
To the Editor

THE RENEWAL OF CIVIL SOCIETY IN AMERICA requires religion to play an essential role. This is Professor Jean Bethke Elshtain's point ("The Faith of Our Fathers and Mothers: Religion and the American Democracy," part of A Salute to Al Quie on His Eightieth Birthday, Fall 2003), and I could not agree with her more. Without respect for the dignity of the other, without humility in our beliefs, and without a sense that the good of the individual is ultimately connected to the good of all, I see little hope for the restoration of civil society. There are too many corrosive acids at work in American society eating away at civility for a purely secular solution.

I agree with her that most Americans are sadly unaware of the role Protestant Christianity and later Roman Catholic Christianity and Judaism have played in helping create and sustain our plural, civically engaged society. That could be corrected if people would allow religion's role in American society, good and bad, to be part of the American history that America's schools teach our children. Our children need to hear the story of how Americans have struggled to align their practices with their principles. It is not a failed experiment, but it is an experiment that has had to resolve contradictions and to overcome challenges. The story should embolden the young to take heart from the experiment and to go out and help America overcome the problems it faces today.

Today as America faces the challenge of the erosion of civil society, I worry with Professor Elshtain about the failure to teach our children a true and hopeful American history, and I worry about the negative influences of religion that exacerbate the divisions in our society and that

amplify an atomistic individualism. But I also worry about the corrosive influences of popular culture, television, and capitalism itself. American popular culture feeds the myth of the independent individual. It infects liberals and conservatives alike. It gives people the illusion they do not need community. But in community we gain our freedom, our prosperity, and our pleasure. And community requires the disciplines of sacrifice, restraint, and a healthy tolerance. Religion fights an uphill battle against popular culture to nurture these disciplines.

Television is also having a negative impact on civic life. Civil discussion is not entertaining enough. Television talk show hosts, liberal and conservative, prefer their guests lobbing verbal mortars than coming to deeper understanding. Shallow, abrasive, diatribe replaces thoughtful discussion. It is more entertaining, but it erodes civil society.

For all its proven benefits, capitalism still has its contradictions, as the sociologist Daniel Bell began pointing out in the 1960s. These erode the very values capitalism needs to sustain it. Fox Television, for example, asserts a strongly conservative perspective on its news shows, but its entertainment shows are among the most degenerate on television. It serves up the very thing it rails against.

Religion must reassert its civilizing role in American society. It needs to encourage its believers to practice in public the values it preaches within the communities of faith. Professor Elshtain reminds us of the role the "faith of our fathers and mothers" had in enhancing American democracy in the first half of the nineteenth century. We need to see today a similar contribution by the faithful to rebuilding civil society in America. Governor Al Quie has shown us what such a contribution looks like.

Grant H. Abbott,
Executive Director
St. Paul Area Council of Churches

AS A LONGTIME ADMIRER OF PROFESSOR Elshtain's work, I found particularly helpful her lucid analysis of the interplay between faith and polity.

Along with Professor Elshtain (and most Americans), I believe our unique history of religious liberty, "free exercise coupled with disestablishment," has rightly set the standard for democracies everywhere. The late Jesuit theologian, John Courtney Murray, chief architect of the Roman Catholic Church's Decree on Religious Liberty promulgated in the 1960s by the Second Vatican Council—the document in which the Roman Communion went on record for the first time endorsing the concept of disestablishment—once observed that the church throughout its long history has known both persecution and privilege, and that it would be hard to say which has harmed it more.

I share Elshtain's concern that increasing numbers of Americans feel they need not participate in organized religion to develop the spiritual dimension of their lives. Aside from the fact that making meaning out of life's varied experiences can simply become too daunting to be undertaken alone, to abandon one's faith community is to run the risk of losing a potent source of personal inspiration and motivation for civil engagement—"public virtue" as it is sometimes called. The ensuing materialism that Elshtain fears would rush in to fill the vacuum might very well result in Americans defining themselves less and less as citizens and more and more as consumers. Even for those who might wish to remain engaged in the public debate, shorn of membership in a faith community could they realistically expect to make the same lasting spiritual contribution to society they would have otherwise achieved? To invoke Elshtain's brilliant metaphor: "True illumination is provided by people who hold

their lights aloft in the darkness as a community of belief."

Yet this raises another issue. Organized religion's attempts to influence the public debate are often met with cries that the church should "stay out of politics." Were this view to prevail, American civil society would be the poorer for it. The United States Constitution does not prohibit a socio-critical role for churches. Though the Constitution does call for the separation of church and state, it does not require the separation of church and society. Further, the state constitutes only a small part of society. There is, therefore, a long and distinguished tradition in the United States of Americans—not only as individuals, but also acting in concert through their organized faith communities—playing a significant role in shaping and humanizing civil society.

Just how do churches appropriately enter the political arena? They do so precisely as those voluntary associations Alexis de Tocqueville praised as crucial to the success of American democracy. "Voluntary association" is not a very good theological or canonical designation for church, but it's an excellent political definition.

Elshtain's thesis deserves a wide hearing.

**Dennis Dease, President
University of St. Thomas**

AT A TIME WHEN IT IS MORE FASHIONABLE TO openly scoff or ridicule one's religious beliefs or heritage, Professor Elshtain and Al Quié remind us that this nation was founded and built by the perseverance of many individuals whose efforts cannot be separated from their deep religious convictions. The terrain where the politics of this country's founders intersected with their religious convictions formed the basis for a civil society. This is as true today as it was historically. The authors encourage us to be positive forces in our society by letting our personal

convictions show while being respectful of the beliefs of others.

Thomas G. Kamp
Bloomington, Minn.

PROFESSOR ELSHTAIN'S COMMENTS IN honor of Governor Al Quie provide an excellent framework to analyze the role of religion in public life that has been a centrality of American life since the founding of the republic.

Certainly, those of us in public life cannot divorce ourselves from our religious upbringing. My perspectives on social justice issues, the death penalty, and human rights issues come not only from a political background but also a religious background as a Jewish-American. Additionally, as a legislator I welcome the public efforts of the faith-based community through such organizations as the Catholic Conference, the Joint Religious Legislative Coalition, or the Jewish Community Relations Council.

And, at a much higher level it is clear that no history of Dr. Martin Luther King—one of the most significant public figures of the twentieth century—is complete without an understanding of the importance of his faith and its impact on all of his work.

It gets more difficult when it comes to understanding the original intent of the First Amendment's separation of church and state. A strength of our country has been the protection of religious diversity; what is more difficult is the definition of "establishment."

James Madison, principal author of the Constitution, provides instructive commentary. In the last year of his life he stressed the need for an absolutely insurmountable barrier between government and religion in writing, "Anything less would leave crevices at least, through which bigotry may introduce persecution; a monster, that feeding and

thriving on its own venom, gradually swells to a size and strength overwhelming all laws divine and human."

Madison, in fact, noted his regret at issuing proclamations of thanksgiving when he was president (and cited approvingly the example of his friend, Thomas Jefferson, who did not), disapproved of Congressional chaplains, and opposed tax exemptions for church property.

And in modern America? I found the placement of the Ten Commandments by former Alabama Chief Justice Roy Moore totally violative of the First Amendment, I oppose the placement of a nativity scene on publicly owned property, and I oppose private school vouchers. Yet, I have no objection to legislative chaplains (unlike Madison), a national or state Christmas tree, the singing of Christmas carols in schools, or providing social services to religiously based nursing homes.

Possibly, we will see a clearer judicial definition of what "establishment of religion" means, but until such time I would suggest that for the contemporary elected official that definition is the most serious challenge in understanding the appropriate role of religion in public life.

Richard Cohen
Minnesota State Senator, St. Paul

READING PROFESSOR ELSHTAIN'S SPEECH reminded me of the story of David going out to fight Goliath. Saul loaned the youngster his battle gear but David found it too cumbersome. Instead, he went to meet the giant with only a sling and stones. Like the king's armor, Elshtain's insulation of the American story is esthetic and seductively resilient. I just can't wear it.

Speaking of David, he stole another man's wife, killed her husband, and then made her son his successor. Another son raped his sister, attempted a coup and slept

with his father's women. The history of Israel itself would eventually go on a downward spiral that eventually led to exile.

I secretly read these stories as a child and worried that my preacher-father would be shamed by my prurient discoveries. So why am I here, forty years later, still enthusiastically Christian and admiring the resilient descendants of that unguarded biblical history as they strive today to secure that Middle Eastern home they reclaimed fifty years ago. All this demonstrates one fact: truth, not sanguinity, is the most inspiring guarantor of personal and national resiliency.

Biblical honesty has taught me how to face the truths about America's history and still be a motivated citizen. I need not hide from the truth of the genocide of the original Americans or the perfidious string of broken treaties that mark the trail to their present tragedy.

Neither do I shy away from the hideous enslavement of my African ancestors by my European forebears. I can face the thought of unimaginable sexual violence visited upon forgotten millions of unprotected female slaves in isolated farms and desecrated shacks. I can face the nightmare of thousands of lynched black men, who dared attempt to defend their dignity.

America, as Dr. Martin Luther King said, has often failed to live out the "true meaning of its creed." But I love that America because it is my home and because its creed holds a promise of greatness beyond anything concocted in the political mind of man. And I love America because it inches continuously closer to that dream.

Don Samuels
Member
Minneapolis City Council

THE STANDARD LINE ABOUT RELIGION AND society is that the former is bad for the latter. To prove it, many members of our aca-

democratic establishment and the prestige press regularly trot out the old, old stories of Geneva's Servetus, Galileo's heliocentric science, millions of murdered witches, and, of course, the Thirty Years' Religious Wars (largely sixteenth and seventeenth century history lessons about some of Christianity's failures). The lesson, o poor, benighted citizen? Let the religious into the public square, and there's no limit to the theocratic terrors they will unleash in our freedom-loving democracy. The wise course for our nation? Secure individual rights to define life as we each want it, and let us trot along as individual masters of our collective destiny to the liberal paradise.

We have Jean Bethke Elshtain to bring us back to reality, reminding us that our society's elite have a simplistic view about religion's impact on society. Virtually unrivaled in her ability to mine the classic mother lodes of political and social theory, Dr. Elshtain calls on the great French social philosopher Tocqueville to tell us that, at least in our nation's founding era, religion (largely embodied in the Judeo-Christian tradition) was the foundation of much of our national success. The linkage between confessional and social pluralism meant that Americans didn't need a state church in order to have a common social vision; rather, religious disestablishment meant that civil society could and would thrive, because "religion helped to shape the mores, the habits of the heart." What she didn't say, but what sociologist Rodney Stark has so clearly shown, is that religious disestablishment also meant that our churches thrived as well, in contrast to Europe's moribund state churches.

Today's risk, as Dr. Elshtain warns us, is that individualistic, pietistic, privatized faith has so overtaken American society that religion is no longer the formative core of our civil society. It's not just that we "bowl alone" (the evocative title of Robert

Putnam's work on civil society), but that in liberalism's paradise of individual choices we may lose vital access to the "chastening influences" of religion.

Rather than the story of religion's past failures, Dr. Elshtain admonishes us to reeducate ourselves and our children in the "story of a society struggling to see to it that its practices live up to its principles." Rather than liberalism's continued insistence on a public square denuded of religion's influence, why not join Dr. Elshtain on religion's road to a thriving, robust, and non-coercive civil society that renews the American promise?

Robert Osburn
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THANK YOU FOR THE OPPORTUNITY TO READ and review the article "Family Life and Civic Bonds" (Fall 2003). I think Professor William Doherty's work here is tremendous. It's thoughtful, well-argued, bold, and desperately needed in today's conversations about "doing the common good better."

This isn't a buildup to real criticism—it's a plea to take the argument further. If anything, the discussion stops too soon. We need not just a new ethic of family and civic life, but the policies and politics that will help us achieve and sustain this ethic.

New policies: Most of Professor Doherty's specific examples for change are still somewhat anecdotal in nature, when what we need is call for a broad new policy agenda based on his analysis and fundamental principles—and these anecdotes. This policy agenda would be based on the strategies Professor Doherty articulates, but be more specific and applicable to specific institutions.

By policy I simply mean a "principled course of action" that has some normative standing within any organization or institution: from schools and workplaces to broader public policies. These policies are

really the only thing that will move us from successful examples of change to the large scale and sustainable improvements we need in civic and family life.

New politics: Professor Doherty makes a strong case for a new civic ethic in regard to families and marriage. He points us toward the "ideal state" (our destination) but doesn't necessarily give us enough gas to get there. I think the answer must come in the form of a new definition of politics.

If we assume that one of the most simple definitions of politics is "the work of the citizen" (borrowing from Peg Michels and Harry Boyte), or simply how any action is accomplished, then we know we need politics to make the type of changes Professor Doherty calls us to achieve. Unfortunately, politics has been infected by the same passive consumer mentality as almost everything else in society. A passive politics is no politics at all. It's a recipe for inaction – or worse yet a continued deterioration of our public life.

Today most conversations about politics are dismissive of the term as either thoroughly corrupt or unnecessary. We need to reclaim politics as necessary to take any type of public action, and desperately in need of rethinking in order to reclaim and reconstruct the civil and family bonds we need to achieve our full democratic potential in this republic.

Sean Kershaw
President
Citizens League

WILLIAM DOHERTY'S CRITIQUE OF "MY needs first" consumerist thinking brings to mind an experience I had a few years back when I was invited to observe a group of affluent ten-to-twelve-year olds who were being interviewed about their family lives. Asked what their parents hoped for their lives, nearly every child gave some version of the response: "They want me to be

happy.” Pressed to describe what their parents did to make them happy, the kids—again almost unanimously—pointed to “nice things” their parents provided for them, including vacations, good schools, and private camps. In short, these privileged children saw their happiness as the paramount goal in family life. More to the point, they assumed that their parents’ chief duty was to secure their happiness through the goods and experiences that could be bought on the market. Of course, like most Americans, I believe that there is much to be said for the pursuit of happiness. And like most parents, I believe in doing all that is humanly possible to help children do well in life. At the same time, as I listened to these children, I couldn’t help wondering about the perverse effects of consumerist notion of happiness on the actual achievement of happiness. What makes for children’s happiness, as we know from evidence and experience, is not expensive camps or Tae Kwon Do lessons but close, warm, and enduring family bonds. And, as Doherty so persuasively argues, the closeness of family bonds is hugely dependent on generous investments of time, love, and attention, on a reciprocal sense of obligation between parent and child, on a child’s experience of giving as well as receiving, and on a sense of citizenship within the family itself.

Barbara Dafoe Whitehead
Co-Director
National Marriage Project

I FOUND WILLIAM DOHERTY’S ARTICLE interesting and compelling, containing several points that have caused me to think differently about the influences bearing down on contemporary family life. Doherty of course is right that much of the language and rationale of our “consumer culture,” as he terms it, has crept into the heretofore

sacred realm of our families. But the important question to me is the “why” question – why has this creep become so extensive? Is it because the corporate sector of our society has made a concentrated, conspiratorial effort to invade family life, and pit one family member against another? Is Doherty right that “free-market capitalism inevitably encourages materialism” and thereby wreaks havoc within the home?

I think not. Businesses and advertising firms have simply become more productive at what they’ve always tried to do—turn a profit. This is not a bad thing, but rather it is a good thing—it’s good for workers, good for their families, and good for local governments in need of increased tax revenue. Further, it is neither the fault of business, nor the role of business, to ensure that the TV is turned off in a household.

Rather, parents are responsible for keeping this “consumer culture” out of the home. Parents must decide how much of the culture’s values and behaviors will influence the lives of their families. They must decide how much time the TV is left on, what CDs they allow their children to listen to, and what kinds of influences are allowed in the home. In this respect, Doherty is dead-on when he observes that parents “increasingly have difficulty saying ‘no’ and meaning it.” Children want and need their parents to set high expectations for them. But this is hard work, and parents need social encouragement and support.

It is religious institutions, civic organizations, and other community groups to which parents turn for this type of support. It is this cadre of mediating institutions, not business, that has the lead role in tempering the influence of the “consumer culture” to which Doherty so ably calls our attention.

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