

The Boisi Center Papers on Religion in the United States

The Boisi Center for Religion and American Public Life is a research institute at Boston College committed to fostering scholarly discussion about the role of religion in the contemporary United States. To this end, the Boisi Center hosted two four-week seminars on the topic in 2002 and 2003 for Muslim scholars from seventeen different nations, most of which were predominantly Muslim. During these seminars, we at the Boisi Center learned how perplexing the peculiarly American relationship among religion, government, and society can be. Our seminar participants had many questions about religious pluralism, the separation of church and state, the basic principles of Christianity, and the different forms Christian religious practice take in this country. They expressed an interest in a basic written introduction to these topics, and we are pleased to provide such an introduction in the four papers collected here.

The Boisi Center Papers on Religion in the United States were written with the generous support of a grant from the Carnegie Corporation of New York. Neither the Boisi Center nor the Carnegie Corporation seeks in its work to

promote or denigrate any religion, or to promote religious belief over against secularism. Rather, these papers are provided as a means of better informing the international, interfaith discussion—both scholarly and popular—about the role of religion in the United States. While the initial impetus for these papers was the questions we received from visiting Muslim scholars, we hope they will be useful to anyone who desires an introduction to the status of religion in the United States. We invite all who read them to share them with colleagues and friends and to contact us at the Boisi Center with comments and reactions.

The four papers collected here may be read sequentially for a comprehensive overview of religion in the United States, or they may be read individually for information about a specific topic.

The first paper, “Religious Pluralism in the United States,” outlines the development and current status of religion in the United States, addressing the competing images of the United States as both a Christian enclave and a secular nation. This paper describes Christianity’s complex role in the founding of the United States

as well as how other religions—especially Judaism, Islam, and Mormonism—have gained acceptance as part of the American religious landscape.

The second paper, “Separation of Church and State,” gives an account of the history and current controversies over religious disestablishment in the United States. It explains how the constitutional structure of the American government—particularly its federal system and its separation of powers—has led to a complex and dynamic relationship between religion and government; and in surveying some of the most important legal cases dealing with religion, the paper provides an overview of the status of religious freedom in the United States.

Despite the vast diversity of religious traditions in the United States today, Christianity remains America’s predominant religion. The third paper, “Basics of Christian Theology,” provides an overview of the basic tenets of the Christian faith. It gives an historical overview of the development of Christianity from its origins and outlines some of the primary Christian beliefs. In doing so, it explains some of the major differences among contemporary Christian churches. The paper thus offers an understanding of Christianity’s complex

history, development, and current relevance to American society.

The fourth paper, “Religious Practice in the United States,” describes how Americans practice their faith, concentrating on the diverse American expressions of Christianity. By sketching some of the behaviors and attitudes demonstrated by various American Christians, this paper offers the reader a sense of how Christian faith influences the daily lives of believers. Where possible, the paper includes comparative discussions of other religious traditions as well.

With these papers, the Boisi Center hopes to provide the reader with a primer on how religion—especially Christianity—functions in the United States. While the papers are introductory in nature and are necessarily brief, they contain suggestions for further reading to encourage interested persons to explore these topics in greater depth. An expanded list of further readings will be published on the Center’s website (www.bc.edu/boisi) as well. We sincerely hope that this project will promote respectful and well-informed dialogue among people of different faiths and nationalities, thereby advancing the global common good.
