**“How Should We Talk? Religion & Public Discourse”**

Prouts Neck, Maine

**Speaker:**

Dr. Jean Bethke Elshtain, Laura Spelman Rockefeller Professor of Social & Political Ethics, Divinity School at the University of Chicago

**Respondent:**

William McGurn, Chief Editorial Writer, *The Wall Street Journal*

**MICHAEL CROMARTIE:**Jean Elshtain is the Laura Spelman Rockefeller Professor of Ethics at the University of Chicago Divinity School. She has written many books, the most recent of which is *Who Are We? Critical Reflections and Hopeful Possibilities.*Earlier titles include *Political Mothers*, *Augustine and the Limits of Politics*, and *Democracy on Trial*. She previously taught at Vanderbilt, where she was the first woman to hold an endowed professorship.

**DR. JEAN BETHKE ELSHTAIN:**Americans are rightly associated not only with rights talk but also with God talk. American culture and politics are indecipherable if you sever them from the panoply of religious conviction. It’s also the case that much of our political ferment, both historically and currently, flows from religious commitments. Sometimes this happens directly. At other times it happens through a kind of translation process whereby people turn convictions deriving from religion into civic commitments that appeal to others who don’t necessarily share their religious beliefs. The vast majority of Americans continue to profess belief in God — though it’s not always clear exactly what that means — and an extraordinary number claim membership in a church or a synagogue or a mosque, though the number who attend regularly is much smaller. Without this feature we just wouldn’t have American political and civic life as we now know it.

Tocqueville’s great book *Democracy in America* helped to capture the tone and texture and temperament of a fledgling republic over a century and a half ago. One of the things that most intrigued him was that in America one found both separation of church and state and a rich intermix of religion and politics. When Tocqueville wrote his observations on the Jacksonian era, he proclaimed that religiously formed and shaped convictions brought a tremendous energy to the American democratic enterprise. He realized that the associational enthusiasm he saw around him derived substantially, if not largely, from these religious convictions.

What Tocqueville was observing in operation is what we now call civil society. Discussions about civil society have been out there for a decade now, inaugurated, some claim, by Robert Putnam’s famous “Bowling Alone” essay, now a *Bowling Alone* book in which Putnam lays out more of the data behind his conviction that there has been a turn in America away from associational activities — clubs and political parties and bowling leagues and the like — toward private, individual pursuits. When we talk about civil society we’re talking about the many institutions that human beings create to sustain work and family life, to promote domestic peace and security, to propagate their faith, and to attain various other ends and purposes. For Tocqueville, this associational enthusiasm was the heart of the American democracy.

What he was observing — although he didn’t put it in quite these terms — was the connection between confessional pluralism and social pluralism.

Confessional particularities usher in the social and civic manifestations of these faith commitments. Confessional pluralism is what we usually call freedom of conscience, freedom of religious belief; social pluralism refers to the maintenance and accommodation of a plurality of associations, many of them in order to foster religion or to make religious belief manifest in institutional forms. Tocqueville was most interested in what he called the “habits of the heart.” These determine what drives people, what makes up their individual and collective identities. And for him this social pluralism, derived mainly from confessional pluralism, was essential.

Tocqueville was a Catholic whose family had narrowly escaped complete devastation during the Terror, so he understood what happens culturally when a people’s religion is violently wrenched from them. It is not a pretty picture, he says. Why? Because this wrenching out of a religious tradition enervates and depletes a culture. It destroys the intermediary associations that help to give people social power when they’re confronted with the power of the state. When those are wrenched away, people don’t become more robust democratic actors; instead they become more available for mobilization by the nation-state apparatus, which is certainly what had happened by the time of Napoleon.

Tocqueville also observed that in the United States the Constitution didn’t require that people relinquish the communal dimensions of their faith, the external signs of their faith commitments, as the Napoleonic Constitution had, for example, demanded of French Jews. In order to be full citizens, the French Jews were told, they needed to forsake a lot of what made them distinctive — their characteristic dress, their dietary regulations, Hebrew schools, all the public markers of their confessional difference. Americans are free to make their faith commitment socially explicit.

Tocqueville also said that you couldn’t understand the extraordinary civic currents rushing through the United States without being aware of the Christian insistence that all persons are equal in the eyes of God. Once people take this idea seriously, he said, the logic of it will start to manifest itself politically. It may take a long time to work out, but he was convinced that, for example, slavery couldn’t last. The manifestation of that religious conviction required communal institutions and the communal expression of religious faith.

With regard to one other claim Tocqueville made, it is harder to argue for his complete prescience: he thought that religious conviction would restrain some of the striding individualism and the ambition that an energetic, prosperous, commercial republic would generate. Religious notions of covenant, stressing mutual accountability and the responsibility of persons one to another and before God, would help restrain what he called the “excessive and explicit taste for well-being” that human beings acquire in an age of equality. Religion would help to forestall a slide into a world totally dominated by self-interest. Here he put a lot of faith in Catholicism because of the strong ecclesiology of the Catholic tradition, the strength of its sacramental and liturgical tradition, its language of solidarity. Tocqueville reported on some labor rallies he had attended where a priest got up and addressed working men and women, championing the rights of the poor to organize. This sort of thing would play an ongoing essential role, he thought, and help to check the rushing tides of individualism. He also hoped that over time religious conviction would help to prevent people from falling into what he called indifference, a lack of concern about one another. If taken seriously, the religious obligation to love and serve your neighbor would counteract this indifference and have a salutary civic effect.

A few months back *USA Today* published a report on contemporary America religiosity that said this: “Where once a community of believers shared a common vocabulary, many feel free now to define God by their own lights.” That is a lot of lights. If you define religion that way rather than providing some barriers to the rush of libertarianism and individualism, religion becomes part and parcel of the individualist cultural project. We each have our own little individual light rather than a communal calling, a membership, a form of covenant and solidarity. This notion better comports, obviously, with individualism and also with a kind of indifference, a kind of “Whatever” attitude. A question I would pose is whether we’ll see the loosening or loss of religion in a robust sense in favor of a kind of spiritual individualism that much better comports with the rise of libertarianism in this country, on both the right and the left.

One of the worries of people who argue strongly in favor of pluralism is that too much power is reposed in centers of power, and there is not enough power at the periphery. We can find that argument in all sorts of political thinkers, many of whom were not religious. Defenders and theorists of democracy have argued for a long time that in the absence of strong social institutions, strong formative institutions other than the state, it will be very difficult over time to sustain civic freedom. That freedom requires that people have concrete ways of manifesting their civic identity. It’s not just an abstract thing; it’s the notion that there are things I can do, there are all sorts of mediating possibilities available to me, to enact my civic membership.

Most of us, when we were taught the scope of Western history, were taught that liberal constitutionalism forced a regime of toleration on religion. Faith communities, we learned, were paradigmatic instances of what are now called “sectarian groups” that, if they had their own way, would immediately oppress other people or start killing one another. There is obviously some historical support for the argument that religion represents a potential menace, and that if it’s not held in check it can get out of hand. But if you look at instances of the persecution of believers around the world today, you see that much of the danger now comes from overweening state power that routinely violates religious freedom, rather than from religious believers intolerant of the faith of others. And of course if you were to do something as unseemly as a body count, the non- or anti-religious ideologies of the twentieth century would win hands down.

Why do people always return to the Inquisition and the wars of religion in any discussion of toleration? Part of it, I think, is the degree to which Locke’s famous “Letter on Toleration” has seeped into our understanding of things. It’s worth going back once in a while and rereading that great essay, considered a signal turning toward religious toleration. Of course, Locke argues that atheists and Catholics are *not*to be tolerated, they’re not part of the deal: atheists because you can’t trust them to keep an oath, since they don’t have a higher power to help enforce it, and Catholics because they’re going to be loyal to some power other than the magistrate, so you can’t trust them either. But for everybody else you have toleration.

There’s a price to be paid for this toleration. Locke insists that, as a precondition for civil government, very sharp lines must be drawn not just between church and state but also between religion and politics. Then he extends that logic to say that religion belongs in one sphere, politics/government in another, and you can be a citizen of both realms so long as you don’t ever attempt to blend the two. In the religious realm you can answer God’s call and do what your faith requires (if you’re a Protestant, that is). But when you step out of that domain you enter the civic realm, and then your religious convictions cannot figure directly anymore. Your civic fidelity is pledged to the sovereign, to the magistrate. So religion is seen as a potential danger to the civic realm, and that’s why we need this rigid line between religion and politics. Religion becomes irrelevant in a public sense. It is privatized; it’s reduced to the subjective well-being of each individual practitioner.

The 96th American Assembly held in March 2000 produced an interesting document called *Matters of Faith: Religion in American Public Life*. I will quote four sentences from this document:

We reject the notion that religion is exclusively a private matter relegated to the homes and sacred meeting places of the faithful, primarily for two reasons. First, religious convictions of individuals cannot be severed from their daily lives. People of faith in business, law, medicine, education, and other sectors should not be required to divorce their faith from their professions. Second, many religious communities have a rich tradition of constructive social engagement, and our nation benefits from their work in such varied areas as social justice, civil rights, and ethics.

This suggests, in an understated way, a logic for engagement in the civic realm, or suggests at least that we need to develop some terms of engagement. A view still very dominant in the academy is that your religious convictions need to be translated into a strictly secular civic idiom if you’re going to base any argument on them in public life. You have to make that translation or you’d better stay quiet. Part of this position is an insistence that there is a single vocabulary that is standard, and that arguments have to be made in these terms. There’s a single vocabulary of political discussion, a single understanding of authority. Fortunately, since all this is mostly on the level of political philosophy, there aren’t many people who are going to take it seriously, but it is very dominant in the academy. Certainly it has made its way into jurisprudential thought; I’ve seen law-school articles that extend the logic of it to suggest that religious institutions be pressured to conform to what democracy looks like, and what one-person-one-vote looks like.

Let me mention a couple of religious responses to this and to the whole tradition that I’m associating with John Locke. The first I’m calling “full-bore Christian politics,” which is the belief that the fullness of your religious belief and commitment and witness has to enter the public sphere, and precisely on religion’s terms. When you go public you’re obliged to make the whole thing *present*. That can lend itself to the notion that there’s a Christian position on almost everything. One of my worries about this position is that it can court parody. Is there really a Christian position on term limits? Certainly there is such a position on war questions, on issues of abortion and euthanasia, on the kinds of questions that are at the heart of what theologians call “anthropology,” the understanding of the human person. If issues concerning the common good are at stake, then a person with religious convictions is obliged to bring those convictions to bear in a very energetic way. But on a lot of other issues, contrary to “full-bore Christian politics,” there is not a “Christian” position.

Another strong view in this area is the one associated with Stanley Hauerwas: the view that Christians signed on to a rotten deal when they agreed to the regime of liberal toleration, and so when persons with religious convictions engage politics, they are bound to do so on the world’s terms. Having accepted a lousy deal, now they’re going to have to perpetuate it, to accept civic peace on those terms. The essential worry is not what happens to politics but what happens to Christianity, to the Church. I call this “radical dualism” — the Church is the Church, and what happens to the world is not a central concern.

My own position is rather complicated and difficult to articulate, and is compatible with the tradition of Catholic social thought. Let me just outline some of its guidelines. When you’re thinking about the form that religious convictions should take when they enter civic discourse, you have to ask yourself certain kinds of questions. What are the stakes? Who are the key players? What areas of social existence are touched upon here? Is this a question of the common good or some other kind of question? Your response to questions like these should determine the way in which you engage, and your understanding of what it is you’re doing when you engage.

**MR. CROMARTIE:**Thank you very much, Jean. Bill McGurn is the chief editorial writer for the *Wall Street Journal*. He’s a graduate of Notre Dame, and he spent twelve years in Europe and Asia as a journalist with Dow Jones. Formerly he was also the Washington bureau chief of *National Review*.

**MR. McGURN:** The role of religion in public discourse is a subject that I’m particularly interested in as an editorial writer and as a practicing Christian who does not believe his job is to proselytize in print. Much of this question is considered to be a clash about how we conceive of God. In Jean’s latest book, *Who Are We?*, she makes the point that without a strong anthropology there is no sturdy rationale for drawing and defending limits in regard to human dignity and human rights. That really cuts to the heart of what we’re considering here: in terms of this kind of debate in the public square, it’s not so much how we view God as how we view man.

Having returned to America from abroad, I’m struck by the realization that in the United States, despite our interaction with many different religious groups, we tend to talk in rather abstract terms of “Christians,” or “believers,” or “faith-based communities,” and “non-believers.” In other cultures they don’t use such broad terms. We’re not just Christians — we are Southern Baptists or Methodists or Irish Catholics or Hispanic Catholics. In public discourse the culture you’re addressing really does determine a lot of your choices of language and framework and references.

I was an editorial writer with the *Far Eastern Economic Review,* and I lived in Hong Kong. In the publication that I worked for, we were trying to articulate a set of beliefs and principles about Asia that were not necessarily just a reflection of an American view of the world. This meant that we were really thrown back on first principles. In a debate over human rights you may find that your opponents don’t believe in human rights — they believe the concept is an example of Western romanticism. If you use these terms — human dignity, inherent rights, equality, and so on — that we Americans all agree to here, they have no resonance. They sound like Western bleatings, because though you think you’re appealing to a universal standard, that standard is not accepted here. They’re highly charged words. A lot of people in other countries don’t believe in democracy. The whole notion of human rights, individual rights, the notion that the individual has a right not to be crushed by the community — I wouldn’t say that these things are all disrespected, but they’re certainly not taken for granted. You have to argue for them. You have to go back to first principles. And where there’s so much disagreement on religious expression, you’re left with an anthropological vision of man.

I also have a domestic example of the importance of language. In my state of New Jersey a year or so ago there was a move to have schoolchildren recite fifty-five words of the Declaration of Independence, the part that begins, “We hold these truths to be self evident . . . they are endowed by their Creator with certain unalienable rights . . . to secure these rights governments are instituted. . . .” This ended up being very contentious, and eventually it was defeated. There were three main types of opposition. The feminists opposed it because women didn’t have the vote at the time when men prepared it; women were not equal citizens then. Some African-Americans opposed it because of Jefferson’s affairs with his slaves and because of slavery itself. A third group was concerned about introducing the word “Creator” into the classrooms. So there were three sorts of opposition to this our founding document, which one might think would constitute the lowest common denominator of acceptable language.

The people who opposed the recitation of these words from the Declaration of Independence ended up on the side of Stephen Douglas, who viewed the Constitution and Declaration in the same way. In his first debate with Lincoln, Douglas said, “I believe this government was made on a white basis. I believe it was made by white men for the benefit of white men and for their posterity forever, and I am in favor of offering citizenship to only white men forever.” So the irony is that a lot of these groups came down on the side of Stephen Douglas as opposed to Abraham Lincoln and Martin Luther King. This is a dangerous place for people to go. If you do not accept any religious authority on which to base the view that there should be equality of races and genders, and then you exclude the constitutional basis also, your position has no basis. It’s a very vulnerable position.

**MR. CROMARTIE:** I’m struck, Jean, that neither you nor Bill mentioned natural law. Did you intend to?

**DR. ELSHTAIN:**There’s a natural-law basis, obviously, for constitutional thinking and for the Declaration. The presupposition that all human beings have access to reason, to certain sorts of standards, the warrant for which we can articulate in language — that’s definitely part of the backdrop here. When people sit down to reason together on some issue, they might not come up with absolute unanimity, but they should be able to arrive at some commonality on how people are to be treated, or at least how they are not to be treated.

The Universal Declaration of Human Rights has two categories or parts. One is the positive things that governments are enjoined to do to make available to people a rich and full life. This part is very controversial, because there are different cultures that say, “Wait a minute, I don’t agree that government can or should do this or that.” Then you’ve got the list of what governments are *not* to do. There’s much more agreement on things in this category, such as unjust imprisonment and torture. So you start to build negatively, but working underneath there is some basic understanding of the human person, and you wind up with a lot of commonality.

**MR. CROMARTIE:**When we were planning this seminar the “George Bush’s favorite philosopher” controversy had just come out. If you were an adviser right now to candidate Bush, what would you say to him about how he *ought* to talk about his faith in the public arena? What public language is available to express faith in a way that that’s both sincere and not offensive?

**DR. ELSHTAIN:** He’s an evangelical Christian, and there’s a language in which evangelical Christians speak about the experience that was decisive for them. If you’re talking specifically about your own faith commitment, there may not be another way to describe that. But if you’re talking about the rationale behind certain kinds of policy initiatives, then I think there *are* other ways of describing it. Don’t you think Bush has done that? In talking about charitable-choice provisions and so on, he’s not saying, “My personal relationship with Jesus Christ tells me that this is a good policy.” He talks about why *civically* this makes a lot of sense, which is the way that Gore talks, too. That strikes me as entirely reasonable. I’m not super-keen on having people make a public confession of faith.

**DR. LEO RIBUFFO, George Washington University:**I think it’s indisputable that when Americans took religion more seriously there was more religious conflict.

**DR. ELSHTAIN:** I think we have become astonishingly conflict-adverse. It’s not as if those conflicts threaten to rip the country apart. There are all kinds of interesting debates that reflect different sorts of commitments. In the past, accommodations got made; the conflicts didn’t lead to total war.

**DAVID VAN BIEMA, *Time*:** You spoke about the importance of having power distributed along the periphery. But these groups on the periphery that help to keep the power in the center from becoming absolute often themselves speak in very absolute language. That’s one of the reasons why I feel uncomfortable with them. As long as they’re on the periphery, it’s okay for them to speak in absolute language; but if I take them seriously, then I have to take seriously the notion that at some point they might be in the center and their power might be applied. I want to speak up for all the secularists and the Rawlsians, and say that this prospect is a bit scary.

**DR. ELSHTAIN:**The Rawlsian position holds that civic argument must be free from the taint of religious conviction — and that position becomes a kind of absolute. The absolutists I run into are the Rawlsians. I just don’t think it’s possible for people to sever religious commitments from civic positions in this way. And I don’t think such a requirement should be the price of civic admission.

That said, let me respond to the concerns you expressed. If someone says that his or her position is scripturally enjoined and that therefore there’s no counterargument, while that person may *claim*unassailability, it’s just not going to hold. Somebody else — not necessarily our Rawlsian protagonist but somebody with strong religious convictions who can also do the scriptural proof-texting — is going to say, “I don’t interpret that passage that way at all.” So you’re not creating a completely unassailable position. Argument over interpretation of Scripture is going to continue no matter how many people might want to fix and freeze it. How that translates into civic and political commitments is an enormous issue. And effecting that translation means you inevitably are going to enter the world of political jousting and debate and that dirty word “compromise.”

As soon as the periphery seeks to engage, it’s transformed. It can’t remain isolated and impermeable. My worry is the argument from those who say that independent sites of social power ought not to exist unless people reason a certain way, think a certain way, argue a certain way, because otherwise they are civically irrelevant or even dangerous.

**MR. McGURN:** Some people think that these controversies that divide our society should be settled through the judicial process. But I’m not sure that the solution is to have such questions adjudicated by the least representative part of the government so that the answers rest on a legal case — all or nothing. That seems very absolutist. I think legislators would love to have the courts settle these issues. When the Supreme Court issued *Roe*v. *Wade* they probably thought they had settled the matter. The question is not what people say, what they demand, but what people will settle for. And I don’t mean that in bad way. My ideal version of America and what I’m prepared to settle for, and even be content with, are two different things.

**STEPHEN CARTER, Yale Law School:**A lot of Rawlsians would say, “We need to teach people that to participate in public life, what’s most important is not so much the values you hold but the way you engage with other people. Can’t we come up with a way to avoid impasse, to avoid passion, to avoid people’s sense of being frightened or oppressed by the words of others? Can’t we design a public square in which we will be able to have conversations that have commonalities, where we’re all speaking in effect the same language?” The models fail, but why is the project not admirable? Why is it not admirable to say, “We do have a lot of passions — religion, ethnicity, and so on — and we’re going to tame all of that by coming up with a common language for the public square, so that we don’t always have this warring of interests, with everything up for grabs every couple of years”?

**DR. ELSHTAIN**: Because it would shut down Martin Luther King and anyone else who’s talking specifically in a language of advocacy that could not be what it is without the commitments drawn from religious faith. The problem is not the advocacy of reason; it is, instead, a far too narrow definition of what constitutes reason. There’s a very, very narrow view of what counts as deliberation. There is the presupposition that people with strong religious convictions cannot be considered people of reason because they haven’t deliberated about this — as if their convictions are an unthought thing, so that whatever they say has the epistemological status of a grunt.

This is a narrow view of reason and of deliberation, and one frightened of conflict. What is politics about if not the way in which we adjudicate these conflicts? The view that we should have politics with as few conflicts as possible doesn’t make sense to me. The notion that you have to strip people of the markers of their identities, so that they’re sexless, nameless, religionless, and then they can make the best decisions about the principles of justice and how to govern a society — that just seems wrong. You have to start where people are, with their passions, their interests, their convictions, and then politics is a way that those get molded, get civically filtered. We have ways of doing that. Half the time I don’t understand what the problem is here, because there are ways in which we do that.

**JOHN LEO, *U.S. News & World Report*:** I’m interested in the way this stuff gets into the popular medium. I only became aware in the last year of how widespread among ordinary people this hostility to religion is. I have a folder bulging with clips of common, ordinary people reflecting the attitude that there’s something illicit about religion, and this is new. It has been around forever as an intellectual idea, but now it’s in the culture. It has become respectable and ordinary for people to say that religion has to shut up. Am I just belatedly coming to recognize this or is it indeed a new thing?

**DR. ELSHTAIN:**Let me reply first from within the academy. What happens there, what kinds of student groups are considered acceptable and can make their presence felt as RSOs, Registered Student Organizations, varies widely from campus to campus. The kind of thing you’re talking about in the Tufts case or the Grinnell case, where student Christian groups were denied access or were kicked off campus because they didn’t have the politically correct position on some issue or another — I think that’s a minority phenomenon. More common is what so many campus spiritual advisers have commented on: they’re seeing in many of the students a renewed interest in religion, a concern that they’re ignorant of their own traditions and want to find out about them. The students are leading the way on this, which makes some of the university powers-that-be very uncomfortable.

There’s a notion in some quarters that religious convictions are incompatible with the pedagogical mission, that somehow religious belief just doesn’t comport with learning how to be a critical thinker, whereas other forms of advocacy or of identity claims are thought to be entirely compatible with the pedagogical mission. Where all that comes from I’m not entirely sure. I think that certain strands in popular culture, in portraying religious people as dummies, have had an effect. But I also think there’s a lot of interesting stuff in the popular culture that doesn’t deserve to be blasted and is engaging people of religious convictions. Some movies where you wouldn’t expect it speak to suppressed theological and religious concerns. It’s as if these ideas are yearning to breathe free and can’t quite do it, but they’re there and they’re worth teasing out.

**VINCENT CARROLL, *Denver Rocky Mountain News*:** I get hundreds of letters to the editor every week, and I can tell you that arguments *not* generated by faith-based beliefs are no less passionate and indeed may be *more* passionate than faith-based arguments. The most hostile sort of reaction to anything that I’ve written over the years has come from gay militants. Not reasoned discussion but denunciation. In Colorado right now, ever since Columbine, the issue that is most passionately argued, *viscerally* argued if you will, is gun rights.

So I absolutely reject the idea that religious-based advocacy is any more passionate or less subject to reason than non-religious-based advocacy. There is something attractive about idling discussions down and being able to engage at some level, no matter how far apart the two parties are, rather than just shouting at each other. Nevertheless, in the purely secular arena a lot of discussion is simply shouting, and no different from the most extreme religious sectarian shouting that has occurred throughout history.

**DR. ELSHTAIN:**That has certainly been my experience, too, of just how ardently views are held and how passionately they are expressed. That radical separatist feminist position I mentioned earlier was often couched in the most extreme language, and it was almost impossible to have a reason-based discussion about it within the framework of feminism — not as an anti-feminist but *within* that framework.

**KENNETH WOODWARD, *Newsweek*:** Is there a cultural failure to all of this that wasn’t there before? Look, I think there is a moral equivalent of war, namely, reasoned argument over issues of fundamental importance to society and to all of us as human beings. But from where I sit it seems that the only kind of religion that creates a problem for secularists is a religion that makes judgments, insists on distinctions that secularists preclude or ignore, and is seen as threatening to society by the sheer weight of numbers.

What passes for “real religion” for many Americans who are otherwise disconnected from any religious formation or tradition is what goes by the name of “spirituality.” It’s only the religious people who make judgments, and who look as if they might be able to make those judgments prevail over others, who are feared and fought against. Religion these days is very acceptable, even in political campaigns and at dinner parties, as long as it speaks the language of personal discovery, recovery, or spiritual quest.

**DR. ELSHTAIN:**The heart of politics is making judgments, distinguishing what should be done from what shouldn’t be done. Now we get this dominant view, in the name of spirituality, that *judging* is anathema. If making relevant distinctions and assessments is considered by definition something that only intolerant people do, then politically we’ll just get dumber and dumber. Learning how to make reasoned judgments is at the heart of the civic community.

**JAY TOLSON, *U.S. News & World Report*:** I think that some of the really rending issues like abortion or homosexuality have not been scrutinized very deeply within certain faith traditions. It’s as though theologically these issues are absolutely decided. I find myself wondering, am I at fault within my own faith that I haven’t come to a decision? For instance, I don’t find overwhelming scriptural evidence to prove certain positions on homosexuality. I think one of the fears about the entry of a powerful evangelical point of view into public discourse is that it will silence reasonable discussion, that there is a kind of absence of serious engagement of faith with reason. We’re facing the prospect of kids who are not allowed to study even the possibility of Darwinism. If we have a public that more and more finds evolution an inadmissible subject of discussion, that’s a little frightening.

**DR. ELSHTAIN:** There are precious few places where such discussions can go forward as it is, and it might be that the upshot of some of the evangelical Christian claims in this area, their argument that Darwin shouldn’t be taken as scripture, will be to force a discussion to occur rather than close one down. Certainly it has forced a discussion from some of the defenders of evolutionary theory like Stephen Gould, who will say, “Wait a minute. Orthodox Darwinism — there are real problems with that, too! Now, I’m an evolutionist, but I’m not that kind.” So they start to nuance the view from science, which is good.

One of the things we need to be concerned about is the automatic authority that the hype of science confers. There’s a utopian cast to a lot of what is coming to us in the name of science. First of all, the scientists and science writers shouldn’t be making grandiose claims. Second, these are issues that have to be discussed in other arenas, where people are not shot down with the notion that if you don’t have the full scientific apparatus to bring to bear, you’re out of the discussion. So challenging the automatic authority of science is a good thing. Having a public debate about science and its claims is like having a debate about religion and its claims. Both are important debates.

**LYNN NEARY, NPR:** I want to talk about reporting on the Southern Baptists’ decision to proselytize specifically to Jews. I spoke to a Southern Baptist leader who explained the decision like this: “Evangelization is what we’re about. If we don’t bring people to Jesus Christ we feel that we’re doing harm, because the way to salvation is through Jesus Christ.” What happens when that primary goal — that we all should be Christian, and a very specific kind of Christian — hits politics or hits the public forum?

**DR. ELSHTAIN:** I don’t see what could be objectionable per se about people who regard themselves as evangelicals *evangelizing*. People can resist evangelization. They don’t have to agree. The real problem would arise if people with evangelical commitments decided that they were going to evangelize using certain public institutions, that they were going to take over the public school and turn it into an evangelizing institution. That’s completely improbable. And certainly if evangelicals set up Christian schools, no one *has*to go to those. I think that objecting to non-violent, non-coercive evangelization is objecting to free expression.

**MICHEL MARTIN, “Nightline”:** Part of the reason why a lot of these arguments take place in high school is that being okay is really important there. It’s less important to an adult. I think a lot of evangelical Christians say, “I don’t feel okay. We can talk about Kwanzaa in the schools and we can talk about Passover in the schools, so why can’t we talk about the birthday of Jesus in the schools on Christmas? How come I’m not okay?” One of the things I hear Jean saying is that people need to stand up for their own okay-ness and stop expecting other people to withdraw. I do find that the mainstream denominations are not willing to step into the ring; they just want the other people to step out.

**DR. ELSHTAIN:** The decline in membership in the mainline denominations suggests, in fact, that people are looking for something more robust, something more powerful and more demanding of them. I think the mainline folks ought to look to themselves more than they have.

**MS. MARTIN:**Journalism is often about conflict; that’s the easiest way to do stories. Side A versus side B. Maybe part of our task as journalists is to think about how to write a story without reducing it to a side A/side B fight.

**DIANE WINSTON, Pew Charitable Trusts:** That was what I wanted to bring up, too. One of the dilemmas I feel as a journalist is how to tell stories in ways that will be interesting enough to get in the newspaper but will still be true to what’s going on. People*are*religious, and they do feel strongly about their convictions, but they’re very wary of bringing them up in the public arena because they feel such things would lead to conflict, and they don’t want that kind of conflict. Part of what we can do as journalists is to encourage a process of reconceptualization that shows people that you can disagree civilly, and that there’s more to it than “I’m right, you’re wrong.”

**ALISSA RUBIN, *The Los Angeles Times*:**It seems to me is that people don’t know how to argue very well. They don’t know how to argue in a way that’s constructive, where you can concede a point but not concede everything. It always seems that either you’re going to win or you’re going to lose, and those are your only choices. That makes the stakes incredibly high. I’m not sure how you create an environment in which people feel that it’s safe to argue, that they won’t simply be crushed.

**DR. ELSHTAIN:** My late friend Christopher Lasch lamented the loss of a culture of democratic argument. Our options, for a variety of complex reasons, seem to be either to shout somebody down or just to walk away. There is a therapeutic mentality in which a strong argument is thought to undermine people’s fragile standing. “Oh, my feelings are really hurt and I’m going to leave the room right now because my self-esteem is in danger of plummeting to ground zero.” The ability to engage in democratic argument comes from practice. It used to be a more standard part of civic education for people to learn how to do this. Debate wasn’t just for a few students in debate club; it was something that everyone had to learn how to do. There’s no reason in principle why we can’t relearn those lessons. Too often people think that if you attack my position you’re attacking me. That isn’t so. People need to realize that you can stand outside yourself to have an argument.

**MR. DIONNE:**I love the idea of democracy as a way of life. But I think constitutional democracy imposes certain disciplines on people who participate in it. I agree with Jean that you shouldn’t have to translate everything into secular language, but it does seem to me that you can’t base an argument in the public square solely on an appeal to scripture and faith. It has to be rooted in reasons that are accessible to other people. Yes, Martin Luther King’s speeches seemed to use Southern Baptist language, but they were actually public arguments accessible to everyone.

**MR. CARTER:** I think this vision of giving acceptable reasons is a non-starter. I’m sure that evangelical activists who speak from nothing but scripture would say, “This is publicly accessible. Everybody can understand this!” I think anybody should be able to say in public what they think. They may lose, they may fail to persuade anybody, but that has nothing to do with it. I strongly disagree about Martin Luther King. I’ve studied his work for a year now, and I don’t think you can easily make the case that King’s body of work is anything but a deeply religious testament. It’s at least as full of explicitly scriptural arguments as the work of leaders of the Christian Coalition.

The problem doesn’t have a solution. I honestly think it has no solution. I don’t think that a common language is the solution, or that Supreme Court decisions are. We are going to have to live with deep, painful, offensive, troubling, scary conflicts because we are free. Because we’re a free country we’re going to continue to fight about this stuff as we have done all through our history. But we’ll sometimes find ways to soften its impact, and we will find ways to live together because we’ve always done that.

**MR. DIONNE:** I readMartin Luther King’s *Strength to Love* when I was in high school, and I didn’t realize he was a Southern Baptist. I certainly didn’t have to share his faith tradition in order to understand his argument. I’m not arguing that constitutionally you can’t derive your public argument solely from faith, and I’m not saying that your argument can’t be steeped in your religious tradition. What I’m saying is that in a pluralist democracy, your public arguments need to be different from the kind of arguments you might make in deciding your church’s view of gay rights or abortion. You are asking a government that does not recognize your particular religion — or any other — as guiding its view to make a decision.

**DR. ELSHTAIN:** The first King I knew about was *Stride Toward Freedom,* which I read in high school, and I took him to be talking to me as an American citizen. You may know that what he says is coming out of his faith commitment, but he’s talking about the Constitution and all sorts of things in a language that appeals to you as a citizen. I think it’s analogous to the Catholic common-good argument. The question is, really, what kind of people are we?

**MR. CARTER:**In the Western tradition we take the view that a legitimate government has the exclusive right to use force, that is, to use violence to achieve its ends. And although we have deeply worked out philosophies of law, law to the dissenter always looks like force, because law is the police with guns drawn, making you do what you *don’t* want to do and preventing you from doing the things you*do* want to do. I think that people of faith ought to be very reluctant to place their hands on the levers that say, “For this, we as a society may kill.” I tell my students on the first day of law school that every time we have an argument about what the law ought to be we’re arguing about what we as a society would want to kill for, because we send armed police to go and enforce the law. So if you don’t want to have a society that has to do violence in this cause, don’t say it’s a good cause in which the government ought to take sides.

**DR. ELSHTAIN:** Civil-rights laws are coercive, and they have sometimes been enforced at the point of a gun, but it’s not everyday practice for the U.S. government to go out and kill its citizens. Law is coercive, but it’s not violent. It’s a mediated form of coercion. So when you say religious people ought to be very cautious about having that kind of power, that in effect says to me that the judiciary, the police force, the legislature all ought to consist of people who don’t have Christian commitments, because Christians somehow ought to be humble enough not to trust themselves with this power.

Here I would offer as the counter-argument, which I can’t flesh out fully here, Augustine’s fascinating discussion of why he opposed the notion of Christian empire. He says that if you’re lucky you’ll have a Christian emperor who behaves like a Christian, not a Christian empire. But does that mean that Christians should shun positions of judgment? Augustine said no. If your calling is to be a judge, that may well be a kind of tragic vocation in some ways, but it is necessary. It’s important to have people whose consciences are developed and who will therefore handle the reins of power in a way that is more just than unjust.

**ELLIOTT ABRAMS, Ethics & Public Policy Center:** I want to go back to Lynn Neary’s point about fear of evangelicals and what they might be up to. It struck me as a very odd statement. Think for example what a bunch of Southern Baptist evangelicals might do if they controlled the school board. Well, they were in control of*every* school board in the South for a hundred years, and yet they did not kill any Jews, nor did they kill any Catholics, nor did they drive these people of other faiths out of the South or destroy their religious identity.

If I were an evangelical, I’d say something like this: “You’re describing a world in which we evangelicals are trying to change America, whereas in fact America has already been drastically changed by our opponents, and all we’re trying *desperately* to do is to ask them to show a bit of humility and slow down!” Lynn’s statement implied that the evangelicals were to be feared because they were culturally the aggressors, whereas it seems to me, as I look at American culture today, that they are on the defensive.

**DR. ELSHTAIN:**I was giving a talk someplace and was interviewed by the local public radio station. Even though it wasn’t the subject of my talk, the fellow started asking me questions about the dire threat from evangelicals. I said, “It seems to me that what you’re complaining about is that they’re being politically effective. If they’re electing people you don’t like, there’s a democratic solution to that: un-elect them.” The notion that there’s something intolerable about these people *actually getting elected* to school boards and city councils seems to me radically anti-democratic. And the idea that we’re helpless before them — well, go find candidates to unseat them. I don’t understand why somehow this constitutes a dire threat. People come into office and go out of office. They’re re-elected or they’re not re-elected. That’s the deal.

**MS. WEHMEYER:** I think that we in the press have to be careful with our language. When I read that the Christian Coalition “took over” a school board, I wonder, when did the other side take over? When these protesting parents see condoms being distributed and evolution being taught in the schools, they say, “Oh no. They’re offending our deeply held beliefs! We’d better run for the school board.” And then the press says, “Look out! They’re taking over!” It isn’t a takeover any more than it was when the other side took over in the sixties, or whenever it was that they started running the school boards. What we really should do as journalists is to drop that “takeover” language and enlighten our readers and viewers as to what these people really fear, why they’re doing what they’re doing.

**DAVID BOLDT, *The Philadelphia Inquirer*:** I wanted to respond to this consensus that seems to be emerging that the problem is fear of evangelicals, and that anti-Catholicism is a thing of the past. We don’t really seem to see that quite so much in Pennsylvania. The principal issue there that involves religion happens to be school vouchers, and anti-Catholicism is still a very virulent force. It is also one that is difficult to deal with in commentary or in the news, partly because it’s practiced by the people who are doing the writing. We shouldn’t go out as Catholics thinking anti-Catholicism is completely gone.

**DR. ELSHTAIN:**I agree. I think there’s actually a lot of it. My friend Mary Ann Glendon has talked and written about this. It comes up in the academy in the form of attacks on the pro-life people, where a lot of the arguments are just flat out anti-Catholic. The idea seems to be that the pro-life Catholics are, again, anti-reason; they’re doing what their church demands of them and they haven’t thought the position through. It has also been my experience in the academy that even though you can’t tell most kinds of anti-group jokes, anti-Catholic jokes are still okay. I heard them all the time when I was in political science departments.

**MR. BOLDT:** The difference today is that it’s a *secular* anti-Catholicism, not primarily a *religious* anti-Catholicism.

**MR. McGURN:** One of the things that comes to mind in regard to school boards is the difference between a court decision and a process of change. The court produces a law that just sits out there and is imposed everywhere. But *processes* can be reversed, so if you go too far you can step back. We tend to think there’s an endpoint, whether the controversy is abortion or something else, and that eventually we will reach it. Maybe we ended slavery with a civil war, but I don’t think that in most cases there is a real endpoint. It takes a long time for consensus to build, and it’s not always an attractive process. There will be very contentious matters, and a lot of bad feelings; still, it’s the better way.

**DR. ELSHTAIN:**I want to sign on to what Bill just said. It strikes me that a lot of the fear is a fear of democracy itself, the fact that it is about messy conflict and people working things out over time in a way that stops short of the use of power, something that we’re all too familiar with in the history of political life. When too much is adjudicated by fiat and people feel they haven’t had a say in what happens, for a period of time there is a kind of sullen withdrawal. Then when people do decide they’ve had enough, often the way that gets articulated — out of a sense of deep grievance — is far more scary than what would have happened if there had been more space created for people to messily butt heads over a period of time. That’s where this winds up, with a robust and rowdy democracy.