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Under God? | Michael Sandel & Jean Bethke Elshtain

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The Veritas Forum

Throughout our 25 year history, we've had the privilege of creating conversations between some of academia's giants and of modeling dialogue across difference at the heart of the university. The 2013 Veritas Forum at Harvard was a stunning example of this: a dialogue between University of Chicago political scientist Jean Bethke Elshtain and Harvard philosopher Michael Sandel on the role of religion in public life.

Transcript

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Michael Sandel has been recognised as perhaps the most prominent college professor in America. His writings have been translated into 21 languages and his packed-out course, "Justice," was the first Harvard course to be made freely available online and on television. Thomas Sandel's "The New York Times" was also a towering public intellectual.

Author of over 10 books, recipient of the highest award bestowed by the American Political Science Association, an irregular contributor on controversial questions in the public square. Before moving to the University of Chicago, she was the first woman to hold an endowed professorship at Vanderbilt. In a way, serves as an expression of the kind of woman she was, fiercely intelligent, witty and unconcerned about popularity when it came to the pursuit of truth.

This conversation between Jean Bethke Elshtain and Michael Sandel representing secular Jewish and Christian perspectives is if anything more relevant now than it was four years ago. And one of the most challenging issues facing us today, how to build a society that enables us to bring our deepest belief to the table in our personal lives and in the public square. We hope you find this dialogue engaging, foot-provoking and edifying.

Please join me in giving a warm Harvard welcome to Professor Jean Bethke Elshtain. [Applause] Well, thank you very much. I'm delighted to be here this evening and to join my good friend Michael Sandel on this stage.

I would like you to imagine if you could an echo from long ago. It's from my childhood and I can assure you that was long ago. The voices of children piping clear voices, singing the words to a beloved children's hymn of the day.

Some of you may recall it. I don't know if you'd admit to recalling it, but you might recall it. Jesus loves the little children, all the children of the world.

Be they yellow, black or white, they are precious in his sight. Jesus loves the little children of the world. Now sometimes, if it is very quiet, I can hear that song again.

And I see once more the felt board that was our visual aid device featuring a felt, it's a type of cloth. Some of you surely recall what that was. This is very much pre-technological.

A felt Jesus figure standing before the children, holding forth his shepherd's crook and beckoning to them to join him. Or Jesus is represented seated on the stump of what was once a mighty tree. Children crowd around him as he rebukes his own disciples.

Suffered the little children to come unto me and forbid them not, for if such is the kingdom of God. Now let's fast forward some decades. I was in college by then, and I had slowly but surely inched over to join the company of those who chided those who believed.

I decided I was not gullible like those folks. And if they wanted to cling to wishful thinking, they could certainly do that. But I was at university after all, where I had learned skepticism.

And indeed I decided I had become a skeptic myself, joining most of my professors in that designation. But my residency as a skeptic didn't work out so well. Perhaps skepticism wasn't quite it.

No, I said to myself, I am instead a deist. We were in the final weeks of my history honors course and studying the enlightenment. I'm a deist.

I'm an enlightenment type. So that was that. I'd finally settled it.

Well, not quite as it turned out. I learned that arguably the greatest theologian of the 20th century, Carl Bart, you know when it could accuse him of being deficient intellectually, had responded to a query from a critic. The questioner asked the great man, what is required? What does God expect from the Christian by way of belief? And Carl Bart said, just take the first line from the hymn, Jesus loves me.

Jesus loves me, this I know, for the Bible tells me so. And God presumably will take it from there. Now my reaction to this news was befuddlement.

You mean all the tumult, all the sleepless nights, all the anguish over core beliefs and truth warrants and so on, that it was really rather beside the point? Surely that cannot be. I thought of the wonderful line, the playwright Robert Bolt puts into the mouth of St. Thomas Moore before Morris Marjardom. We are made to serve God with him and the tangle of our minds.

So perhaps those who anguish over these issues are serving God in the same way as someone who says, Jesus loves me, this I know. Bart, a formidable scholar, however, seems to suggest that all the learned tones stacked up are less in the overall scheme of things than the simple Jesus loves me. Well, I cannot rehearse the entire tale for you.

That would border on self-indulgence. Suffice to say that much of what I thought I had rejected had lived on and burst forth in manifold ways. Some not so friendly critics of my first book, *Public Man, Private Woman*, subtitled *Women in Social and Political Thought*, had hinted or flat out stated that they suspected the author just might be a Christian.

I know. It was quite serious. To be sure, religious references, illusions, parables, historical developments together with great religious thinkers as they've been categorized were prominent throughout the book.

And I realized that in the concluding chapter, I had used terms and phrases like bearing witness and where two or three are gathered together. Surely these understandings, though, are part of a shared patrimony as children of the West, but people should not make unwarranted assumptions, and any good and wise political thinker should consider and incorporate modes of thought that helped to shape the world. Of which he or she is a part.

In the West, one of those formative movements and ways of being in the world is, of course, Christianity. We will admit or forget this at our peril. In other words, we become more stupid.

We lose contact with the sources and the forces they have for better or worse, made as who we are as persons, and as a complex, diverse culture. Now, let's turn, as you know, we don't have a whole lot of time, let's turn to contemporary debates, if you will, about the self and where religious belief enters into it. For philosophers like Charles Taylor, the

self cannot exist, cannot function outside his or her immersion in an inescapable framework.

It is within such a framework that we establish our orientation to the good, that our moral institutions are engaged and formed to become solid habits, that those moral instincts go on to become our mode of access to a world in which certain ontological claims serve as a background picture against which our understanding and intuitions are articulated. We can never escape such orientations. We can never step outside them or shed them.

Now, one great feature of the orienting framework for citizens of liberal societies is a political ethic of toleration. Cells oriented to this framework learn to live and let live, if not approve of, commitments different from their own. Now, in its classical form, this liberal dictum, live and let live, provided enormous latitude for judgment and discernment.

In other words, the regime of toleration did not require suspending judgment as between contrasting beliefs, identities and ways of being. Rather, it required restraint, not coercing those whose orientations one might find unintelligible. Even just tasteful.

So long as those orientations pose no threat to public safety. Now, the classic liberal regime of toleration speaks of dangers that are assumed to exist, should selves locate themselves within orientations, frameworks that make it impossible to speak across frameworks. They can't speak to one another.

There are, of course, some very difficult passages that we would have to study into parse if we were to strip this orientation or that down to its bare essentials. And that's certainly not a task we can undertake here. So we do have time to note that liberalism over time paid a pretty heavy price as the regime of toleration evolved.

They gave up the public promotion and presence of their faith in the public square as part of the deal, so to speak. So we will have public or civic peace, so long as that which we care about and believe most deeply does not enter into our civic conversations in a robust way. One doesn't go marching into the public square, brandishing the truth of one's faith.

Rather, religion is privatized and its meaning reduced to the private spiritual well-being of religious practitioners. If you do bring your deepest core beliefs into the public square, you are inviting civic strife. This can only be a recipe for civic strife and other horrible outcomes, especially so if faith has first been privatized and second subjectivized.

The upshot is that should I, as a person of belief, raise those beliefs in a public forum, or bringing forward warrants for the policy I am endorsing, my actions can only be construed as a kind of hostile takeover. You are trying to turn me away, I think, from my

deepest core beliefs. Somehow this is hostile to democracy by definition.

Ergo, proselytization, trying to persuade others of your point of view as a suspect, perhaps even forbidden. No one should be forced to re-examine his or her core beliefs. Now, it is the coercive feature we object to, says the critic.

The respondent could say, "force has nothing to do with it." And turn his interlocutor might opine that the entire exchange could be exquisitely polite, but coercive nonetheless. Again, we'll not settle that matter here tonight. But perhaps we may take it with you, so to speak, and raise these questions with your friends and fellows.

Perhaps the best thing I can offer you here is a splendid example of what it is I have in mind. Again, as a moment of persuasion, as an essential constitutive feature of proselytization, we're doing a way with shedding coercion and manipulation. So we require some way to distinguish between blunt coercion, slime and manipulation, and authentic persuasion.

Distinctions between and among these alternatives have been hopelessly blurred, given our vaunted view of our own privatization. You know, I got a B&B. And our inarticulously, when it comes to parsing the goods of a civic life, in instances of intimidation, coercion, there is an implied threat of harm, unless you convert to my point of view.

In a case of manipulation, I sneakily get you on my side. Neither of these approaches respects you as a moral agent who can freely weigh alternatives and make up your own mind about something. Persuasion by contrast begins with a presupposition that you are a moral agent, a being whose dignity no one is permitted to deny or to strip from you, and from that stance of mutual respect, from that stance alone, one offers arguments or invites your participation, your sharing in a community and its rhythms.

You do not lose something by agreeing. Even among persons religious, however, proselytizing has come to have an unpleasant ring to it. The snapshot of all this would seem to be the both toleration and proselytizing.

It is a clumsy word, isn't it? It does not come sort of, you know, ringing the off the tongue. It is sort of great, but proselytizing are badly battered as concept and as practices. Is there any way to redeem one or the other or both? I think there is.

My example of an attempt, at least, along these lines comes from Pope John Paul II's pastoral visit to Kazakhstan in September 2001. Something struck me in a report I read of that visit in which the pontiff, speaking to thousands and thousands of young people, and the capital city, Astana, said, "Allow me to profess before you with humility and pride the faith of Christians." Jesus of Nazareth, the son of God-made man 2000 years ago, came to reveal to us this truth through his person and his teaching. Only in the encounter with him the word made flesh do we find the fullness of self-realization,

religion itself, without the experience of the wonderful discovery of the son of God and communion with him who became our brother, becomes a mere set of principles, which are increasingly difficult to understand and rules which are increasingly hard to accept.

I found this moving. I wanted to explore why, in conclusion. Certainly the combination of pride and humility is a part of it.

One places before another and all humility was most profound beliefs. Beliefs one holds with pride, not boastful self-pride of the kind that St. Augustine so rightly condemned, but pride with a kind of dignity or as part of a kind of dignity, and that these beliefs may well be repudiated or scorned or ignored. Also powerful is John Paul's recognition that turning God into a metaphysical first principle is not only increasingly difficult to understand, but increasingly hard to accept.

John Paul's words on this pastoral visit constituted an eloquent defense of toleration and another of his homilies and Kazakhstan. When in a society, these are his words, citizens accept one another and notice that what is being accepted is one another as a citizen. In one civic status and in their respective religious beliefs, it is easier to foster among them the effective recognition of other human rights and an understanding of the values on which a peaceful and productive coexistence may be based.

In fact, they feel a common bond in the awareness that they are brothers and sisters because they are children of the one God. It reminds his listeners that in Kazakhstan today there are, and I'm quoting, citizens belonging to over 100 nationalities and ethnic groups. And they live, they have no choice but to live side by side.

Coexistence is a necessity, but quote, bridges of solidarity and cooperation with other people, nations and cultures is an imminent possibility that should be realized, even as the gospel in all its fullness is preached in all humility and pride. Well, there's much more to say, but my time is up and I realize peering into the fog of the past that that was precisely what those lessons in Sunday school with the felt Jesus, what those were all about. We must be sisters and brothers, we must learn to live with one another, we must be wise, we must be brave, but we know that holding together humility and pride is no easy thing.

But as my grandmother always preached, if it's worth doing, it's worth doing well. Go grandma. [Applause] Please welcome Professor Michael Sandow.

Oh, I agree. Thank you. Well, thank you and what a pleasure it is to be reunited with my friend, Gene Alshtane, and what I was reminded just listening to that talk of what a great pleasure and privilege it is.

And I'm afraid, Chris, we're not going to have a debate on our hands. That's the only problem. But I would like to take up the question, what should be the role of moral and

religious argument in public life? There is a certain answer to that question that says, we disagree.

We in pluralist societies disagree about moral and religious questions, so we should try, and so far as possible, to keep them out of public discourse. We should try to engage in a form of public reason that brackets or sets aside or leaves at the door of the public square are moral and religious convictions. I think that views a mistake, but it is a powerful view and an influential one, and it's worth recognizing the source of its appeal.

One source of the appeal is, as Professor Alstane just mentioned, we worry about conflict and disagreement and coercion and wars of religion. This worry runs very deep. Understandably so.

And there's the fear of coercion that if moral and religious arguments are brought to bear in public discourse in a democracy and if people argue on that basis and vote on that basis, then the effect will be to have laws that impose on some the moral or religious views of others, views with which they may disagree. So there's a worry about disagreement and a worry about coercion. And yet I think that view of toleration or public reason, leaving our moral and religious convictions outside the public square, is a mistake.

For two reasons. First, many of the questions that we have to decide together, public questions, political questions, policies, laws, unavoidably presuppose some answer or other to questions that are informed by people's substantive moral and religious convictions. We can't decide what the law should be about abortion or about stem cell research or about same-sex marriage without engaging directly with contested conceptions of the good life.

And of virtue and the meaning of life. These are big questions. They're moral, they're spiritual, they're religious, theological questions.

And many decisions we need to make to govern ourselves together presuppose some answer or other to those questions. That's one reason. It's not always possible to bracket or set aside these views.

But I think there's a further reason. Even in those aspects of our public life where we could bracket, we could set aside our moral and spiritual convictions. Doing so would cut ourselves off and cut our civic life off from a range of considerations that ought to matter in the way we govern our lives together.

Now, there's often a confusion. People say, when people like Gene and me make this argument, people say, "Well, don't you believe in the separation of church and state?" That's the wrong question. That's the question based on a confusion.

There's a difference between the separation of church and state on the one hand and

the separation of religion and politics on the other. In fact, one of the strongest arguments for the separation of church and state is precisely to allow free scope for pluralist argument and engagement from all traditions, secular and faith traditions in politics. Now, what about toleration? If we bring to bear, if we welcome all voices, secular voices informed by various faith traditions in the public square, won't that be a clamorous, contentious kind of public discourse? Yes.

Yes, but ideally it will be a morally more robust one than the kind we've become accustomed to, and it might actually elevate the terms of public discourse. After all, we're not doing all that well these days. If you look at the terms of political discourse, what passes for political argument often consists of shouting matches on talk radio and cable television, ideological food fights on the floor of Congress.

Some people say that's because too many people believe too deeply in their moral convictions and they're bringing them to bear in its creating this cacophony. I think something closer to the opposite is the case. I think the reason our public discourse is so impoverished is that it is largely empty of big questions of meaning, big questions that people care about.

And so I think what we need is not less moral argument in politics but more. And what does this mean for toleration? It means then rather than aspire to a toleration of avoidance. We should aspire to a pluralism of engagement about hard, moral, and spiritual and religious questions.

But it's many people made uneasy about this about the cacophony, of a morally more robust kind of public discourse. I saw a small signal of this. My wife and I were traveling recently in India and we were staying in a hotel, an upscale hotel in the north of India.

And the hotel was spread out and adjacent to the grounds were local communities. And often at night you could hear the voices of people praying and chanting. And in the morning you could hear calls to prayer.

And we found this enchanting. But apparently not all the guests did. Because we discovered when we went, when we came back in the evening, and the turned down service had come, you know, they sometimes leave a mint on your pillow.

Here they also left another amenity. It was a small wooden box. We wondered what was in it.

On the box there was a little pendant that described the amenity contained in the box. And I brought it along. It said, "Dear guest, as you may hear the sounds of evening celebrations or early morning prayers from the local community, we provide you here earplugs with our compliments." And then it said, "Wishing you a restful sleep." Well, we didn't avail ourselves of that rather strange amenity.

But in a way, this is symbolic of a certain widely held view about the place of the sounds and the voices of moral and spiritual argument in public life. Now, I think one of the ways that we can make progress in challenging the toleration of avoidance that I've described is to notice that what counts as religious argument in politics is not so clearly distinguishable from other kinds of moral argument. In fact, I think it's worth noticing and emphasizing that there's a rather blurry distinction among moral, spiritual and religious voices and arguments and contributions to public discourse.

Let me give you one example. Most of the time, when we debate questions of public policy and law, we debate them from the standpoint of two considerations, utility on the one hand. Will it promote the general welfare? Will it produce more happiness on balance and fairness? And part of the appeal of utility and fairness is that each in its way seems not to get us entangled in questions about virtue or the right attitudes and dispositions to encourage in our fellow citizens to try to cultivate and promote.

And yet reasoning about public things only from the standpoint of utility and fairness misses a lot that matters. And what it misses are considerations precisely having to do with the proper way to value goods and to cultivate our character. The proper attitudes and dispositions to take toward the questions we have to consider.

When we debate the environment and whether we should try to prevent global warming and pollution, we often say, well, we need to do that wide because it creates a drag on the economy and various health risks, that's utility. Or it's unfair to future generations, that's justice. But what about the attitudes and dispositions, the habits of mind, that incline us increasingly to treat nature as entirely a resource at our disposal that we can treat however wantonly provided, we don't diminish the overall utility and don't do unfairness.

Or take the debate about genetic engineering to choose the sex of our children, to choose a boy or a girl, or to enhance their strength or choose their eye color, or make them smarter conceivably one day. Now you might say, we don't want to have sex election because it'll throw off the sex ratio and the demography and that'll create instability. That's a utilitarian argument, and it's a serious one.

And others say it's objectionable because it's unfair to the child who isn't really free then to choose for himself or herself how to live. That's not such a good argument because otherwise children don't choose whether to be boys or girls in the first place. But really what's objectionable is the third consideration, I think, having to do with an attitude of mastery and dominion, a kind of hubris, that casts the parent as the maker of the child and casts the child as the object of the parent's will as a kind of product or achievement.

Which is a misplaced way of conceiving our drive to mastery and dominion, which drive is familiar and useful in many parts of life. So it's a bad attitude. It's the wrong way.

It disfigures the relation of parents to children. And that's a kind of loss that can't quite be captured by the language of utility and fairness. Consider a final example, success, and especially unequal success in the growing gap between rich and poor.

We're familiar with arguments that too much inequality lowers utility by creating crime and unhappiness and dissatisfaction and insecurity. And we're familiar with the arguments that say too great a gap between rich and poor is unfair, unfair to those at the bottom. But maybe there's a further, deeper reason to worry about the growing inequality of our society that has to do with a certain attitude toward our own success, those of us who may land on top.

And the attitude, like the attitude of the overbearing parent who's using biotechnology to choose the genetic traits of the child, the attitude I think has to do with a certain kind of hubris. Only in this case, it's the hubris of assuming that we are the sole possessors and proprietors of the talents and gifts that our society happens to heap rewards upon. And therefore, we as the owners of these talents and gifts have a privileged right to the fruits of their exercise.

And that leads to a kind of attitude and disposition toward one's own success. Never mind those on the bottom, toward the rest of us. That is corrosive, a kind of overreaching and inhaling too deeply.

It's the idea that merit, success, money and wealth is the crown of virtue that I earned it. And therefore, it's mine rather than being alive to the sense in which I'm the bearer of gifts that are not my own doing. And much of my good fortune may be thanks to that.

And that gives rise to a notion of solidarity, or can support a notion of solidarity, that's harder and harder to come by. If we cultivate, as I'm afraid our society has in recent decades, cultivated a sense, that we are responsible for what we do and what we get and what we accumulate. So these are three very different kinds of public questions that would benefit, I think, from a livelier sense of the contingency or the giftedness of the circumstances in which we find ourselves.

Which is just one example of habits and attitudes and virtues that often find articulation and expression in various faith traditions, but that can't quite be translated into the language of utility and fairness. And why do we insist on translating them then? Well, because we think that utility and fairness alone enable us to ask people to leave their moral and religious convictions at the door. Their views about virtue, their views about character, their views about the proper way to value goods.

I don't think, going back to the Caffney, we would, I don't think we should have a morally more robust kind of public discourse because we will agree. We don't know on what we will agree until we try. But I do think it would make for a better kind of public discourse, and I do think it would also make for a richer democratic citizenship.

Thank you. [Applause] Thank you.

[Music] All right, well, it's really intimidating to be the next voice that you all hear.

[Music] What we're going to do from here is I'll ask a couple of questions. I'll ask the professors to each ask each other a question, then we'll turn to you. So do be thinking, and I know in your programs you have space for notes, so please feel free to use that.

So my first question is for Professor Epstein. Okay. I'm hearing you give a lot of space to religion in the public square, saying that the liberal idea of live and live should not lead to subjectivization.

We need to distinguish between coercion and manipulation on the one hand and persuasion on the other. And because of that, we should be open to people sharing their deepest commitments and being open to changing our minds. And you also said what I thought was a key phrase, so long as we pose no threat to public safety.

And so one question that I wondered is whether that's enough. And I know some people who might worry that public safety as a kind of cap gives too much space for certain kinds of theocracy. So I'm wondering how you might fill in the middle, so to speak, and give some guidelines for the kind of civil discourse and prevent against the disagreement and coercion that Professor Sandell mentioned.

Well, the phrase that I used about threats to public safety was part of the description of the position I was opposing, not the position I was affirming. It was part of the regime of toleration that said, you know, we can engage one another only up to the point where our core beliefs threaten to come into play. And at that point we have to quash things precisely because there may be a threat to public safety.

So the threats that I absolutely agree with your conclusion that saying, oh, this will lead to chaos in the streets, that that's an argument that people rush to when they think something really deep is going to be engaged in a public forum. So I think there was a slight sort of misstatement in my position, not a big one, but a slight one. So let me clarify that in a way.

So someone who is worried that to be persuaded is a serious threat. I hear you saying that that should not be seen as a threat. Well, it does mean, let me tie in some things from Michael's talk.

If your view of the self is that you are the center of the universe, that you are a master, that you have a kind of dominion, even if it's the little state of the self, that any engagement with another person may pose a threat to your territory. So that view of the self will always perceive some kind of threat and will not therefore be open to persuasion because being open to persuasion makes you vulnerable. It means that you're not surrounded by a wall, that the borders are rather more porous than that.

And you accept the possibility that something might happen that would change you. If you expect that you might change someone else's point of view, it works the other way as well. So I think that's just part of the deal.

If you're going to go beyond the positions that I criticized and Michael criticized. Okay. And then just as a follow-up.

So say, for example, in the Christian tradition, you have a sort of theodosian moment, you know, in the fourth century where Christianity is put as the nice seeing Christianity as the official religion of the Roman Empire. Is there a moment where some liberal ideals such as live and let live puts a check on religion's ability to move forward into the public square and shape it according to their own? Well, I have a hard time putting the theodosian settlement and 19th century liberalism in a, you know, face it one another. I just don't know how to do that.

If you, if your question at base has to do with what tendencies, what are some of the worst, tell me if I'm getting it, some of the worst tendencies of what human beings are capable of come out in religion as they do in other spheres of human activity. That as religion is not exempt from folly and not exempt from sin and so forth. So are there other forces, and you suggested the liberal ideal of toleration might be one such.

Other forces that could check certain tendencies to excess on the part of religion or, you know, some other movement presumably or powerful view. If that was ever the case, I don't think it's the case now. It seems to me that in fact, a certain kind of desiccated liberal toleration was unable to come to grips with some of the greatest forces moving in our world today, which are religious forces for better or for worse because religion just wasn't supposed to be doing these.

It was supposed to be on the way out. I mean, when Michael and I were, he's, he's of course a young whipper stampered by compare to me, but I think we read some of the same books and, you know, we were told that modernization meant inevitably that religion was going to weaken and finally disappear altogether. Well, that doesn't seem to have happened.

So I think that through all sorts of social scientists into disarray because the kinds of things they had rather confidently predicted were not coming to fruition. And some of the things they said would never happen were happening. So at least now I think religion is recognized as this great force.

It has to be studied and as a force because we see it every day for ill or for, or for good. Could I ask Michael a question? Or are you going to? Can I ask him one first? Well, no, you go ahead. Well, it's, it's, it follows right on what I just said to you.

I won't, I won't lead us astray. Michael, I was wondering where religion fit in with, you

know, the alternatives you were describing as the conclusion of your talk. Is religion play any role in the background or the deep background of any of those positions? By the, by the background of the positions, you mean the emphasis on attitudes, habits, virtues, dispositions? Yes.

As a register that's often missing or crowded out of the statistical. Right, right. Yes, do you mean it's a general matter? Yeah, I think this is the space where this is the part of our public discourse that's, that's withered now.

But that traditionally has been informed and inspired, I think, by various spiritual traditions, faith traditions. Would you agree with that? Yes, I would. And I think part of the reason that we shrink from bringing questions about how properly to value goods or what virtue should we try to cultivate.

The one reason we shrink from that, I think, is connected to this discussion about toleration or what we, maybe we should call thin toleration. Yeah. Just to describe the view that you were criticizing.

The thin toleration view or the toleration of avoidance, of bracketing, is very wary of bringing talk of virtue or character formation or attitudes or dispositions into public discourse because it seems to traffic in those spiritual and often faith derived. Considerations because what they have in common, those considerations, is that they touch on the meaning of the good, on the nature of the good life. And bringing considerations of the good life to bear in public discourse is what this, we can call it, the "intoleration" wants to avoid.

What if precisely wants to reward? Yeah. Okay, thank you. Yeah.

So Professor Sandell, can I ask, I'm wondering if you look for a kind of alignment, if you like, between what you call this register and utility and fairness. And what I have in mind is the sort of thought process that John Rawls went through, where he thought about the civil rights movement and how infused the language was with religious language. And ultimately ended up allowing for that religious language because he thought it ultimately aligned with another kind of moral reasoning.

So I'm wondering if you look for an alignment or if you think that a religious way of thinking, if you like, can stand as a freestanding counterbalance to some of these other... Well, I think it can be a freestanding contribution. I don't know whether it's a counterbalance, but a freestanding, independent contribution, I would say. I would not insist that people whose moral and civic convictions are informed by faith traditions.

I would not insist that they translate those arguments into a form of reason that washes away their source, because often what's most interesting about the contribution is inseparable from the source. Even if not everyone in the society shares that faith

tradition, learning about the source and hearing the line of reasoning that flows from the source is part of what makes it, or can make a distinctive contribution, when evangelical Protestants led the abolitionist movement in the 1830s and 1840s, they argued that slavery was a sin. Now, there are other arguments to be made against slavery, other moral arguments that are entirely legitimate and important and weighty.

But I wouldn't insist that evangelical abolitionists translate their conviction about slavery as sin into slavery as some other kind of injustice detached from sin, because that misses an important part of the contribution. Likewise, if you washed away all of the Christian strands of Martin Luther King's argument against segregation, it wouldn't be Martin Luther King. It would be something else.

It would be something else, and it would be a lesser thing. And so that's why I think it's a mistake to try to insist on a translation. Now, that doesn't mean we shouldn't try to make ourselves understandable to one another and try to persuade one another and reason together.

But the reason I don't think that means we have to neglect or cut off or bracket the source is I don't think these sources of faith traditions are hermetically sealed and so inaccessible to people outside them. I think that's a great mistake. And so that's why I would not insist on translating into some other more neutral, moral vocabulary.

Thank you. Would you like to ask Professor Elfstein a question? Oh, that's right. I jumped the gun.

Okay. I'm another one if you like. All right.

Well, it's one question that occurred to me. Jean was about the language of toleration. Yes.

Now, in some ways toleration means putting up with something. Yeah. That you're not too happy about it.

Yeah. What the heck? Yeah. Right.

And does that suggest that toleration may not be the best way of arriving at a pluralist vision of social and moral and civic life? Should we should we is all toleration what we were calling a moment ago, thin toleration or is there a more robust kind? It may be a non judgmental sorry a judgmental toleration that allows for the possibility that yes, I accept what you have to say. It doesn't mean I agree with it. I may think it's completely bonkers, but I'm curious to learn more about it.

Maybe I hadn't seen it. So what about toleration? It's a nice bag. Yes, it is.

And I do think there is another form of toleration which I couldn't develop that I call deep

toleration. And I won't even start spelling it out right now, but it's it's it's rather like Michael Wolster's thick and thin. Morality is when he talks about the international or the universal sphere because it's a thicker notion of toleration.

It demands more from us. You know, then just saying, well, you know, I guess I have to tolerate them. They're here.

But it demands more from us, but it also calls upon us in ways that thin toleration never does. Calls upon us, for example, to recognize to really recognize many of those that we would as soon not even look at. And I'm thinking of an occasion.

I end my Gifford lectures with this little story told me by a Jesuit priest who was had been working in Guatemala. But the story is about a fellow named Jean Vanier who started a home for people with profound mental or physical disabilities. And he realized Vanier did and one part of the impetus to create these homes was the fact that one day he noticed the same man sort of wandering up and down up and down a street, little village in France.

And he tried to become acquainted with him and slowly it happened. And he realized one day with a start that this fellow had no keys. His pockets were always empty.

No change. No identity card. No key.

Didn't have a card. Didn't have a home. So he said that image of empty pockets just haunted him and how easy it is for us to ignore those with empty pockets.

And deep toleration would not permit that. You'd have to pay some attention and pay some mind. And in toleration we can just let them wander about with their empty pockets.

This discussion of toleration reminds me of a passage that puzzled me at the end of a famous essay by Isaiah Berlin who in many ways was a great political theorist in Essay. At the end of one of his famous essays he says a wise man once wrote to realize the relative validity, the relative validity of one's convictions. And yet to stand for them unflinchingly is what distinguishes a civilized man from a barbarian.

Now I was very puzzled by that. I thought that was puzzling because the wise man actually was quoting Joseph Schumpeter who says this. And in a way, now this was in the 19, Berlin was writing this probably in the 1950s.

And that was at the high tide of thin toleration in a way. But what puzzled me about that idea was that if everybody really did believe that his or her convictions were merely relative, why stand for them unflinchingly? Indeed, I'd ask the same question. Why stand for them unflinchingly? And in many ways liberalism transformed itself from an idea based on toleration based on relativism to a much more philosophically sophisticated

and compelling version, Chris, the kind you asked about in John Rawls, a generation later, which was not based on the idea of moral relativism because Rawls was not a relativist, certainly not about justice.

And he maintained that his view didn't even depend on relativism about the good. He just wanted to separate considerations of justice from considerations of the good. So in many ways, the liberalism that we wrestle with today on this question of toleration is subtler and more sophisticated than the kind of 1950s version which was based on a kind of implausible kind of relativism.

And yet it still raises the kind of questions of translation that you rightly raised and whether we should insist on that translation. The translation into terms that everyone can in principle. And a bridging kind of acceptance of Martin Luther King into public speech.

Right. If you could translate that argument in a way that would be consistent and therefore it's in line with public reasons. Very strange.

People can talk about King and forget that he was a Baptist preacher for habits days. I mean, we'll sort of clean him up and make him look like your average, what, liberal politician or something. I don't know.

But it certainly isn't Martin Luther King. Let's get some questions from the audience. We have Usher's going around with Mike's and I'll look and you'll wave and I'll point.

Can I ask a question? Got a question? Where is that? I don't see. Yes. I think we have to make a very strong distinction between a society like our own which has many, many minorities and societies that have absolute majorities dealing with minorities.

Here the cacophony is a plus because we have so many different voices. But let's say in a society where it is a theocratic, authoritarian society and there's a small minority and it might be tolerated to a certain degree, that toleration can be taken away. Certainly someone who grew up in the Jewish tradition.

We know that toleration is not enough. There has to be a level of enfranchisement and the capacity to participate in civil society which is guaranteed by some thing else than tolerance. That's one thing.

Second, I want to say there's a different, I've been involved in interfaith dialogue for about 30 years, Jewish, Buddhist, Jewish, Muslim, Jewish, Catholic. And that's the word I want to use. Dialogue is different than disputation.

And what I think has come up in discussion is the sense that there's going to be a disputation. In disputation someone has to be right and somebody has to be wrong. Effective dialogue I have found is you go to the partner, to the interlocutor and you

present the best stuff about your own tradition that you have.

And you put it on the table. And your interlocutor does the same thing. This is the best values we have that we want to contribute to our society.

And if you're doing it well, you come back loving your own tradition more rather than having to feel you are being persuaded by another tradition. So I think this is really a very important idea that dialogue doesn't necessarily mean anybody comes out a winner or a loser. But dialogue means the capacity to say this is what I hold dear.

And I believe that why hold dear can make a contribution not only to myself because ultimately the goal of all of our traditions, I hope, is to be right. I hope is to create compassionate human beings. And if it's not creating compassionate human beings, there's a lot of room for self-examination of what's wrong with that tradition.

So you want to comment on... Yeah, I agree with most of that. But not all of it. Certainly I agree with the part about not aiming at identifying winners and losers.

And the idea of dialogue of course is very important. Just a few weeks ago, the figure in modern Jewish life, who I think was perhaps the most significant figure in... Well, bringing Judaism into contact with modern philosophy and also with other traditions. David Hartman, who ran an institute, a center in Jerusalem, he died just a few weeks ago.

And I learned a tremendous amount attending over the years' conferences that he held. And he... First, on the question of disputation. I think one of the most effective vehicles for dialogue among different faith traditions is not only to put forward the best version of one's own tradition and then hear what the other side has to say or the other sides.

But to actually sit and study the texts of the respective traditions together, which can be a disputatious activity even within a given tradition. Of course, the... the Tomotic tradition is nothing if not disputatious. And he would gather people from different faith traditions.

Some would be conferences for people studying the Jewish tradition. Others bringing different traditions together. Jewish Christian and Islamic, he emphasized.

Studying one another's texts and arguing about them, not as representatives of those traditions, trying to put the best face on one's own tradition. But engaging together in the hard task of trying to interpret and argue through, what does this passage of Tom would mean, or of the Quran, or of a Christian text? What does it mean? And there would be plenty of disputes. Though the disputes would not necessarily break down on sectarian lines.

And so I think disputation and mutual learning can be a very valuable vehicle. And the representational approach to dialogue can lead to a kind of hardening of positions,

representing the best face of one's own. And if you want to think that, "Oh, that I learned from David Hartman is, whether he was talking to other Jews or to members of other faiths, he would always be very explicit about the dark side of what he took to be the dark side of his own tradition.

And where it was to be found in the text and how he had to wrestle with it. And so he was able to go deeper and further as a religious thinker, but also as an interlocutor. By not only presenting what he took to be the strengths of his tradition, but also by being very explicit, almost sharing as his burden with others, what he took to be the dark and difficult parts of the tradition.

Well, you won't be surprised that I basically agree with what Michael just said. But let me add a few things. I don't think you can draw a bright line between what we call dialogue and what we call disputation.

Disputation is part of, or can be, part of dialogue. And we think of dialogue in a number of ways. For example, if you read the Moral Philosopher Charles Taylor, his primary focus where dialogue is concerned is on the creation of the self that we are dialogical beings, that is that we mutually constitute one another throughout our lives.

And that continues. We often fail to recognize it. Certainly the person who claims himself or herself a master doesn't recognize the ways in which he or she has been constituted by others can't acknowledge that.

So there's that understanding of dialogue as essential to who we are and what we are as human beings. And then of course there's the sense that you were using about people getting together and exchanging views, sometimes in a way that's head-buddy. I mean, it can be rough and sometimes in a way that's a bit gentler, I suppose.

But good things can come out of all sorts of encounters. And sometimes I know I've had the experience. Certainly this was true in the sort of early days of feminism.

I don't mean 19th century. I'm not that old. I mean, in the 1970s and so on, where somehow the view was that women who call themselves feminists did not disagree with one another.

And so I was thinking, you know, there was solidarity and to question things meant you were breaking with solidarity. So I was in this feminist consciousness raising group and we'd get together and, you know, we'd be about to approach something that was important. And where you knew there'd be some differences and tempers might flare.

At that point, this session would stop. And then, you knew as soon as you got home, you know, it took me about 40 minutes to get home. The phone would ring and it would be one of the women from the group saying, "Can you believe it?" You know, the thing that was most interesting, we didn't target.

So we finally said, you know, what's the point of our getting together if what it winds up doing is inviting sort of overheated private discussions. You know, we've got to find some way to bring these into the picture. So I think we did.

Not such a great job, but a passable one. Another question. I've got someone over here.

Someone with them like, yeah. Thank you for speaking both tonight. First, I have sort of one question, the distinction you made between, or not questioned, but ask a little more about your thoughts and the distinction between church and state being separated and religion and politics.

And what exactly where this separation is drawn? And I know you're going to say coercion and it's not manipulative. But I want to sort of maybe think about a concrete example. It's been termed radical Islamism in the Middle East and new democracies there.

And how do you deal within a society when there are people who hold beliefs that are coercive, that want to coerce others into holding their beliefs? How do you set up rules practically to deal with that one? Secondly, even if you do, it seems like your ethic is inevitably coercive because those people are going to feel coerced. They're going to be excluded from civil society. Or if they're not, how are they not excluded from civil society? And how can they engage in productive, deep dialogue if their deep dialogue means being coercive? So I just want to know how you deal with those issues.

Well, it's a challenge always where there's a dominant majority of any kind exercising its will on minorities. I don't think that there is any one formula for contending with that. I think it's a mistake to have an established church or an established religion.

Because that typically has the effect at least of heightening the dangers that you described, the dangers of coercion. And also of cutting off the robust, morally engaged pluralism that we've been calling for really. In the case of Islam, I think this is one of the great challenges that Islam is facing today.

And I think there are, I don't think there's any single model or set of rules that can resolve this question. Turkey now is trying to work out a version of an Islamic democracy. It's halting, it's fraught with challenges.

But of the places in the world today where we see Islam trying to govern in a way consistent with democratic principles, Turkey is an important example in test case and it will be very interesting to see not only how it develops, but also how it's theorized and explained and used, if it is used as a model for other Islamic societies. In Christianity in the West there was a religion as this was being sorted out. And then there came to be a kind of settlement, but not a fixed settlement because we're still now debating the terms of the settlement.

When we're discussing the intolerance versus more robust pluralism and so on. So I think that majoritarianism of any kind, whether it's religiously powered or not, is a dangerous thing. But how exactly to negotiate the Islamic character, the Christian character, the Jewish character of a society, while respecting minorities and holding open the possibility of debate and argument.

That's one of the great challenges of our time in the Islamic world right now is struggling with this and we don't know what the result will be. I'd like to add that it seems to me we're not doing we here. We're not doing a very good job of dealing with the developments in Islam, in part because we revert to the thin tolerance model, which means that things that should be criticized and condemned, practices, acts, we're hesitant to do it because people are afraid they'll be accused of being bigots of some sort.

And then we have others who of course go off the rails the other way and think that anyone who is a, who professes to be a Muslim is a threat. So you get these pictures, both of which are troubling and inadequate to the task of really trying to sort out the different positions within Islam right now. I mean it's very vibrant and active in thinking about, for example, the compatibility of Islam with democracy and what version of democracy, what would it look like and so forth.

And you know the literature is available if we would take advantage of it and try to understand it. Again, I think the fallback position is this thin tolerance and our elites have not done our news media and so on have not done a very good job of being public educators on this issue. >> We've got one here.

>> At the risk of sounding simplistic, I'd love to know what you think about this. Is there a law of human nature? Is it testable? Are we naturally good? Are we selfish or fallen or broken? How does that prime the pump for dialogue, certainly interfaith dialogue or social dialogue? Is that, it seems to be largely missing in the dialogue and I'd just like to know how you respond. >> The problem with the question is not that it's simplistic, that it's rather difficult.

>> Yes. >> Well, that's for you, Jean. >> It is? Okay.

>> Well, I think naturally we're a mess. I mean, it's -- >> [Laughter] >> I think that human beings are neither naturally good nor naturally evil all the way through, but we're born with certain propensities that are drawn out over the course of a lifetime. And what gets emphasized, what we do depends in part on our own willing, as St. Augustine argued so brilliantly, but it also turns on what the culture tells us is good and rewards.

And what the culture says is not so good and steers us away from. So human nature is not fixed, I would say, but nor are we silly putty, you know? You can't just mold us into anything you want. We're made of different stuff, but anyone who's a parent knows that

the child is not a blank slate.

You know, kids come into the world with all sorts of predispositions. And there's so different. I mean, within one family, you know, you see these differences that emerge.

So you know that there's something going on, you know, that we bring with us when we're born as unique human beings. But there's no model and that's great that we'll guarantee that we can mold everybody in a society so they can form this type of person. It doesn't work like that.

Great. Well, I'm sorry to say we're coming to the end of our time. If this is wedded your appetite, I know there are going to be opportunities to continue discussing.

Maybe some of our co-sponsors will set up some of those textual dialogues that Professor Sandell mentioned. So I'll just ask one last question and then we'll invite Terence back up to tell us about some of those opportunities. And so the question is this, you know, here we are at Harvard, a university, and the university has to be considered part of public life.

So what does this look like in our classrooms, in our dorm rooms, leave us with a vision for the academy? Maybe Professor Sandell. Well, I would say two things should happen in a university and not only in a university. I think one of the greatest obstacles to successful dialogue among and across faith traditions is that we don't know our own traditions that well.

Very few of us do. And so I think a necessary condition of effective learning across traditions is that the interlocutors need to deepen their knowledge to the extent they can of their own. Not with the aim of digging in and being hermetically sealed, but so that they will have some rich basis for engagement with students and fellow citizens who come from different places.

So that's number one. And number two, I would say, to gather to study and argue together about the foundational texts of our respective traditions, not only within our own faith communities, but across those communities and including and welcoming students who don't identify with any faith tradition or community. So I think that the model of mutual learning with open argument where it's not one group representing, here's what my people think.

But where there is a kind of, well, in Tomodic studies called Hebruta study, which begins with two people sitting across the table with the text, arguing about what it means. And the root of Hebruta study is Chabere, which means friend. It's an activity among friends, though sometimes it can be pretty sharply pitched.

But there's no reason why the circle of that friendship needs to be restricted to two or to people who share the same faith tradition. I think in a university it's a great opportunity

to include students with secular traditions and convictions and various faith traditions to sit down and actually try to learn the key texts, because only then will we have something to talk about. And to engage in dialogue, it really helps to have something to say.

Well, of course, the University of Chicago is associated with the study of texts and almost obsessive study of texts in some cases. So I absolutely agree with what my friend and colleague has said. Let me add one other thing.

And that is that I think universities should provide, and some do. A kind of civic space, especially on occasions of great importance. And occasions when we've been shaken or we're disturbed or we want to pursue some controversial issue, universities should help to provide, again, a literally a space for those discussions to go forward with professors and students, so that perhaps out of the sort of tangle of views that are going around, so to speak, you could at least clarify what certain alternatives are.

I was thinking, I am thinking of, of course, post 9/11, when I think some very important things happen on some college campuses. And on other college campuses, there was a dearth, I mean nothing, because people were afraid to have the discussion. They were afraid that intolerance might erupt and so forth.

And there has to be some courage shown by college administrators and so on in order to defend a kind of civic space at certain times in our shared civic space. And I think that's a very important thing to say about civic life. Thank you.

Well, it's been an honor. Please join me in welcoming our speakers again. [applause]