At the same time, women have often participated informally in interreligious dialogue through neighborhood networks or discussion groups, to much success. Such examples of dialogue go beyond mere theological discussion, and treat religion in a holistic way by celebrating the aesthetic, social and cultural aspects of religions.

A central point of contention in the symposium that led to *Women and Interreligious Dialogue* was whether women bring anything unique to interreligious dialogue, or whether including women is beneficial simply because doing so makes dialogue less patriarchal. Including women in interreligious dialogue, Cornille argued, can help expose patriarchal aspects of tradition; for example, Muslim-Christian dialogue that includes women can reveal how Western feminists have been complicit in the denigration of



BC theology professor Catherine Cornille speaking at the Boisi Center on October 14.



## breakfast with yair hirschfeld

Yair Hirschfeld, an architect of the 1993 Oslo Accords between Israel and the Palestinian Liberation Organization (PLO), addressed a gathering of faculty and graduate students at an informal breakfast at the Boisi Center in September. Hirschfeld detailed the back-channel avenues with PLO leadership that he

pursued in the early stages of the peace process. These back-channel communications eventually paved the way for official negotiations, which culminated in Israeli prime minister Yitzhak Rabin and PLO chairman Yasser Arafat signing the accords in a Washington, D.C., ceremony hosted by U.S. president Bill Clinton.



Israeli negotiator Yair Hirschfeld appeared at the Boisi Center on Friday, September 19, for an informal breakfast discussion with select faculty members and graduate students.

**Politicization of Religion or Sacralization of Politics:**

**Two Faces of Political Islam**

Ali Banuazizi, Boston College

Wednesday, January 28, 2015, 12:00-1:15 pm

Boisi Center, 24 Quincy Road

[View Event](#)

**Challenging Simone Weil:**

**The Problem of Simone's Svengali**

Benjamin Braude, Boston College

Wednesday, February 11, 2015, 12:00-1:15 pm