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ESSAY

HOW SHOULD WE TALK?

Jean Bethke Elshtain[†]

The Annual Battisti Memorial Lecture

This is the United States, so we need not worry about theocracy. Despite occasional media hyperbole, there is no realistic chance of anything remotely approaching the establishment of religion as an enshrined constitutional order in the United States. Nonetheless, this possibility, skulking in the interstices of our political order (if we are to credit the alarmists) often frames the discussion that follows. The threat from religion can not be dismissed lightly, we are told. It follows that we are all in danger of having Pat Robertson or Jerry Falwell or someone else tell us how we are to live our lives. It follows that we must be forever vigilant against the encroachment of this threat. Therefore, in constitutional terms, we effect a bright line separating church and state. That having long ago been accomplished, in the minds of some the bright line should now extend to religion and politics, the latter represented as the embodiment of everything religion threatens if the chasm between the two is not maintained with militant fervor.

Given this construction of the threat, the political solution increasingly was posed, in our relatively recent past, as a legal one tied

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to various theoretical propositions. The details of the legal situation I leave to constitutional lawyers. To sum up quickly: the ardent separationists held sway for a sustained period of time. But the Supreme Court, in *Agostini vs. Felton*,¹ appeared to signal a mild retreat from such an approach, reversing a holding that federally-funded programs providing supplemental, remedial instruction to disadvantaged children could not be administered by "sectarian schools" without violating the Establishment Clause. This prior holding had led, in practice, to the spectacle of mobile units perched outside parochial and other religious schools as children, even ones with severe disabilities, in weather fair or foul, were removed from their school buildings and taken to these units in order to receive instruction.² The Court, voting five to four, evidently no longer believes that the mere physical "placement of public employees on parochial school grounds inevitably results in the impermissible effect of state-sponsored indoctrination or constitutes a symbolic union between government and religion."³

Is this a shot across the bow signaling a new day in church-state adjudication? It is hard to say. But it does invite critical reflection on a position I shall tag *liberal monism*, by which I mean the view that all institutions internal to a democratic society must conform to a single authority principle, to a single standard of what counts as reason and deliberation, and to a single vocabulary of political discussion. Democracy is defined in such a way that religion must be kept marginalized. Reason is defined in such a way that faith is automatically discounted as something else, whether irrationalism or a peculiar atavism, or a form of private solace that must be kept utterly privatized. Authority is defined in such a way that only something akin to "one person, one vote" models of representation and acquiescence in the outcome of such representation pass muster as a legitimate form of authority in a democratic society. Those who adhere to this position, or some version of it, begin with the menace of establishment or the specter of advancing hordes of priests or televangelists as a backdrop. Then they go on to construct their bright line forms of defense. This powerful school, associated with the work of John Rawls (but not he alone), holds that when religious persons enter the public sphere they are obliged to do so in a secular civic idiom, shorn of any explicit reference to religious commitment and belief. I will not rehearse this

¹ 521 U.S. 203 (1997).

² Having tried to describe this phenomenon, and others, to audiences in South Africa recently, I encountered utter bewilderment. What on earth did the Court and the disestablishment extremists think they were accomplishing by this sort of thing? Good question.

³ *Agostini*, 521 U.S. at 223.

position yet again. It has been done over and over to the point of near tedium. I will, instead, simply assume the liberal monist position as a backdrop and move on.

There have been several religious responses to liberal monism, positions much underrepresented in the academy but quite visible in the civic world at large. The first holds that the fullness of religious belief, commitment and witness must enter the public sphere and strictly on religious terms. This has nothing to do with the legal establishment of religion. It has to do, rather, with the conviction that religion is undermined if persons with religious commitments are compelled to engage in *any* translation of these commitments into a civic idiom. Let us call this “full bore Christian politics.” The so-called “Christian Right” would enter here, in part, although there are many distinctions between fundamentalists, pentecostals and evangelicals that I can not now spell out. But I would like to emphasize one distinction on the table before moving on. It is altogether meet and right for persons of faith to speak from that faith, at its fullest, in moments of unusual challenge or crisis. In other words, while those who push for undiluted “Christian politics” seek Christian saturation of ordinary, everyday political discourse and action, the persons I have in mind responded to extraordinary situations from the fullness of religious commitment. Thus, no one demanded that Martin Luther King drop any and all references to the Prophet Amos in his “I Have a Dream” speech. No one demanded that the Berrigan brothers refuse to cite Scripture in advancing their pacifist anti-Vietnam war cause.⁴ No one told John Brown he was a dangerous extremist *because* he cited Scripture; rather, he was an extremist who also cited Scripture. The problem was not Scripture—it was Brown’s extreme response to slavery, a response supported (so he claimed) by Scripture.

Note that none of the prophetic positions and witnesses just mentioned are (as liberal monists seem to claim or to believe) critically unassailable. Neither King nor the Berrigans (I am less sure about Brown) wanted to envelop the entire universe of a pluralistic democratic society with a strong, doctrinal blanket of normativity along theological or doctrinal lines. Discussion always remains open when people turn to religion with a prophetic intent in mind. Denunciation of a given intolerable situation begins the argument; it does not end it, as the liberal monists seem to believe. What Abraham Lincoln drew from Scripture was not the same as John Brown’s message. What a

⁴ Those who disagreed with the Berrigans did so on political grounds or because they did not believe Scripture called everyone who claimed to take Scripture seriously to be a Berrigan-like witness.

religiously-based defense of race separation drew from Scripture was certainly not what Dr. King did.⁵

Thus we find that even the ostensibly simple case of religion being represented fully, and on religion's terms, in the public square does not create a situation beyond discourse and dispute. Now, there are some in our midst whose sense of Christian politics is that the positions advanced from a doctrinal stance are, or ought to be seen as nigh-unassailable civically because these positions are directly Biblically enjoined and inspired. But this is not possible in a pluralistic civic world, in part because so many other persons of religious commitment, speaking from the fullness of *their* beliefs, will offer challenge. The prophetic citizen-activists I have noted, then, do not advance a position of epistemological incorrigibility. As well, they tacitly retreat from the conviction that Christian politics at its fullest is everyday, garden-variety politics: that the full force of Christian witness must be brought to bear on *every* public policy question, that there should be a Christian view of the balanced budget as there is a Christian view of euthanasia or of war. This is not the position of democratic prophets who reserved and reserve their Christian witness, at its most intense and uncompromising, to situations of unusual civic moment and moral challenge, such as slavery, unjust wars and segregation. But it is the view of many lumped together as the Christian Right or, less frequently, as the "Christian Left."⁶

As if this was not already complicated enough, a strong alternative both to liberal monism and to full-bore Christian politics is most ably represented by the work of theologian Stanley Hauerwas. Here the critical worry is that when religion—specifically, Christianity—engages politics it is bound to do so on the world's terms, especially in a liberal age. Having accepted a lousy deal by signing on with the liberal social contract and accepting civic peace on the world's terms, the church ceases to be church. The central worry is not what happens to politics but what happens to Christianity. If the full-bore version of Christian politics, then, veers towards a posture in which church and politics are drawn into a very tight relationship (not theocracy but, rather, kissing cousins), the version here sketched moves in the direction of *radical dualism*: the church must, above all, be church. If the world wants to come to religion's understanding, fine, but that is not religion's primary concern. The danger with liberal

⁵ Need I add that I think those who defend racial segregation on Scriptural grounds are committing a hermeneutic travesty, to put it mildly. My point here is not to separate better from worse interpretations but, rather, to make the simple point that interpretation is *always* at issue.

⁶ I am here laying down a marker that will be taken up more fully when I sketch out an alternative to "Christian politics."

monism is presented by Hauerwas and others as a high-overweening one that has yielded a posture in which politics is wrenched free from any and all religious authority, argument and constraint; instead, churches themselves grow to look a lot more like liberal monistic institutions themselves. The deep—and it seems to me, correct—insight of the dualist posture is that much of the story of mainstream Protestantism in the United States this century has been that of churches veering toward the liberal monist position, thereby embracing the world on its terms rather than the church's terms. To forestall more of this sort of thing, a strong ecclesiological understanding is central to the dualist position.

But does insisting on a strong ecclesiology mean that one is by definition drawn into the orbit of the dualist position? I shall argue no. Nonetheless, we are well advised to be wary of the pressure posed to the practice of religion and the religion of practitioners from the side of an all-encompassing social or civic ideology (liberalism, Americanism, etc.). If the two are merged, what gives way in cases of dispute is most often religious belief rather than political interest. So we are forewarned. How can we best forearm ourselves? The bulk of my remaining remarks will be devoted to an exploration of this matter. What I shall be aiming for is a position that draws insights from the other positions or tendencies without seeking a tepid compromise between them. I am interested in a way to situate the discussion that is not framed by advancing, at peril, an extreme version of the view one aims to counter. What I propose, in brief, is a way to distinguish between different dimensions of the public sphere so one can offer a nuanced assessment of the way religion enters civic discourse, depending upon the nature of the issues involved—what are the stakes?—and depending on what arenas or spheres of human social existence are affected and how—who are the key players? How should those implicated in any given situation address the issues at stake and go on to express their concerns, not only to their co-religionists but, as well, to their fellow citizens?

There is no easy tag or name for the position I will sketch and that I hinted at in my discussion of King, the Berrigans and John Brown. Please note that a fully fleshed out position requires that which I am in no position to provide here, namely, a full unpacking of an anthropology, an understanding of the human person and of what it means to live *in communio*. A brief sketch must suffice. This anthropology exists in tension with, if not outright opposition to, the anthropological presuppositions that underwrite modern liberal contractarianism, an anthropology that sees us as essentially free standing, self-possessing, self-defining, and self-naming creatures. We relate to

others to the extent it seems expedient, prudential and part of self-interest, rightly understood. Of course, there is love and family commitment but the tendency is either to bracket these as the exception that proves the rule or to bring the family, too, under the wings of an anthropology that distorts it profoundly. And it does the same to friendship and many other, if not all, human relations.⁷ There is a form of social liberalism that could be drawn into a much closer relationship with Christian anthropology, but it seems to me to be growing weaker as certain libertarian and contractarian strands within liberalism grow stronger.

Recall, if you will, the framing questions: What are the stakes? Who are the players? Is the heart of Christian anthropology at issue? Are the players a small group of contesting elites or is the entire society, including its most defenseless members, also implicated? Most often the engagement of Christianity with political power is not so sharp-edged as, for example, was the Catholic Church's struggle against authoritarian Communism in pre-1989 Poland. Most of the time, the engagement of Christianity with politics is a series of half-advances and half-retreats. In the American democracy, the process of assessing "what Christ has to do with Caesar" is even trickier than in other modern industrial societies, for several reasons. First, an extraordinary number of Americans profess belief in God and in personal immortality; indeed, the figures on the United States' religious enthusiasm stagger observers from other societies as well as our most strenuous secularists with some ninety-five percent of Americans professing belief in God and seventy-percent claiming membership in a church or other religious institution. Second, American democracy was, from the beginning, premised on the enactment of projects that were a complex intermingling of religious and political imperatives. The majority of Americans were religious seekers and believers who saw in communal liberty the freedom to *be* religious, rather than freedom from religion. It is, therefore, not surprising that such a large portion of American juridical life has been devoted to sorting out the inaptly-named church-state debate. In a less "churched" society this would be a far less salient issue.

Let us assume that Christianity's task is not primarily to underwrite a politics external to itself, including democratic politics.⁸ That

⁷ My book *PUBLIC MAN, PRIVATE WOMAN: WOMEN IN SOCIAL AND POLITICAL THOUGHT* (2d ed. 1993) covers this terrain, although I talk there about contrasting accounts of "human nature" rather than "anthropology." But it is basically the same topic.

having been said, it is undeniably the case that Christians and churches unavoidably *must* engage politics. The issue, as I have already indicated, is the nature of that encounter. There is no single right way to do this. It is important, at times, for Christian identity to be made manifest in as clear-cut a manner as possible so that there can be little doubt about where the Christian stands. But such moments will likely be rare in a democratic society in which the good, the bad and the ugly are so often commingled in dizzyingly complex ways. For example, is it good to stop people from consuming vast amounts of liquor? Certainly. Excessive alcohol intake violates the integrity of the body, it wounds others and breaks relationships, and it even threatens the lives of persons if driving is involved, and so on. Does this mean one must follow the Women's Christian Temperance Union ("WCTU") of late nineteenth and early twentieth century fame and demand a constitutional amendment to compel prohibition? Not necessarily, although the good ladies of the WCTU believed it did. But prudential considerations must enter as well. Will such a political intervention likely do more harm than good? What is the good it will do by contrast to the harm it might engender? In the case of prohibition, we have a historic case study ready at hand, and it undermines the strict prohibitionist case.

When and where the issues calling for a sharp, decisive break of Christianity with secular power appear, politics as usual is likely to have already disappeared. This was the claim of the Confessing Church at the time of the Barmen Declaration, for example. The Nazi state had overstepped its legitimate mandate. The time had come, in Dietrich Bonhoeffer's words, to put a spoke in the wheel. Here one is reminded of Albert Camus's powerful essay, *The Unbeliever and the Christian*, a statement made at the Dominican Monastery of Latour-Maubourg in 1948.⁹ Camus insisted that the Christian has many obligations and that, in fact, what the world needs most today is "Christians who remain Christians."¹⁰ Camus maintained that he did not like priests

⁸ This, of course, assumes that the church itself constitutes a politics. I have tended to be somewhat wary of this argument, given the reigning definition of politics among us as an interest-maximizing process of power aggregation. But I am now persuaded that the church does indeed embody a politics—it is just that it is a politics much at odd with the constitutive proceduralisms of constitutional republics and even more jarring if what is at stake is twentieth century totalitarian or authoritarian societies—with these the church can or ought not "make any peace."

⁹ Albert Camus, *The Unbeliever and the Christian*, in *RESISTANCE, REBELLION, AND DEATH* 67 (Justin O'Brien trans., Knopf 1961) (1948).

¹⁰ *Id.* at 70.

who are anticlerical any more than philosophers that are ashamed of themselves What the world expects of Christians is that Christians should voice their condemnation in such a way that never a doubt, never the slightest doubt, could rise in the heart of the simplest man. That they should get away from abstraction and confront the blood-stained face history has taken on today.¹¹

After Camus poses the question, “What can Christians do for us?”¹²—the “us” in this case being unbelievers—the answer emerges. First, to abandon pronouncing maledictions and, second, to reduce the number of tortured children. Camus lamented, “[p]erhaps we cannot prevent this world from being a world in which children are tortured.”¹³ But, he asks his audience of monks, “If you don’t help us, who else in the world can help us do this?”¹⁴ Interestingly, then, Camus would have Christians be Christians, but he derives from this the insistence that Christians must engage a world in which children will always be tortured. Their task—their political task—must be to work to lessen the frequency and the acceptance of this horror.

Surely the assessment that American society faces such a horror lies behind much of the “extreme” rhetoric from the pro-life side in the abortion debate. The state at its highest level having thrown all its weight to one side only—that tagged “pro-choice”—those called to anti-abortion witness believe they are dealing with an issue absent any moral ambiguity, one that indeed presents a harsh and terrible “choice” that should not even be dignified with the language of “choice.”¹⁵ I think there is considerable merit in stressing the moral weightiness of the stakes involved in the abortion debate and a cluster of others, among them euthanasia, cloning, some aspects of reproductive technology and the like. But I do not believe this dictates a series of political interventions so clearly: the marching orders are not attached to the moral mandate with the political equivalent of superglue. Abortion would certainly be a candidate—likely the *only* candidate in American society at present—for an issue of the moral moment of the sort that makes defensible and intelligible an unequivocal position.¹⁶ Still, the “abortion option” is not the same as fighting Na-

¹¹ *Id.* at 70-71.

¹² *Id.* at 72.

¹³ *Id.* at 73.

¹⁴ *Id.*

¹⁵ Or the view is that the language of choice is by now so deeply corrupt it can be accorded no automatic legitimacy; this despite the fact that the notion of agential, choosing persons—the free will question—is radically inexplicable minus a Christian backdrop. But that is another discussion.

zism, so even here Camus's hope, one that calls for Christians to be Christians—i.e., faithful to their own identity and, from that identity, to reach out to the world in a way that promotes clarity rather than opacity on moral questions; in a way that is open-hearted and compassionate yet, if needs be, severe—gets tangled up in a series of ethical and pragmatic considerations.

Let us explore this a bit further by assuming that, in a democratic society, Christians are obliged to continue the argument, to engage in dialogue even with those with whom they differ radically. Let us further assume that one has assessed a situation and determined that the heart of the matter is at stake in the most dramatic way: Who is worthy of moral consideration? Who is inside or outside the boundary of moral concern? Further, one has determined that it is a *common good* question, that the well-being of the entire society is up for grabs—this is not a contest to divvy up the goodies between a small number of already powerful groups. How does one proceed? How should we talk? First, we should avoid maledictions. We are dealing with fellow citizens, not enemies. That many of our fellow citizens may be deeply misguided and a few pernicious is certainly possible, even as each one of us is often in need of correction and reproof. The space for disputation remains open; hence, one must assume that even those one finds most resistant to the message one is advancing must be considered candidates for persuasion, even as one opens oneself up to their counter-arguments. This leads to the second task: to offer reasons from clear religious commitment to those who claim no such commitment and who may even be hostile to religious arguments if this is done in and through what is often called “doctrinal” language. One's premises might take the form of pointing out, for starters, that the commitment we share to democracy rests, in large part, on Biblically grounded norms and, moreover, that the entire human rights armamentarium of modernity is simply inexplicable minus Christianity's commitment to the dignity and worth of human persons. If Christians are committed to ontological equality and dignity, human rights is the political face that equality and dignity present to us in late modernity.

An irony, then, in how we should talk in *this* democratic society is that a society most solidly associated with both equality and liberty

¹⁶ I say the “only” candidate because the state, as embodied in the rule of law at its very highest level, has sanctioned the nearly unrestricted reign of a practice that involves a “solemn affirmation of human rights and their tragic denial in practice,” in the words of Pope John Paul II. Or does so if one acknowledges the fetus's human status. It is pressing that acknowledgment should lie at the heart of pro-life politics.

may invest itself in flawed interpretations of a magnitude that undermine these commitments over the long run. But this is a case that must be made and not merely assumed. It begins by refusing to grant sacral status to democracy itself. The voice of the people is not necessarily the voice of God. As Pope John Paul II argues in the recent encyclical, *Evangelium Vitae*,

[d]emocracy cannot be idolized to the point of making it a substitute for morality or a panacea for immorality. Fundamentally, democracy is a "system" and as such is a means and not an end. Its "moral" value is not automatic, but depends on conformity to the moral law to which it, like every other form of human behavior, must be subject: In other words, its morality depends on the morality of the ends which it pursues and of the means which it employs The value of democracy stands or falls with the values which it embodies and promotes. Of course, values such as the dignity of every human person, respect for inviolable and inalienable human rights and the adoption of the "common good" as the end and criterion regulating political life are certainly fundamental and not to be ignored.¹⁷

Pope John Paul continues that these values—the common good, or a version of egalitarianism, inviolable human rights, human dignity—"cannot be provisional and changeable . . . opinions," but derive from the "acknowledgment of an objective moral law . . . written in the human heart . . . the obligatory point of reference for civil law itself."¹⁸ Without this grounding, he argues, "not even democracy is capable of ensuring a stable peace, especially since peace which is not built upon the values of the dignity of every individual and of solidarity between all people frequently proves to be illusory."¹⁹

So, once again, one begins with the anthropological issues, including an affirmation of a notion of human rights as the way in which modernity expresses a commitment to human dignity. It follows that, to the extent that we translate everything we want into a right, we vulgarize rights. We are obliged not to conflate rights with mere wants and preferences, as our dominant politics currently does. This is a point that should be made continuously and routinely. But the full display of this point, including the underlying anthropological presuppositions, comes into play only in the most strenuous circumstances and where the toughest—the highest stake—cases are con-

¹⁷ Pope John Paul II, *Evangelium Vitae*, 24 ORIGINS 689, 714 (1995).

¹⁸ *Id.*

¹⁹ *Id.*

cerned. So the way one talks in, say, a debate about welfare reform should bring a portion of the full panoply to bear. But when the matter at hand is abortion or euthanasia or cloning or other matters going to the heart of what it means to affirm the dignity of persons, then fuller reason-giving is required. And note that it will and must be reason-giving of the sort liberal monism would rule out of court (or have a court rule out of court!), and that full-bore Christian politics would render supererogatory, since politics in all its aspects and features, on this latter view, must reflect, on each and every issue, a set of authoritative religious commitments. Thus, in Christian politics (whether of the right or the left) the distinctions between the high stakes issues and those subject to far more pragmatic considerations are often muddled.

The position I am working toward, even as it frames *all* political discussion with certain anthropological presuppositions, can advance or retreat from full-fledged reason-giving depending on an assessment of the stakes and the nature of the players: Is this undeniably a common good issue? My position also clears the way for the use of some strong language, albeit used sparingly. Some might counter that the strong reactions, responses, and judgements I am clearing space for—couched in a full display of religious reason-giving—fails the test of democratic dialogue or conversation. Let us drop conversation as too tepid for starters. Democracy is not about conversation: that is what happens at social gatherings and over the dinner table. But democracy *is* about dialogue and debate. What I aim for is an authentic dialogue rather than generic, low-grade substitutes. We have lost a robust understanding of argument in the present moment. Thus, we have come to think of dialogue in quasi-therapeutic terms, meaning that people should never disagree fundamentally with one another but should, instead, “feel” one another’s pain to the point of terminal and indiscriminate empathy. Authentic dialogue, however, is far more than interpersonal exchange. It requires, at the outset, a belief that there is some truth to the matter; that better and worse arguments can be assessed; that while all persons are of equal dignity, not all positions and ideas are equally compelling, justifiable or decent. “Being real” or sincere is not the same as having good reasons. So dialogue does not disallow strenuous argument.

Because this has been a highly condensed argument, let me summarize the main positions and questions before I turn to some final thoughts. The opening questions asked how one might challenge the liberal monism of extreme separationists who move from a narrowly

judicial doctrine—church-state separation—to an extreme social and political stance: full religion-politics separation. It is the nature of this monism that all institutions in a democratic society must, therefore, conform to a single authority principle; to a single standard of what counts as reason and deliberation; to a single vocabulary of political discussion.

To this there are several religious responses, with specific reference here to the Christian tradition although I believe this would hold more generally: One response is that religious witness at its fullest must enter the public sphere and precisely on religious grounds. This has nothing to do with legal establishment. But it does have to do with the insistence that any translation of religious commitments into a civic idiom dilutes, and often dangerously so, the religious message. I called this full-bore Christian politics, the search for doctrinal saturation of everyday, ordinary political discourse and action: there must be a “Christian” position on everything.

I distinguished this from the second response: Christian witness of a more prophetic nature as a response to extraordinary situations rather than politics as usual. My examples were Dr. King and the Berrigan brothers. Even in these prophetic cases, the liberal monists are wrong to believe that the Christian position is unassailable. Discussion always remains open, in part because the Christian tradition itself is contested. So claiming scriptural warrant of a direct sort does not create a situation beyond discourse and dispute. Yet another alternative both to liberal monism and to full-bore Christian politics is the third response: radical dualism of the sort that insists the church must be the church because in a liberal society when Christians enter the public sphere it is always on the world’s terms, not the church’s terms.

My next move was to a position distinct from those just summarized, with space reserved for full-bore Christian witness. This position begins with two questions: What are the stakes? Who are the key players? I argued that framing with these questions offers a nuanced assessment of the way religion enters civic discourse depending on the nature of the issues involved. Beginning with an explicit anthropology is essential: What does it mean to live in communion? Put differently, is the heart of the anthropological matter at stake, by which I mean deep sociality and relationality in contrast to a free-standing, fully self-possessing self? It is not the task of any religion, including Christianity, to underwrite a politics external to itself, including democratic politics. That said, Christians unavoidably must engage politics. But there is no single right way to do this. In other words, one should not counter liberal monism with monistic forms of

defense. There are times when it should be absolutely clear where Christians stand (e.g., genocide, torture). But such moments are likely to be rare in a democratic society because “marching orders” are not attached to moral mandates with the political equivalent of super glue. Inescapably, however, different—at times radically different—answers will emerge if one asks: Who is inside or outside the boundary of moral concern? Is this a common good question? Answers to these questions point to public, political engagement. How does this play itself out among democratic citizens at the present moment?

To help explore this question I turn to the recent book by the distinguished sociologist Alan Wolfe, *One Nation, After All*.²⁰ Wolfe's book is a study of the attitudes of middle-class Americans from different regions of the country as we near the end of the century. Much of what he reports seems alternatively reassuring and troubling. I am concerned with the undercurrents of fear that seem to run through many of the words of his respondents. How does this bear on our topic? The great Frederick Douglass once remarked that you can not have rain without occasional thunder and lightning. Yet that is precisely what Wolfe's quintessential middle-classes seem to want: spring showers, lovely gardens, but no thunderstorms, please. There is—or can be—great virtue in this, a kind of quotidian evenness. But there are often deep troubles that confront us and a nation that shirks from such troubles can be a nation no longer up to the task of living up to its own premises and promises.

Wolfe characterizes the views of his respondents on religion as expressions of “tolerance.”²¹ But there are times when the positions articulated depart in rather significant ways from a rich and robust understanding of what tolerance is or what it requires. Wolfe's middle-class respondents begin by viewing religions as a private matter to be discussed only reluctantly, a position that already cuts rather dramatically against the American grain. In fact, religion and politics have always been on intimate terms in America, in part because so much of the same territory has been claimed by each. The intermingling of religion and politics, remember, is quite different from church-state separation. To endorse a properly secular state that has no established ties to any religious institution neither implies nor requires that one should support a secularized society in which religion

²⁰ ALAN WOLFE, *ONE NATION, AFTER ALL* (1998).

²¹ *Id. passim*.

is reduced to a purely private role. Yet this is precisely what many of Wolfe's respondents seem to be saying they want or actually practice.

Now, as I indicated, there is a fearfulness running just beneath the surface of many of the views Wolfe reports and more or less lumps together as expressions of tolerance. The general view is this: If I am quiet about what I believe and everybody else is quiet about what he or she believes, then nobody interferes with the rights of anybody else. But this is precisely what real believers, whether political or religious or both, can not do: keep quiet, whether they are believers in King's "beloved community," in ending the war in Vietnam on justice grounds derived from religious conviction, in greater economic equality, in ending capital punishment or in opposing the current abortion regime. To tell religious believers to keep quiet, else they interfere with my rights *simply by speaking out* is an intolerant idea. It is, in effect, to tell folks that they can not really believe what they believe or be who they are: Don't ask. Don't tell.

What fears underwrite this attitude? One, surely, is of religious intolerance, even religious warfare, though, of course, if you were to do a body count, the murderous anti-religious ideologies of the twentieth century would win the prize hands down. But the fear now seems to extend to public expression itself. Wolfe's respondents are disturbed when religion is taken out of the private realm. But a private religion makes no sense. One must have public expression of a faith in order for it to be faith. That is, religion either expresses itself in social, communal, public meetings, rituals and symbols or it strives for such modes of expression in situations where these are forbidden. To a good many of the middle-class respondents in the book, public expression itself is forcing something on somebody else: you have already crossed a line because you are supposed to keep quiet about what you believe most strongly. If you do not, it may demand of me—if I hear what you say—that I enter into debate or an act of discernment. That is just what many Americans do not want to do.

Consider the remarks of Jody Fields, one of Wolfe's respondents. "If you are a Hindu and you grew up being a Hindu, keep it to yourself. . . . Don't impose your religion, and don't make me feel bad because I do this and you do that."²² I submit that this is not tolerance at all but, rather, an intolerance of religious pluralism: if one changes Hindu to Jew in the comment that becomes clearer. Telling a Hindu to hide being Hindu is scarcely a picture of religious tolerance. Some of Wolfe's respondents do come closer to authentic religious pluralism, or a recognition of such. Here, for example, is Cathy

²² *Id.* at 63.

Ryan, perturbed because Christmas carols can not be sung anymore in the public schools of her town at Christmas time because Muslims may get upset. Her response: “[w]ell, excuse me, let’s teach Muslim songs too Don’t wipe out all the culture, add to it. . . . Do Hanukkah songs. Let’s find out what a dreidel represents. Let’s find out what Muslims do.”²³ This is closer to real tolerance, for it encourages the public expression and representation of certain differences with the view that all will be challenged, possibly even enriched through the process. Jody Fields is frightened and espouses intolerance in the name of privatization. Cathy Ryan is generous in the name of a kind of Bournian vision of “trans-national America,” for it is in the United States that such trans-nationality finds forms of relatively benign expression.

Michael McConnell, in a paper titled “Believers as Equal Citizens,”²⁴ reminds us of a particular version of Jewish emancipation. Jews were expected to disappear as a distinctive group once they were given their civil rights. Under the terms of Jewish emancipation in France, Jews were expected to relinquish the civil aspects of Talmudic law; to disavow any political implications of their faith; and to abandon altogether the use of Yiddish and their semi-autonomous communal institutions. He writes, and I quote at length:

The great public feast given in 1789 in Philadelphia, then the nation’s capital, to celebrate ratification of the Constitution included a fitting symbol of this new pluralistic philosophy: the feast included a special table where the food conformed to Jewish dietary laws. This was a fitting symbol because it included Jewish Americans in the celebration without requiring that they sacrifice their distinctiveness as Jews. By contrast, in France Napoleon summoned the leaders of the Jewish community to a “Great Sanhedrin,” where he insisted that the Jewish law be modified to enable the Jewish people to be integrated into the French nation. In a gesture no less revealing than the Kosher table in Philadelphia, Napoleon’s Minister of the Interior scheduled the first session to be held on Saturday. Here we see three alternatives. Under the *ancien regime*, Jews would be excluded from the celebration, for they could not be citizens. Under the secular state, Jews would be welcome to attend, but they would be expected to

²³ *Id.* at 70.

²⁴ Michael McConnell, *Believers as Equal Citizens* (1998) (unpublished manuscript, on file with author).

eat the same food that other citizens eat. If they want to keep kosher, they should do it at home, in private, at their own expense. Under the pluralist vision, multiple tables are provided to ensure that for Protestants, it is a Protestant country, for Catholics a Catholic country, and the Jew, if he pleases, may establish in it his New Jerusalem.²⁵

My position is consistent with this pluralist vision. Liberal monism is not. That is where the gravamen of this lecture lies.

²⁵ *Id.* at 28.