

KEEPING THE WORLD FROM GETTING WORSE

An Interview with Jean Bethke Elshtain

*What is the appropriate role for faith communities in the public square?
How do we preach on public issues?*

ELSHTAIN: You have to do it in a way that is sensitive to the fact that, if you're going to make your case legislatively, you've gone through all the arguments you can with a nontheological vocabulary. But then you get into gray areas like the "common good." Is that theological? No. I think these are theological categories that have migrated over into our political language. And we need to make more use of such terms.

So I think you can make arguments in that way, at the same time realizing that the fullness of your reasons may not be exposed at every point. It doesn't seem to me that Christians are called upon to lay every single card on the table at every point. There is a language that is adequate to the task. There may be some issues that call for a full-blown set of arguments.

Euthanasia, for example. Unless you're working with some account of the God-dignity of the human person, it is much harder to give the full argument as to why mandated physician-assisted suicide is a very bad thing. But there is a whole range of other issues—mental issues, budget issues—where you don't have to bring the fullness of that understanding to bear.

Above all, if you want to be political, you've got to persuade. And I think you want to bring as many people on board with you as you possibly can with a language that's available to them. I think most Americans don't have trouble with language derived from religious discourse. They do have trouble with someone saying "God dictates that," but no intelligent person in political life is going to make that kind of argument.

In the post-World War II era, the liberal Protestant church thought it could have a major impact on policy issues in the secular world, and it did. But now, in our religiously pluralistic culture, hasn't the church become marginalized and less important?

ELSHTAIN: The story of liberal Protestantism would help tell that tale. It strikes me that even as the power and effectiveness of mainline Protestantism was waning, the power and effectiveness of other religious communities was growing.

The religious right, for example (and I'm not one of those who thinks you should bash the Christian right every day of the week), here's a group that had been basically, completely marginalized since the Scopes trial. They just drew the wagons in a circle and tended to their own communities—wound up discovering a voice, and finding some effectiveness in the public square by being quite unabashedly who they were. Catholics, who were for a long time cautious about entering the public arena because of the powerful strain of anti-Catholicism in American life, felt quite emboldened to step forward on issues, including abortion, and did so from a stance of faith.

At the same time liberal Protestants were becoming almost indistinguishable from the secular culture, so much so that it seems to me now that when the mainline denominations weigh in on the Iraq issue, I'm not sure who's paying attention. Their influence has waned rather dramatically, and it's waned in part, not simply because of our growing religious diversity, but because they've rather systematically abandoned their own theological traditions, it seems to me, to a great extent.

Stanley Hauerwas argues that Christianity does bring us into conflict with the culture, and that it's not about reforming the culture. The church is God's sign of hope in the world. We need to understand that. How does your agenda differ from his?

ELSHTAIN: Christ against culture is one stance. But there are a number of other, far more complicated positions, it seems to me, than *contra mundum*. A more complicated position is the one I would associate with Augustine. There's a famous colloquy in Augustine's *The City of God* in which he puts the question about whether a Christian should be a judge if called upon to do that, and he says, "Yes." It's an inherently tragic vocation and he goes on to explain why that is. You're going to punish some innocent people and let some guilty people go. It's just inevitably going to happen given the fallibility of the human mind and the flaws in human will, but yes, you're obliged to do that.

The great strength of Christians historically has been that engagement, that preparedness to engage the world and to think about the ways the world might be transformed, not made perfect, but transformed. You can do that if you locate appropriately the peaceable kingdom at the end of time. Just as we aspire to something that we can never quite reach, the image of the peaceable kingdom functions on earth in much the same way. We can't get there, but we can think about how to make the world less cruel, I was saying to my students last night. One of them said the world was so messed up. There's

The great strength of Christians historically has been that engagement, that preparedness to engage the world and to think about the ways the world might be transformed, not made perfect, but transformed. You can do that if you locate appropriately the peaceable kingdom at the end of time.

nothing I can do. I said, "No, you can keep the world from getting worse." That's my view. Our task is in large part a negative one: keeping the worst from happening. And maybe if you can keep the worst from happening, some good can be done as well. But there's that first task of interdiction. Albert Camus, in that great speech he made at a Dominican monastery on what the unbeliever expects from Christians, said, "You know, if you won't join me in this task in preventing the triumph of evil, who will?"

Bonhoeffer is so good on this issue. In his *Letters and Papers from Prison* he talks about the man of virtue who retreats into his own purity; his hands, in effect, are not going to get sullied and dirtied with the things of the world. What does that mean? The world is going to hell. As he said, the bleeding brothers and sisters of Jesus Christ are being led off to the camps. You're going to maintain your purity and not engage the world? I

don't think that's Christian.

Bonhoeffer uses that marvelous image when he says that while the Church has a duty to bind up the wounds of those the wheel has crushed, it also has a duty to stop the wheel.

ELSHTAIN: To put a spoke in the wheel. I think that's absolutely the case. Once, in a debate, I raised this issue of purity, "Well, I'm going to be a pacifist even if things go to hell and the terrorists keep killing us." And of course Stan Hauerwas did one of his typical quips, you know: "Hell, I'm from Texas; purity is not an option!" But that's a quip, not an answer. It doesn't respond to the concern I raised.

In my book, *Just War Against Terror: The Burden of American Power*, I ask, "What happened to the Neibuhr tradition?" Where has it gone? The mainline has just lost it, it's just evacuated that tradition that I associate with both Neibuhr and Tillich and those great sermons that Tillich broadcast into Nazi Germany over Radio Free Europe about responsibility. I don't think that responsibility is enacted from the stance of a pseudo-pacifism—they have nothing to propose concretely about what should be done about a Saddam Hussein, but no, no, never a war. How can they be enabling Christians from a stance of supposed moral superiority to denounce those who

take on the responsibility of the world because they've got dirty hands? I just think that's an impossible stance—finally.

I don't think that responsibility is enacted from the stance of a pseudo-pacifism—they have nothing to propose concretely about what should be done about a Saddam Hussein, but no, no, never a war.

So in the global village, the person who is able to wield power in a beneficent way has an obligation to do so?

ELSHTAIN: Absolutely. And I would say in a responsible way. One of the things I hope to work on is related to those who daily have to confront evil homicide detectives, people in child protective services, and so on. Those of us who are safe in the academy or the clergy are happy those folks are doing it, but we'd rather not know too much about it. We're happy to be able to go to bed at night and have a pretty good chance of waking up in the morning safely in our own homes.

So we assign these tasks, but look down on the people who do them. We don't want to confront what it is they have to deal with, and then when there's some excess—and there always will be when people are taking on a task—we roundly condemn them and think we've done our moral duty. I just think that's way too easy. □



Jean Bethke Elshain is professor of Social and Political Ethics at the University of Chicago. This article is excerpted with permission from

www.HomileticsOnline.com

Visit New Places!

Come see the possibilities for your church in 2006!

www.beginnings.cokesbury.com

Beginnings: An Introduction to Christian Faith is a small-group spiritual journey for seekers, new believers, and longtime Christians who want to explore the basics of Christianity in a relaxed, nurturing atmosphere. At this website you can download free samples, see comments from participants, and view a video describing the program. You will also learn about the next installment of *Beginnings: The Spiritual Life*.

www.sisters.cokesbury.com

Sisters: Bible Study for Women deepens women's relationships with God and others through personal daily readings and participation in weekly group discussion, using a video segment as a catalyst. At this website, you can download free samples, see comments from participants, and get free posters and flyers.

www.disciple.cokesbury.com

The DISCIPLE Bible study program is designed to develop strong local churches through the in-depth study of Scripture. Through DISCIPLE, persons are strengthened in their faith and guided into service and ministry. Strong, biblically nourished leadership will help your church grow in vitality and Christian discipleship. At this website, you can download sample lessons, register for training, and order online.

Each of these "destinations" has **NEW** programs to delight, nurture, and grow the folks in your congregation. Check them out!

CIRQ067701 PACP00312498-01

Cokesbury
Resources for the Christian Journey



store, web, phone

Cokesbury.com | 1.800.672.1789