

# *The BOISI CENTER Report*

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## **From the Director**

Now that we at the Boisi Center are halfway through our first real year of activity, I wanted to share some thoughts on our undertaking. The Boisi Center for Religion and American Public Life was created to help fill the gap between the obvious importance of religion in American life and the relative neglect of religion as a serious subject of study in the modern academy. Boston College has been the perfect venue for this undertaking. The Jesuit tradition of religious commitment and humanistic scholarship creates an atmosphere in which social scientists need not confine their attention to what C. Wright Mills once called abstract empiricism. We are rather encouraged to address real world issues in ways sensitive to the meaning-producing capacities of human beings.

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We also will sponsor, as the core of our program for spring 2001, a conference devoted to the question of whether it is proper for government to provide direct aid for parents to enable them to choose the appropriate education for their children. Issues involving school choice have generated a flurry of controversy, but much of it has been confined to measurement issues: does school performance improve when school choice is allowed? Does school choice siphon off support for public schools? Does it make a difference in educational effectiveness if the private schools supported are religious or not? We hope, by contrast, to address some of the normative, theological, and philosophical questions raised by school choice: Should society have common schools to help achieve a common morality? For which

institutions is choice appropriate and for which institutions is it not? Can choice and authority be reconciled? Is choice in conflict with equality? To help address these issues, we have invited a number of distinguished scholars to come to Boston College on March 9 and 10 to share their thoughts, including Amy Gutmann, Richard Mouw, Sanford Levinson, Martha Minow, Nancy Rosenblum, and Glenn Loury.

In addition to these highly public events, the Boisi Center is sponsoring a course on economic freedom, social justice, and rel

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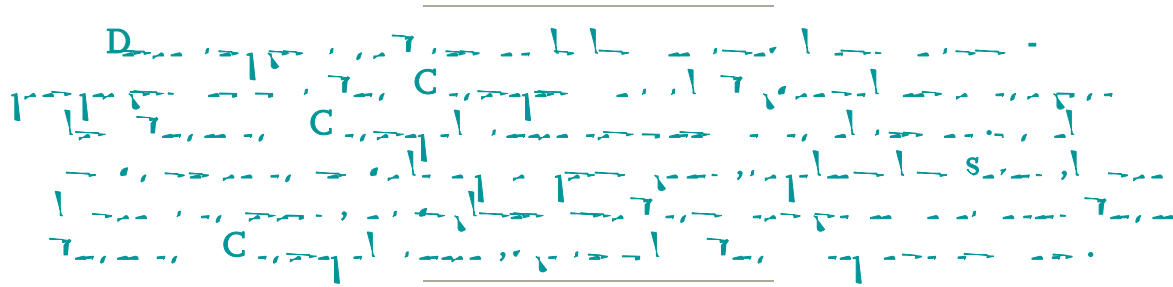
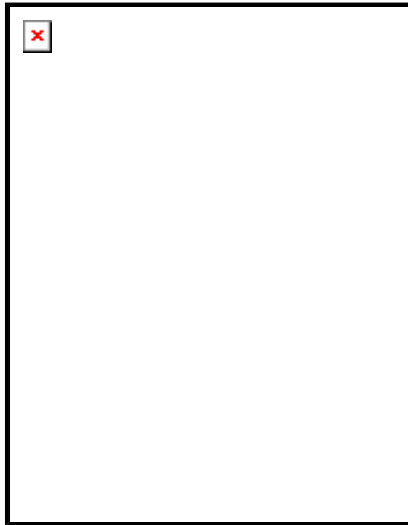
When asked about the impact of the Clinton scandals and the influence of moral issues in general, Dionne remarked that church-goers tended to favor Bush. While moral issues played a role, the sex scandals related to the Clinton presidency did not hurt Gore directly. But they did exacerbate Gore's own credibility problems, which Bush highlighted in the first debate.

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From left to right: E.J. Dionne, Joseph Quinn, Alan Wolfe, and David Brooks at the Election 2000 Panel

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Dillon also commented on the possibilities for common ground between liberals and conservatives. She pointed to the divisions among those on the left and noted that, while each group disagrees with some church doctrines, there is often agreement on others. Finally, she remarked that, despite the official opposition of the Catholic League, surveys show that thirty percent of the members think that some positive effects would come from women's ordination.



### Michelle Dillon at the Boisi Center

Cahill stressed the differences between the dissenters of the 1970s and the young people of today. Thirty years ago, anger at the Church prompted many to leave or to try and change the structure through activist organizations. Many young people today, she claims, think the church irrelevant and find it easier to ignore negative aspects and identify with the positive. Dillon agreed that more young people today are apathetic but emphasized that when they return to the church they are more critical, unlike some older Catholics who are less willing to discuss religion.

Davidman's comments addressed the theoretical framework of the book. Davidman thought that more attention to Foucault's emphasis on the role of power in structuring discourse would prove useful. Dillon replied that Foucault's rejection of the use of language and other institutional procedures as a vehicle for transforming attitudes and practices was too pessimistic and that her research showed that pro-change Catholics were able to draw upon "emancipatory resources" within their tradition to argue for and build a more inclusive church.

The response from the interdisciplinary audience was lively and continued informally beyond the end of the presentation. Because of the strong response to the program, a second talk by Dillon, co-sponsored by the Boisi Center, the Sociology Department and the National Association for Women in Catholic Higher Education is being scheduled for the spring.

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