

Pride, Sloth, and Hope at Century's End

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Who Are We?: Critical Reflections and Hopeful Possibilities, by Jean Bethke Elshtain, *Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans, 2000. 178 pp.*

IN BOOK FOUR of his *Confessions*, St. Augustine recounts a tragic story about the death of a childhood friend. Pondering the difficulties and terror of confronting death so closely leads the Bishop of Hippo to further reflections about the meaning of his despondency and his own mortality. He includes in his musings a single provocative sentence: "I had become a great question to myself." These words resonate over the task that Jean Bethke Elshtain sets for herself in *Who Are We?* Hers, however, is not a personal dilemma, at least not directly, but a cultural one, and might be rendered: "Western civilization, and especially late twentieth-century America, has become a great question to me." The difficulties and terror she has in mind are nothing less than the experience of the twentieth century itself. Now that it is over, she asserts, it is time for "taking stock." "Where have we been? Where are we going? What are our prospects? Who are we?"

In attempting to an answer to such questions, Elshtain offers up a salutary combination of theology (a lot of theology), history, social analysis, and politi-

cal theory—all written, she states, in a tone of "prophetic urgency." While the scope of such a task perhaps undermines any entirely satisfactory execution, one still feels the agile operations of a distinguished intellect, wearing her learning lightly but effectively to size up some of the thornier and darker aspects of our contemporary cultural moment. For those who have benefited from Elshtain's *Democracy on Trial* (1995) and *St. Augustine and the Limits of Politics* (1995), *Who Are We?* will come as a welcomed sequel.

What consistently pleases about Elshtain's work is her ability to draw from the Christian intellectual tradition in an ecumenical fashion and apply its insights cogently to current-day realities. Indeed, Christians of various stripes, religion-friendly conservatives, and open-minded liberals should consider the good fortune that a theologically informed intellectual like Elshtain writes regularly for publications like *The New Republic* and makes appearances on PBS's *News Hour* with Jim Lehrer.

In her fashion, then, Elshtain's begins *Who Are We?* with extended meditations on two twentieth-century theological giants: Dietrich Bonhoeffer and John Paul II. Elshtain believes that juxtaposing their theology offers a valuable framework to assess our immediate past and future prospects. Yet she is not interested in their thought generically, but specifically in their theology of the human person. She therefore turns to two lesser read works that explore the Genesis account of the creation and fall of humankind: Bonhoeffer's *Creation and Fall* (1968) and John Paul II's *Original Unity of Man and Woman: Catechesis on the Book of Genesis* (1979). Although she teases out the different theological perspectives of each author, she finally is struck by their similarities and how profoundly their views contrast with dominant present-day assumptions. Both men, she observes, regard human beings as begotten, embod-

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ied, interdependent, and fallen creatures made in the *imago dei*. Accordingly, each weighs in powerfully against “any notion of a sovereign, wholly autonomous self.... [Thus] they join hands in a countercultural struggle against the idols of the present moment.”

Turning to these idols, Elshtain is especially troubled by two related phenomena: what one might call capitalism run amok—the belief that increased work and consumption are the final ends of human life—and liberalism run amok—the belief that maximizing personal independence and self-sufficiency are goods beyond the pale of criticism. For much of the remainder of the book, she seeks to expose the clay feet of these idols.

In doing so, she invokes yet two more theological categories: the deadly sins of Pride and Sloth. In her definition, Pride is simply a certain type of willed forgetfulness of our nature, a hubristic refusal to recognize our finitude and interdependence. Unchecked, Pride gives birth to belief in “our untrammled self-sovereignty” that manifests itself in an ideology of “choice”—an ideology which Elshtain believes is now pervasive not only among social liberals but also among doctrinaire boosters of capitalism. As an example, Elshtain points to changes in the family and the workplace over the last several decades. Perceptively, she notes that a major part of the feminist agenda—empowering women as individuals to realize their full market value in the workplace—and contemporary capitalism, which sets as its goal continuous economic growth, have often worked together to produce questionable results for women, children, and families alike. Citing the work of the economist Allan Carlson,¹ Elshtain observes,

In fact much of “what we measure as economic growth since 1960 has simply been the transfer of remaining household tasks

uncounted in monetary terms—home cooking, child care, elder care—to external entities such as Burger King, corporate day-care centers, and state-funded nursing homes.” This is called progress. Quality time [between parents and children] is part...of this monetizing of everyday life. Time is parceled out into measurable, hence more “efficient” chunks. And...we comfort ourselves that our children are really the winners. They are not. Children have been the big losers along with average American families.

If Pride that manifests itself in an ideology of “choice” is a Promethean, assertive form of sin, as Elshtain claims, then Sloth is a “sin of inaction,” a “denial of God and Creation” through a failure to recognize the full implications of ourselves as finite, interdependent creatures bearing the *imago dei*. At first glance, Pride and Sloth might appear near opposites, but Elshtain contends that they have a subtle relationship: Sloth abets the Pride of autonomous individualism by handicapping one’s willingness to rise up and criticize it. Sloth thus nourishes a certain willful wallowing in delusion.

Interestingly, Elshtain turns to norms regarding the treatment of the human body, as manifest in abortion, cloning, in vitro fertilization, and prenatal screening, to demonstrate the pernicious consequences of Sloth. In all cases, Sloth aids the Pride implicit in “our quest for bodily perfection” by failing to identify and speak out against certain evils. Sloth prevents us from challenging Pride’s refusal to recognize our finite, fallen, and embodied natures—a refusal that thrusts us headlong toward Orwellian schemes of bodily and social mastery through an ideology of “choice, consent, and control.”

Elshtain’s worries about the causal acceptance of prenatal screening—through the common practice of amniocentesis—are especially on the mark. In effect, this process, although cloaked in

the language of compassion and choice, subtly legitimizes the notion that there are some acceptable and some unacceptable forms of human life. The practice sends a disquieting message to, say, Down Syndrome's children and their parents: "Why are you burdening society with such a creature. Don't you know that there are means today to avoid this?" Herself the mother of a daughter with special needs, Elshtain castigates this as a "new eugenics."

Obviously, Elshtain thinks that there are reasons for cultural despair. Yet she closes the book by invoking yet another, different theological category, the virtue of Hope, which along with Love and Faith, make up the three theological virtues. Despair is not an option, she argues, if one takes the Christian intellectual tradition seriously, for its thinkers have repeatedly called on the faithful to demonstrate hope in humanity's ultimate destiny. Hope for her is more than sentiment; it is active, deliberate, and directed. Such active hope requires that we are prepared to offer a "reasoned defense" of our positions, and indeed to insist that "reason" and "truth" are worthy goals against a culture that often prefers reckoning in terms of "power" and "legality." Finally, active hope requires that we seize upon the good and affirm it whenever it manifests itself, for the *imago dei* will not be denied and has a way of revealing itself even amid the most ghastly moments of human history.

To be sure, Elshtain is not the first conservative critic to see an ideology of choice as an entrenched problem in liberal societies. Yet she differs from many conservatives in that she does not lay the blame solely on "liberal elites" or the "1960s" or on "culture" in general. Rather, she believes that the ideology of choice is equally a consequence of the exigencies of capitalism—or, better put, a fateful confluence of capitalism and liberalism's dynamic tendencies. In this

regard, Elshtain falls into the company of Daniel Bell, who famously argued in *The Cultural Contradictions of Capitalism* (1976) that "the traditional bourgeois value system" was under attack in the late twentieth century, not so much from its declared enemies, but from "the bourgeois economic system" itself.

Yet Elshtain does not believe that it is responsible to simply stand athwart history yelling stop: capitalism and liberalism are here to stay. With James Madison, she would agree that the remedies to cure liberty's excesses are often "worse than the disease." She admitted great fear in *Democracy on Trial*, for example, that a "top-heavy" state would be invoked as the only possible bulwark against destructive individualism. Indeed, in Elshtain's (Augustinian) political vision, the powers of the *terrena civitas* to improve humankind are greatly circumscribed. Instead, the burden of improvement falls to us, the persuasive power of free, moral individuals—and especially to those, who, following in the footsteps of Bonhoeffer, the Pope, and Elshtain herself, do not shrink from embracing a transcendent view of human nature and human destiny, one not "immersed in the fixed immanence of our culture." *Who Are We?* then, it would appear, with its deliberate effort to yoke theological depth and public appeal, is a good example of Elshtain's own remedy of bringing religious insight to bear on social issues.

But the acts of a single intellect, however powerful and persuasive, are not enough. And Elshtain would be the first to admit that it takes manifestations of human solidarity, operating in civic clubs, religious organizations, charities, and the like to move the heavy rudder of a culture. Without such institutions flourishing, there will simply be no social will to rise up against the petty despots of Sloth and Pride, for want of agents to mobilize and provide outlets for the imperishable

human goodness that still longs for the virtues of Faith, Hope, and Love, not to mention the classical virtues of Prudence, Justice, Temperance, and Fortitude, all of which are vital to human flourishing.

Indeed, without them, who are we? Stooges of the *Zeitgeist*, perhaps, condemned to a paltry freedom rich in "consumer choices" and "lifestyle choices" but poor in duty, binding relationships, and the wisdom of tradition.

1. Allan Carlson, "Toward a Family-Centered Economy," *New Oxford Review* (December 1997), 28-35.

The Dogma of Toleration

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The Long Truce: How Toleration Made the World Safe for Power and Profit, by A. J. Conyers, Dallas: Spence Publishing Company, 2001. *xiv + 266 pp.*

PROFESSOR A. J. CONYERS, in this scrupulous and penetrating monograph, examines "the modern idea of toleration" as it has developed and ramified to problematic socio-political levels over the past four centuries. In particular he tries to show, philosophically and historically, how the theory of toleration is tied to the rise of the modern nation-states in Western Europe, Great Britain, and North America. He also seeks to weigh the consequences of the imposed expansion of this phenomenon, which he sees both in its destructive uses and in its good and true practices. He maintains that the prin-

ciple of toleration, though long exploited and abused from an ideological perspective, can still be rescued and restored "as something both useful and timely." The main critical pivot of Conyers's book is found in this statement from his preface: "The movement toward strong centralized governments was accompanied by a sustained secularization of public life and a trend toward relaxing...moral discipline." Central to this movement and to its reformulated list of collectivist virtues is "the strategy of toleration" that seeks to impose harmony and unity in an increasingly centralized political society of the modern world.

Toleration is seen here as a modern doctrine based largely on the love of power, or to invoke here Conyers's subtitle, "How toleration made the world safe for power and profit." Conyers portrays, in convincing ways, and with admirable subtlety of observation and argument, the distortions and deformations committed in the name of toleration. In this respect, Conyers's including as an epigraph this statement by Dietrich Bonhoeffer has its implicit relevance in understanding the ethos and the thrust of *The Long Truce*: "Whenever the state becomes the executor of all the vital and cultural activities of man, it forfeits its own proper dignity, its specific authority as government." Certainly, Bonhoeffer's words help us to recognize the results of the idea of toleration as it has progressively defined "the centralized large states and its bipolar vision of society." Toleration, in short, has been cleverly annexed by an empiricist grouping of theorists to create a new moral order by being masked as something sacred. Conyers's study meticulously traces the stages and the methods by which toleration has become, since the sixteenth century, a powerful strategic weapon in gaining pragmatic goals that have a non-religious and even an anti-religious nature. Conyers reveals how this weapon has

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