

BOISI CENTER INTERVIEWS



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MICHAEL SEAN WINTERS is an author, blogger for the Jesuit magazine *America*, and the political columnist for *The Catholic World*.

AMY SULLIVAN is an author and a national correspondent for *TIME* magazine. They spoke with Boisi Center associate director **Erik Owens** before participating in a panel discussion on Catholics and the 2008 election.

OWENS: I wanted to start by talking about your book, Michael Sean, which is subtitled [*How the Democrats Lost the Catholics, and How the Catholics can Save the Democrats*](#). So how did the Democrats lose the Catholic vote?

WINTERS: My argument in the book is that in their victory in 1960, when Catholics overwhelmingly turned out to support one of their own in electing John Kennedy, you saw the seeds of the demise. His embrace of this idea that his religion was private was used 12 years later by Catholic pro-choice politicians to justify flipping their position on abortion in the wake of *Roe*. The problem with the idea that religion is private, is that it was demonstrably false. Usually, those things will catch up with you. Obviously, the civil rights movement was an explicit legislation of morality that was led and fought for by religious leaders and conducted with ethical arguments.

The Vietnam War was fought on both sides with moral arguments, and then you get *Roe*, where the morality is inescapable. My argument is, it's not just *Roe* that caused Catholics to abandon the Democratic Party, but the way of talking about morality more generally. In the wake of *Roe*, religion and morals are private, and you can't legislate morality. There are other reasons besides the ideo-

logical fallout from *Roe*. Essentially in the '70s and '80s they became incapable of articulating a moral vision for the nation.



OWENS: In your book, I recall you saying that John F. Kennedy's strident move towards privatization of religion created a challenge that liberal Catholics failed to meet, in terms of explaining the contours of religion and public life. Do you see that as an inability to articulate the boundaries, or an unwillingness to discuss what they understand to be the boundaries?

WINTERS: The latter. They saw it as a safe zone. If you invoke, my religion is

private, no matter how you get to this issue, that's a place where Democrats are safe. Specifically, I mostly focus on Democratic Catholics. That's their safe zone. "Oh, my religion is private." We only saw it though in 2008 with two candidates, both of whom were losers—Hillary Clinton went there and Mitt Romney. And it didn't work for either one.

OWENS: You write that abortion was the iceberg that sank this relationship between Catholics and Democrats. Where do you see that conversation today about abortion? And in particular, I want to bring you both in on this, about the contemporary sort of argument that's happening among Catholics and Evangelicals, about single issue voting, and whether or not it's an appropriate way to be religious or to be political.

WINTERS: We were on a call together yesterday, looking at a new poll that showed that 74% of Catholics agreed with the statement, "You would vote for a candidate who disagreed with you on abortion?" The thing that Democrats have done this year, and I specifically commend Obama for this—there is a group of Catholics who are never going to vote for a Democrat as long as they support *Roe v. Wade*. But there's another group of Catholics who, so long as you're not forcibly throwing us out of the party

and denying Governor Casey a speaking role at the convention, are willing to listen to the Democrats on the war, social justice issues. But they do have to get past that threshold of seeing the Democrats not as pro-abortion, but as pro-choice, and that's a significant difference. Take as an example John Kerry, Hillary Clinton and Barack Obama. Between the three of them, there have been six convention speeches in the last two conventions, only one of whom, Barack Obama this year, mentioned abortion reduction. Now, we've got to hold him to that, if he wins and it will be curious to see how he addresses that. But I think going forward, that's an important group. And then there's another group who think abortion doesn't matter that much to them or it matters number five or six. But I do think what's changed, between 2004 and 2008, is, there is a group of voters who have come into the room, and they crossed a threshold because of the way Obama has addressed the abortion issue.

OWENS: What do you see from your perspective?

SULLIVAN: I have a slightly different take on it: abortion, for many voters, operates kind of as a threshold issue. It gives them a sense of whether a candidate or a party understands and respects their worldview. If you ask people, "What's the one issue that really motivates your vote?" you would expect single issue voters to identify abortion. In fact, only 7% or 8% of voters say that it's abortion. And even among Catholics, you're only at 10% or 11% of Catholics saying, that's my one issue.

We did a separate poll of Catholics at *TIME*, and only 15% of Catholics said they would not consider voting for a candidate whose position on abortion was different from theirs. In practice, however, that's obviously not the case. Everybody knows somebody who is a Catholic who says, I just can't vote for Obama, even though I'm with him on economic issues, against the war, everything else.

I just can't vote for him because of abortion. So, abortion is operating as something different than just an issue on their agenda. And I really think it is a kind of proxy for the question, does this candidate and does this party accept me and my world view? I do agree that Obama has done more, in terms of talking about abortion reduction. The fact that it was in his acceptance speech was quite a step for Democrats. But after McCain picked Sarah Palin to be his running mate, the Democrats worried that moderate women already believed that John McCain was

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actually pro-choice, and they might be inclined to think that a woman, despite what she says, is really at heart pro-choice. The week after the Palin pick, the Obama campaign chose to run in a number of swing states, including Wisconsin, ads that were just pure Pro-Choice messages: "These are extremists, and we have to support *Roe* at all costs."

I have heard from so many religious leaders who feel that they were thrown under the bus. They have spent three or four years making inroads with their communities, talking to them about their

concerns with abortion and why they think Obama's approach is the right one. Whatever he says in response to the question that will come up in the third debate, will tell you whether the orientation of Democrats has really changed, or if it is where it has traditionally been.

OWENS: So does this signal any sort of movement away from single issue voting as such, among religious voters? Not just about abortion, but it seems to me that there are some people, among Catholics at least, who find social justice in its forms to be the single issue vote that they'd take, and that other things are corollary to that. I mean, is there any move to have other things—poverty relief, or on a conservative side other sorts of non-abortion single issue voting, that's on the rise?

SULLIVAN: Well, the one thing about this election is that it's going to be very hard to project forward from what happens this year, because the economy is so key—particularly for the Catholic voters. The economic plan has the advantage there. The Democrats have one, when it comes to the economy. It is what's swinging the Catholic vote their way.

That said, there's no question that in the last four years, lay Catholics in particular have been very aggressive about pushing back against the idea that abortion is what defines them, and that abortion is the only issue that a good Catholic looks to when it's election time. We've seen a number of groups including Catholics in Alliance, Catholics United, Catholic Democrats—these groups simply didn't exist before. So even if individual Catholics were saying, what about social teaching with a preferential option for the poor, there weren't organizations running ads and backing them up on that. And that's what's changed.

WINTERS: Yes, and I think your question ties into what Amy said earlier, which is, abortion was a kind of talisman for a kind of cultural demographic that

made it uniquely suited to be that one issue. I think gay marriage may run at it, but fall short because of its generational gap on gay marriage, which is really much starker than you see on abortion. And I think the Iraq War, for a while, played in Democratic party politics that role. There were people who early in the debate—in the primary said—they might vote for somebody who had supported the war in 2002, but it mattered hugely to them how they backed off of it. And Clinton's unwillingness to say it was a mistake outright, I think really cost her with certain parts of the left.

Obviously, the single issue that's maturing now—if we had met a month ago, I would have been worried with certain Catholic ethnics that it would be race. And I think that's one of the nasty, pernicious ways abortion has played a role in this election, is as a cover. And if you remember, that *New York Times* article on Catholics in Scranton, the guy says, well, I voted for Kerry and I voted for Hillary Clinton, but I can't vote for Barack Obama because of the life issue. Well, that's not the difference between Barack Obama and John Kerry. Their stand is alike. There you have to understand it was race. But I think in this economic crisis, the winner is Franklin Roosevelt. And that's our brand and not theirs. And so, the color of his skin matters much, much less.

SULLIVAN: I keep hearing about what I've been calling "Racists for Obama." These are people who still hold racist attitudes, who say, "Are you kidding? I'm voting for him. My brother is voting for Obama. How could we not vote for Obama? He could be polka-dotted, but I don't want to lose my house. I don't want to lose my job."

OWENS: Well, speaking of the economy, I'd like to hear your reflections on how religious voices have entered into this debate, or have failed to enter into this debate—including the simple finger pointing that's going on about corruption



and greed. Who's spoken about structural self-criticism about capitalism, about thrift economy, the sorts of values that used to be fashionable and can't be uttered now? How do you see the conversation that's happening about the economy in religious circles?

SULLIVAN: A couple of observations. One is that mainline Protestants are feeling a bit vindicated with their old Protestant ethic. There is going to be a tough discussion in some corners of the Evangelical community about the role of the prosperity gospel, the idea that God will provide and you don't necessarily need to be husbanding your own resources. Stewardship, I believe, is going to be a key term that comes up in religious communities, and becomes more of a value than maybe it has been in the last few decades.

And I would say, just among the progressive religious leaders—they are becoming a bit savvier, in terms of how to talk about all this. A few years ago, you would have heard them kind of spouting off about how we should all care about justice and economic equality. And now they're learning to tie it specifically to things like the budget as a moral document. That was the campaign that Jim Wallis

led with some other progressive religious leaders. That actually takes their values and applies it to something you can see in front of your face. They're doing the same thing with the financial collapse, which I think is very, very smart, instead of talking in these abstract terms about how we need to care about economic justice. Being able to point exactly to cause and effect gives them a perfect opportunity for public sermonizing.

WINTERS: And I think we're still waiting for Barack to find his voice on this a little bit. The biggest difference I noticed between now and the Depression is the inability and just the lack of history of criticizing capitalism. The '20s and '30s were fiercely ideological times. There were competitors; you had Communism, you had Fascism, you had different ways of organizing society. And the way we've taken for granted, well, this is how it's done. You don't have that facility with ideology.

I don't want to overstate the point, because I think Americans fundamentally are not driven ideologically into politics. They're very pragmatic, and a lot of FDR's success was this sense of we're going to try everything, and just a sense of energy. But he did, in his New Deal

acceptance speech in 1932 at the convention say, work and security are not just economic facts—they are spiritual values. And I'm waiting for Barack to find that voice that meets the crisis. A voice that says, on these things that we are striving for, government and the market can certainly help provide, but there's something deeper than that. If he finds that voice, I think he will then be able to seize the opportunity that FDR seized, which is a crisis is always a political opportunity to refashion the political map for a generation.

And curiously, for me, over Labor Day weekend, I was in California, hanging out with a group of young Evangelicals, which is not something that often happens these days. And I asked one of them about Joel Osteen and the gospel of prosperity. And I kid you not, the 29-year old, 30-year old pastor looks at me and said, "Well, you know, I don't really like that Antichrist talk, but if there is one..." And I thought, wait a minute, I mean, you're a fellow Evangelical. And he said, "I want to jump into my TV screen when he's speaking. It's such a horrible distortion of the Gospel." And this was a young man who also, when Governor Palin gave her acceptance speech in St. Paul, sent me an e-mail saying, "I was in AmeriCorps, and she just demeaned community organizing. Who do you think we work with?"

So, they were horrified. So I think you are seeing, whereas this data that we saw yesterday from that poll from *Religion and Public Life* showed young Evangelicals are following their parents still in overwhelming support for Republicans, whereas young Catholics really are breaking off in larger numbers. I do think there are cleavages there that will grow over time. That is a healthy thing within a religion. How different religions will deal with that will be interesting to see. I would love to see a poll that breaks down on the Catholic front, on Catholic attitudes in Denver, in St. Louis, in Scranton, where you've had these bishops who

have these very in-your-face attitudes, and as far as I can tell, all those states were blue the last time I checked the polls. I mean, this could end up being a huge repudiation of those elements of the hierarchy. And then you have to wonder what will be going through Pope Benedict's mind. He's got to deal with whoever is the next President of the United States. And here is the Pope, who when he was here in April, gave Communion to Nancy Pelosi, gave Communion to John Kerry. I mean, this was not his baby. And there's an *Ad Limina* next year. All of the American bishops go to Rome next year. It will

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- Amy Sullivan

be very interesting to see how they sit down. Cardinal Levada, for the first time, the head of the Holy Office of the Inquisition will be casting an absentee ballot in California for President? That's a first for the Catholic Church in the United States. So what is he going to say to these guys, given his statements he made back four years ago, when he was still the Arch-

bishop of San Francisco, which were very middle of the road, very sane statements.

OWENS: Let me take a second to ask you about your book a bit, Amy, and then we'll kind of wrap up with a final question. Your book is called [*The Party Faithful: How and Why Democrats are Closing the God Gap*](#). So tell me what the God Gap is. And do you attribute this God Gap to demographics or Democrats. Also, where do we stand today on this God Gap question?

SULLIVAN: There are two meanings of "the God Gap." One is a cute little phrase that pundits and social scientists like to use to describe what they observed in the 2004 exit results: those Americans who attend worship services most often were most likely to vote for George W. Bush. And those who attended least often or not at all were most likely to vote for John Kerry. This does accurately describe the extremes of worship attendance. But if you look at the middle, which is where the largest number of Americans are—people who go to worship services but not every week—Kerry and Bush actually split that group 50/50. And right now, Obama actually has 60% of those voters to 40% for McCain.

So, I think the God Gap was always more of a slippery measure than an accurate description of what people took it to be, which is that Republicans were the party of religion, and Democrats were the party that was hostile to religion. The way I use it is to describe a general orientation of both of the parties. Republicans have spent much of the last 30 years forming a very close alliance with religious conservatives, while Democrats at the same time, often in response to what was going on in the God Gap, were dissolving their relationships.

I talk specifically about white Catholics and white Evangelicals, just because those are the two largest groups. Together, they make up almost half of the American electorate. And I think the consequence of Democrats cutting



of their relationships with those two voting communities, ceasing to talk to them, and thinking about those groups as one issue voters who are driven by social issues, can be seen in the election results over the last 30 years. We've had two Democrats win the presidency, both Southerners who are very comfortable talking about faith.

OWENS: So where do we stand today?

WINTERS: I We'll find out on November 5. I don't mean that to be flip. I think it is a very open question. We've seen what appeared to be progress, if you're a Democrat who thinks it's a good thing to reestablish relationships with religious communities. We've seen candidates much more open, talking about their faith. And when you have a country where 70% of people say they think their President should be a person of faith, it is a plus if a candidate can talk about religion comfortably.

It is unclear whether those were permanent changes or temporary. Just in the last month, with the Evangelical enthusiasm that followed the selection of Governor Palin, we've had reason to question whether this was all a permanent step in another direction. So I think we'll be closely analyzing what happens

on November 4, and kind of getting a sense of whether Democrats have turned it around, or whether there's still quite a ways to go.

OWENS: So one last question for both of you. As prominent voices in the media yourselves, how has the media done in the whole range of questions about religion and politics in this election cycle? In terms of introducing Americans to somewhat unfamiliar religious traditions or our candidates, explaining nuance, explaining the demographic shifts and party alliance shifts that you've written about so well in your books. What kind of grade would you offer to the media?

WINTERS: I'd give them a C+. I mean, I'm always astounded by some of the questions I get or that I hear, and just the kind of rudimentary analysis. On the other hand, Amy had this three-page piece with bells and whistles and graphs and all that about religious voters. So they're better, but it is still shocking to me to see the superficial level of understanding going. My experience is that most journalists still really think of religion as the Easter Bunny with real estate. I mean, they just don't think it's real, and they don't understand how people are motivated by this. It certainly doesn't occur

to them that it represents a coherent role for you.

SULLIVAN: I am not going to assign grades to my colleagues! I will say there have been some highs and lows. It's somewhat tricky. When you have the first major Mormon candidate running this time for the Republican side, it was handled well for the most part, in terms of explaining Mormonism and explaining the connection between theology and political conservatism. It got better as it went along, and it helps somewhat that Mitt Romney became more open and realized that it was not something that he could afford to be quiet about.

With Sarah Palin and Pentecostalism, we're seeing somewhat of the same thing. I wrote a primer just today on What is Pentecostalism? We haven't seen enough of that. Just very basic answers, here, in part because the McCain campaign is looking to obscure to what extent she still considers herself Pentecostal and holds those beliefs.

I would say, the biggest problem for me, and perhaps it's just because I've covered Democrats and religion, has been when it comes to the left. Journalists love trends and new stories, and I think they have significantly overstated the extent to which the left has gotten religion or Democrats have gotten religion. We went into the Saddleback Forum in August with the expectation that it was a level playing field, but you had the Democratic nominee showing up in an Evangelical mega-church, to take questions for an hour from a Southern Baptist pastor, in front of 5,000 Evangelicals who had paid \$1,000 to \$2,000 a seat to be there. That is not Barack Obama's audience. And yet, it was portrayed as, if he doesn't hold his own, that's a huge defeat for him. The win for him should have been just showing up, sitting down in the chair. So I think that was a mistake.

And the other big one—it made me embarrassed to be a journalist—was the Compassion Forum that took place on

CNN in April between Hillary Clinton and Barack Obama. They both took questions from two journalists, as well as a panel of religious leaders. The religious leaders actually asked some pretty good, pertinent questions, things you might actually want to know from a candidate for the presidency. The journalists were the ones asking, have you ever felt the Holy Spirit? Or what's your favorite Bible story? That was a travesty, and I would hope they were ashamed enough to understand that there are boundaries—not only of what's appropriate, but what do voters need to know? What's relevant to this question we're all facing, of who to elect to the White House?

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