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Event Transcript

## The Christmas Wars: Religion in the American Public Square

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Every year as the holiday season gets underway, debates break out across the country over the appropriateness of religious displays in public spaces, such as crèches and menorahs placed in town halls. But the so-called "Christmas wars" are only a small part of a much larger debate concerning the proper place of religion in public life, a debate that began at the nation's founding. How did America's founders view religion and its role in our country's development? And how does the debate over church and state continue to inform politics today?

The Pew Forum invited Jon Meacham, managing editor of Newsweek and author of *American Gospel: God, the Founding Fathers and the Making of a Nation*, and Michael Novak, resident scholar at the American Enterprise Institute and author of *Washington's God: Religion, Liberty and the Father of Our Country*, to shed light on these questions.

For more information about the Christmas wars, see the Forum's recently published [legal backgrounder](#) on public displays of religion.

### Speakers:

[Jon E. Meacham](#), Managing Editor, Newsweek

[Michael Novak](#), George Frederick Jewett Scholar in Religion, Philosophy and Public Policy, American Enterprise Institute

### Moderator:

[Luis Lugo](#), Director, Pew Forum on Religion & Public Life

## EVENT TRANSCRIPT

**LUIS LUGO:** Thank you so much for joining us today for this on-the-record conversation. I'm Luis Lugo, director of the Pew Forum on Religion & Public Life, which is a project of the Pew Research Center. The center is a research organization and does not take positions on policy debates, including the one under consideration today. This luncheon is part of an ongoing Forum series that brings together journalists and opinion leaders to discuss timely topics at the intersection of religion and public affairs.



Luis Lugo

We have entered that time of the year when Americans are most likely to confront the thorny issues involved in the complex relationship between religion and public life in the United States. Like clockwork, it seems, come December, debates break out all across the country over holiday programs in public schools, seasonal displays in public buildings, and whether retail stores should use the word "holiday" or "Christmas" in greeting their customers.

This being America, 'tis not only the season to be jolly, 'tis the season for litigiousness. Not surprisingly, many of these debates end up in the courts. As our short [legal](#)

[backgrounder](#) discusses, the Supreme Court has weighed in on the appropriateness of displaying crèches on courthouse steps and menorahs in town halls. As I sit here next to Jon Meacham and Michael Novak, I can't help but wonder what the founders would think if they learned that plastic reindeers have become a crucial consideration in the court's rulings on these cases. Maybe they can enlighten us on that.

These so-called Christmas wars are only a small part of the larger debate in this country about the proper role of religion in American public life, a debate that goes back to the founding. How did the country's founders view religion's role in the public square? What do the annual Christmas wars reveal about our still-conflicted views on the relationship between church and state, religion and public life?

To help us explore these and related questions, we are delighted to have with us two very distinguished experts.

Jon Meacham was named editor in chief of Newsweek in October. He is the author of this year's best-selling *American Gospel: God, the Founding Fathers, and the Making of a Nation*. He is also the author of *Franklin and Winston: An Intimate Portrait of an Epic Friendship*, which has won numerous awards.

Michael Novak is a George Frederick Jewett scholar in religion, philosophy and public policy at the American Enterprise Institute. He's a former U.S. ambassador and the author of the recent book, *Washington's God: Religion, Liberty, and the Father of our Country*. He has written numerous books, including the best-selling *The Spirit of Democratic Capitalism*.

**MICHAEL NOVAK:** Thank you, Luis. I'm especially happy to be here with Jon, and I want to thank him for a marvelous book, which came out just about the time *Washington's God* came out. I was happy to see the general approach he took.



Michael Novak

It is very hard for a professor to speak in 15 minutes. (Laughter.) But I'd like to make, in a telegraphic way, three separate points.

First of all, the larger project is to confront what the top 100 founders thought about the founding. If you take the 86 to 89 who signed either the Declaration or the Constitution or both, and add in Abigail Adams, Tom Paine, George Mason and a few others – I'm taking this as a symbolic number 100, not a literal number – what was their view about religion and public life? It's instructive. You find what is coming to be the general consensus, that the three least religious of the founders were probably Thomas Jefferson; James Madison, questionable but sometimes thought that way; and Benjamin Franklin. The one who was most anti-religious, the fourth, was probably James Monroe. If you look at John Dickinson, James Wilson, Samuel Huntington, Benjamin Rush, and go right through the list [of founding fathers], it's quite an astonishing story. Some were presidents for years of the American Bible Association.

I'd like to establish the larger picture. For a hundred years, historians have pretty much evaded the subject of religion and the founding. In the previous 100 years there were lots of books about it. Then in the last 100 years, the last 50 especially, historians appear to have been secular and not very much interested in religion, so they didn't use much care when they did write about it. Gordon Wood has said as much recently.

It's hard reading the founding documents and the actions of those behind them. You need to accept either/or – either religious or not religious. I called my own book on this subject *On Two Wings*. Without the tradition of common sense – skepticism if you want, but I think their view of reason was that of common sense – such as the arguments of the federalists. Think about if we don't seek independence now, if we don't fight while the threat is just beginning, what will happen to our children? What will the country be like? What liberties will be left? Don't just think of your own self-interest today; think in a commonsensical way about what will happen. That's the sort of thing they meant by reason.

On the other hand, to make war against Great Britain, which had the greatest army and navy in the world – arguably alongside France – when we had no army, no navy and no munitions factory on this side of the ocean, required, as the Declaration puts it, "a firm reliance on Divine Providence." (Laughter.) They had the view, expressed most clearly by Tom Paine – Tom Paine is rightly regarded as the greatest foe of biblical religion in the founding generation, but he was not an atheist. He was a devout believer; he even took a ship to France at the time of the French Revolution to argue with the leadership of the revolution that they must not base their revolution on atheism because if they did, they would have no grounds for defending human rights. I won't go into that further; there's been a fine book on Thomas Paine just in the last year or two.

What they believe is God created the world, the whole cosmos – the stars, everything. It's a crazy belief. It's very Jewish and Christian; it's not universal, but it's what they held. God created the world for friendship. He wanted somewhere in it at least one creature, male and female, who was conscious, able to recognize what he did, and to whom he could offer his friendship. As William Penn put it, "If friendship, therefore liberty." Because if you want friendship you can't offer it to people who are coerced; you have to offer it to free women and men. When you decide to make this choice, it's one to one. This choice cannot be made for you by your mother or father, your brother or sister. In this respect it's accurate to say Judaism and Christianity introduce the idea of the individual at the very heart of history. It's the great golden thread for interpreting history.

Tom Paine wrote in his famous "Winter Soldier" letter that he was no atheist, and he couldn't believe God Almighty, Providence, would support that robber, George III, and ignore the efforts of men and women who only wanted to be free. I don't think you can understand the willingness to die of the founding generation apart from that other wing. That's what helped the thing take off. It was not a common sense; it was not a reasonable decision entirely. This was made plain in the debates in Congress. But they thought they had a chance, and if you have a chance you've got to take it.

The second set of points I'd like to make is they were not enthusiasts. They were not

evangelicals. The evangelical movement started after this, beginning towards the end of the 18th century, but really in the early 19th century. There were very few Baptists and Methodists. They were there, and they were beginning to grow. They were important in our Bill of Rights because the Baptists of Virginia refused to endorse James Madison for Congress unless he promised to pursue the Bill of Rights against his declared intentions. He wanted to argue your rights are protected in the Constitution, and if you add a Bill of Rights, it will look like those are the only rights you have whereas a lot of rights are unspecified.

The Baptists said, "We know we have this establishment, and you may trust the Anglicans, but we don't trust the Anglicans, and we want it written down." (Laughter.) Madison therefore agreed, and he went back to the Congress. And though everybody was tired of the philosophical arguments and wanted to get down to fisheries and post offices and import tariffs and so forth, he introduced one more philosophical argument, which he carried on quite brilliantly. Ironically enough it was the Baptists of Southern Virginia who obliged him to do this, and their votes were crucial. Forty percent of his vote was Baptist.

But the founders were not evangelicals, nor were they enthusiastic. A good many of them were Anglican – and I don't mean to joke here, but even the most devout Anglicans I know are not enthusiastic. (Laughter.) It would just be wrong to be an enthusiastic Anglican. (Laughter.) I think I'm right about that –

**JON MEACHAM:** You are, sir. (Laughter.) I can speak for all four of us. (Laughter.)

**NOVAK:** I want to come in on George Washington just for a moment. He did not want his religion to be a political football. He learned this in his 20s when he was responsible for raising an army of 400 men – 400 to 500 – to fight French and Indian advances on the western frontier. This battle, by the way, was one of the first to make the various states recognize the need for cooperative ventures. It was a great shaper of the sense of a national purpose.

Washington had the most unruly, most independent, most ruffian-like men to work with. He discovered early on he needed to establish a moral tone with them. He begged the governor for money for chaplains for each of their units, and for public prayer among the troops every day and certainly on Sundays. But he learned he couldn't speak as an Anglican to people, many of whom were evangelicals or Unitarians or unchurched; they were on the frontier, and there were no churches to go to. Even Washington's own church in Pohick only met twice a month. There were just not enough clergymen.



Michael Novak

He became, first for the army and then a while later for the continental army and then as president, the real architect of America's religious language. As Jon describes in his book, it's public religion. It embodies within it the Jewish and Christian views – which are not universally held among the world religions – that there is progress in history, and

that progress is along the axis of liberty, in achieving it in one set of institutions after another. Because it's not enough to pronounce liberty; you have to be institutionally free for it.

They thought that project was especially blessed. The God who made us, Jefferson loved to say – it was his aphorism – made us free. De Tocqueville describes the force of this conviction, very different from that of France or the rest of Europe. For Americans, freedom and religion went together. There was an idea of progress.

There was also an idea of suffering, that true religion brings suffering, and that learning to live is learning how to cope with suffering. Certainly it's very Jewish – if you haven't suffered – well, it's not quite Jewish. It's certainly true for the founder of Christianity and for the spirit of Christianity. They were prepared to endure hardship.

They were taught every story in the Hebrew testament and the Christian [gospels] concerns, as its axis, what happens in the will of an individual. In one chapter, King David is faithful to his Lord, and in another he is not. The suspense is always what's he going to do next or what is she going to do next. That's the fundamental axis; that's the most important thing going on in the world – what's happening in the individual consciences.

This led to a distinctive American conception of religious liberty. This idea of American religious liberty will not work with Islam or Hinduism or Buddhism, because it depends on a duty to God, a Creator, who reads our consciences. He is not deceived by our outward behavior, and therefore much depends on what you are thinking in the recesses of your heart. Nobody can do this for you.

Washington was a serious Anglican. His pastor described him as one of the best of his parishioners, and the pastor had more than one parish. But [Washington] didn't want to use that in his public statements. He preferred what I would say are deist nouns – "the author of all the good that is, that was, and that will be;" sometimes "Father Almighty" or "the Almighty." In the back of my book, I list all the various names he gave for God – never Savior, never Redeemer, never Trinity. You had to be careful; you had Unitarians and Baptists. They didn't want to start religious arguments; they needed to pull together as one. If you look at the nouns, you can argue he was deist. But if you look at the verbs, of what he asked God to do, they only fit with the Jewish-Christian God.

Let me read – do I have time to read one short thing?

**LUGO:** Yes, you do.

**NOVAK:** You said it so quickly, I may read two. (Laughter.) If you look at his first declaration of Thanksgiving as president, he said, "Whereas both houses of Congress have by their joint committee requested to me to recommend to the people of the United States a day of public thanksgiving and prayer to be observed by acknowledging with grateful hearts the many signal favors of Almighty God" – that word "signal" is really an important one to Washington; he uses it over and over again. It's like a signal in the night. He said no people in the world would be more culpable than the people of the United States if they refused to recognize the interventions of Providence on their

behalf. Signals are flashing in the dark; you can't miss them. That's at least the way he understood reality.

Please note this is an official act; it's not describing Washington's personal faith. This is an act put upon him by both houses of Congress, which he willingly undertakes. He begins it with the words, "Whereas it is the duty of all nations to acknowledge the Providence of God to obey his will, to be grateful for his benefits, and humbly to employ his protection and his favor." I'm not sure I agree there is a duty of nations. I think of duty [in terms] of individuals. But that's what he said. That's what Lincoln said later. They believe there is a duty of nations. There is a duty of a public religion.

To do God's will, to be grateful to him, to humbly employ his protection and favor – I would love to read the whole thing, but there isn't time. But he asks for the 26th of November to be "devoted by the people of these states to the service of that great and glorious being who is a beneficent maker of all the good that was, that is, or that will be, that we may then all unite in rendering unto him our sincere and humble thanks for his kind care and protection of the people of this country previous to their becoming a nation and for the signal and manifold mercies and the favorable interpositions of his providence which we experienced in the course and conclusion of the late war." It's not a theory; it's not a belief; it's an experience he is describing.

At the Battle of the Long Island in August of 1776, just after the Declaration, he made a colossal mistake. He wasn't used to using large numbers of troops. He moved almost two-thirds of his army onto Long Island, forgetting the British Navy could easily outflank him, which it did, trapping him between the British forces and the East River. He didn't wake up to it until the night before the disaster. He ordered every boat on Long Island to be summoned, and he had some Marblehead men there who were great rowers and seamen. With the wind blowing against them, and the waters blowing them back across the East River, they only got half the army across by dawn.

Then a huge yellow fog descended so you had to put your hand on the man in front of you; you couldn't see. It lasted until 11 in the morning, and by then the whole army was across. How could he not see the hand of Providence in that? That's not necessarily a miracle. If you've lived on Long Island, you know that big yellow fog is not a miracle – it happens. But the timing was exquisite, you have to say that. (Laughter.)

When they talked about Providence, they didn't always mean miracles. They just meant God works like an artist; things happen effortlessly for a great novelist and for God. They happen by this mixture of chance and design.

This is a peculiar form of deism if it is deism. He asked God later to forgive our sins, those of the nation as a whole and those of individuals. You don't do that to a deist God. The deist God made the whole thing go, but he really doesn't give a hoot for nations or for individuals. He's not that kind of God. He doesn't make you feel guilty or not guilty. That's not the God of Washington.

He also insisted on having chaplains and regular prayer meetings. He beseeched his men, "If you're going to invite the Providence of God, you are the last defense under God" – he wrote in his general orders to them – "of the freedoms and liberties of the

United States and for millions yet unborn." He said that twice, on July 2nd and July 9th. Lincoln, reading the general orders to see how they're done, since he had to be the commander in the Civil War, read that and that's how he got "under God" in the Gettysburg Address. "But on you depend, under God, the American people for their liberties," he said to them. You're not going to do it without the help of God, so you better live that way. You can't on one hand ask the help of God and then violate his law.

He did his best to forbid gambling, profanity – now that's a miracle. How can you get an army to function when profanity is a capital punishment? Not a capital punishment but a good whipping – I don't believe it could be done. Anyway he tried to do it.

**JON MEACHAM:** Thank you for having me. I should point out immediately that Michael Novak has forgotten more than I know about these topics, and it's an honor to be here with him.



Jon Meacham

I am a child of the South, and I grew up an Episcopalian in the South. There are still three of us; two are in rehab, but we're working on that. (Laughter.) I grew up on a battlefield called Missionary Ridge, which is where Arthur MacArthur, when he was 17 years old, broke Bragg's line, and that's how Sherman got to Georgia. I grew up in a moderately religious household, but only moderately – it was high and dry, unenthusiastic Anglicanism.

If you grow up in the South, particularly with the consciousness of the Civil War, you have to confront the complexities of the uses of faith, for you are living in a region that used faith and scriptural authority to support slavery and then to support Jim Crow. This is not, by any means, an unmarbled topic, and it was something very real to me growing up. I could still find minié balls shot into trees in our yard. God is a complicated figure for almost all of us. If he's not, he probably should be, is my personal view.

My grandfather, who also grew up in Chattanooga, used to tell a story about rooming at Vanderbilt Law School in the '30s with a Southern Baptist. They met at a reunion about 30 years later, and for some reason, religion came up. They had a talk, and it was a lovely lesson in toleration and forbearance. As they parted, the Baptist said to my Episcopalian grandfather, "Yes, we both worship the same God – you in your way, and I in His." (Laughter.) It ain't just the Sunnis and the Shi'a who have problems. (Laughter.)

I grew up with that, and I believe in St. Augustine and St. Paul chiefly. Paul's central insight is we can't see everything; we see through a glass darkly. Appreciating what Chesterton called "the twilight" is to me the table stakes of faith. You acknowledge what you do not know so you can figure out what you can get your arms around.

As Michael was saying, the founders were very much in this tradition. They were very much like us. Jefferson, for instance, was a ferocious atheist one day and a lukewarm Episcopalian the next. He went back and forth. He was terribly influenced, like a lot of

us, by the last book he read. Sounds like another person with Jefferson in his name. We have to understand this is an Augustinian process unfolding – at least as believers – toward an endpoint in history. But mystery is the crucial element at the beginning.

We came together to talk about the Christmas wars. When I was writing *American Gospel*, which I loved doing, I was searching around, because as a good newsmagazine editor, I knew my last couple paragraphs needed to be, "Here are the three things that if the world did them, we would be fine." I was looking for the three-point plan, and Linda Greenhouse will appreciate this, the Lemon test didn't quite do it. Nothing worked. I was reading books on this topic by [Judge John Noonan](#), a sane member of the Ninth Circuit, who wrote that when he tried to come up with a full set of standards to judge the establishment clause, after a lifetime of thinking and learning and pondering, he couldn't. There simply wasn't a standard that could be applied, which led me to Justice Stewart's line, "You know a violation when you see it."

Believers have a hard time with intellectual consistency on establishment questions, because you basically end up arguing the crèche on the courthouse square or the Ten Commandments don't mean anything so therefore they should be there. In the summer of 2005, the resolution to one of the Ten Commandments cases was if it had been up for a long time and no one had noticed it, then that was fine. If it was put up for a purpose, then that was [not] okay.

The establishment goes straight back to the sensibility of the founders. They very much wanted to avoid the worst excesses of the Old World. We forget sometimes they grew up in the shadow of terrible violence, both here and in Europe. There is a legend that James Madison heard the cries of tortured Baptist missionaries in Orange County, Va. Jefferson dwelled at great length in *Notes on the State of Virginia*, which he was writing in Paris, on how Quakers and other non-establishmentarian believers would be deprived of their civil rights in Virginia. This was very real to them; they wanted to avoid an established church at the federal level, and that was an important distinction. There were established churches in virtually every state. Massachusetts was the last to disestablish in 1833, so it took a long time there.

The phrase I hit upon to try to understand what I think of as a twilight understanding by the founders was a phrase Benjamin Franklin used in 1749 when he was writing a syllabus for what became the University of Pennsylvania: public religion. He said history has shown the usefulness of morality and public religion in the maintenance of the morality – I believe he repeated the phrase – morality of a people. I liked the phrase more than the [civil religion argument](#), which most of you are familiar with from [Robert] Bellah back to Rousseau back to Plato. To me, public religion had more to do with people and the values that shaped them, which took on a national significance when viewed collectively. Civil religion seemed to tend toward idolatry – that the nation-state was the thing to be worshipped. Therefore, we were imposing our national views inside our religious views and that would be a stumbling block, as St. Paul would say.

There was a common view of God among the founders, and it's not unlike the one that pertains today, which is he was a Creator God; he weighs prayers; he's attentive to history; he will in an afterlife reward or punish us for our conduct in this. Those basic standards would probably get a quorum of the founding fathers. They were very careful



to avoid sectarian allusions. Jesus is not a huge figure in the public documents, even in the ones meant for private consumption.

I wanted to read one thing – when in doubt, go to Benjamin Franklin. This is a letter he wrote at the end of his life to Ezra Stiles, the president of Yale, who had written asking him for his views on Jesus. Franklin wrote, "I believe in one God, creator of the universe, that he governs it by his Providence, that he ought to be worshipped, that the most acceptable service we can render to him is doing good to his other children, that the soul of man is immortal and will be treated with justice in another life respecting its conduct in this. These I take to be the fundamental principles of all sound religion and I regard them, as you do, in whatever sect in which I meet them. As did Jesus of Nazareth, I think the system of morals in his religion as he left them to us the best the world ever saw or is likely to see, but I apprehend it has received various corrupting changes, and I have some doubts as to his divinity, though it is a question I do not dogmatize upon, having never studied it, and think it needless to busy myself with it now, when I expect soon an opportunity of knowing the truth with less trouble." (Laughter.) He was about three months away from his death at that point. (Laughter.)



Jon Meacham

I think that's a fairly good way of going about it in the public square. I make a distinction – my more theologically conservative friends dislike this – between public religion and private religion. There is a strong school of thought that says this is idolatrous and unsound and that you cannot say one God is blessing America, or we trust in one God on our currency and have, in my case, the god of Abraham in private. There has to be one God; if there are two, then you've missed the mark. As a practical matter, I simply reject that. I understand why people believe it. I understand the theology. But if we are going to make our way through what George Eliot called the dim lights in tangled circumstance of life on this side of paradise, then we're going to have to make those compromises. I think that's an acceptable one.

Most of our ideas about law and liberty have religious roots. They are not wholly religious, but they are crucially so. It's ahistorical to argue differently. But the most important thing as we go forward, in a country that is 80 percent Christian and where only 10 percent of people are willing to acknowledge they are atheists, is for the religious to actually pay attention to what the religion teaches. This is a radical concept in some circles. I think as a believer who is very much part of a majority – I'm a white Southern male, Episcopalian – except for the Episcopalian part, I'm not often a minority. My job is to be deferential, to acknowledge the centrality of liberty – not of toleration. Tolerance presupposes the idea that a majority is granting a minority a right to do something. Implicit in that is the ability to yank it back. Liberty comes from God or from the social contract, if you view it from a secular perspective. It is therefore universal and inviolate. Tolerance is conditional, and that's something else; it's a dangerous thing, I think.

The job of this 80 percent is to concede the point whenever it needs to be conceded. You can put a crèche in a churchyard. You can put a crèche in your front yard. You can put a crèche in your house. Put the reindeer on the cross, whatever it is you want to do. One has to be confident enough in one's faith to figure it's a pretty poor God who needs shopping malls and courthouse lawns to support his cause. If he's God, he's got it taken care of. I don't think he needs Santa, the menorah, and the crèche.

I come to that, not just as a practical matter of politics and culture, but as a matter of theology. If God himself did not compel obedience but merely recommended it, offered some commandments and was rather cross when we didn't follow them, then no man should try. We were created with free will. Faith coerced is tyranny. If it's not a free choice, then it's not faith in the broad tradition of the Hebrew Bible and the New Testament.

It's the same reason we cannot be a Christian nation. Because if you take your New Testament theology seriously, you know Paul said, there is neither Jew nor Greek; there is neither slave nor free; there is neither male nor female; but all are one in Jesus. In Acts he says all nations have been made one blood. If you take the theology seriously, it seems one's posture in the public square should be one of grace and deference and concession.

I realize this is not a widely popular view among my coreligionists, but I honestly believe our blood pressures will go down and we'll have a more – a lot of us talk a lot about civility, but I'm not sure democracy is ever going to be civil – a more intelligent and a more – I don't mean to sound gooey about it – but a more caring conversation if believers and non-believers recognize we stand on religious foundations. Those religious foundations demand of the religious that liberty be prized above all – liberty, not faith; equality and the dignity of the individual, not any particular theological stance.


John Adams once said, "I hate polemical politics and polemical divinity. My religion is founded on love of my neighbor, on doing good to those with whom I come in contact." A lot of us hate polemical politics and divinity, and I think the way to answer that is to permit the twilight. Thank you.

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### Question & Answer

**LUGO:** I am very pleased to introduce a couple of folks who help us co-host these meetings. [E.J. Dionne](#) of *The Washington Post* and the Brookings Institution, and [Michael Cromartie](#) of the Ethics in Public Policy Center. Among other things, they help us secure speakers and oftentimes they moderate. Mike, special kudos to you for helping us to get these two speakers. I'm going to turn to E.J. first since he's a journalist, and in these meetings we always have a preferential option for journalists – Michael, that's an old liberation theology term I'm sure you remember.

**E.J. DIONNE:** Those were wonderful presentations. I was thinking the



newsmagazine headline is "Deist Nouns in the Twilight." (Laughter.)

I want to ask two questions. Jon, where are the differences between you and Michael in terms of how you read the founders? I have not studied this in the depth you have, but [there seems to be a distinction] in what the founders said between real belief, however one defines that, and a great interest in the social utility of religion. There is an awful lot in Washington where he seems to lean toward the social utility of religion.



E.J. Dionne

To open up the Christmas issue, I was very moved by Reverend Meacham's comments at the end.

**MEACHAM:** I'll [be wearing a] miter outside.

**DIONNE:** You'll give us blessings, I hope.

In the Christmas wars over the years, my leanings have changed depending on which side is the aggressor. There are moments when somebody goes to court to remove something when I ask, was that really necessary; was that really offensive? In recent years I've found an aggressive attempt on the part of some Christians to insist upon public displays. Where my leanings in the Christmas wars went one way once upon a time, they now tend to go the other way. I'm worried about what I see as a kind of new aggression. Am I being unfair to somebody in that?

**NOVAK:** I like what Jon says about public religion, and I like his reasons for rejecting the notion of a civil religion, that is, an artificially constructed religion to take the place of religion. Jon in his book – he didn't in his comments here – too easily presents Washington and others as deists. I recognize that's the conventional wisdom of a good many historians. But I side with Gordon Wood and some others in saying you can't make that fit the evidence.



Michael Novak

Washington believed he witnessed interpositions of God in his own life and in the life of the nation. In that sense, he was more a Jewish figure than a Christian one; that is, God does intervene in history; he does have a personal concern for every nation in its own way, but for some nations in particular. And history does have a meaning, and our very notion of progress depends on identifying what is the thread, the golden axis by which we measure progress. In the Jewish and Christian scheme, it's liberty. I lean towards saying – and I didn't know this when my daughter and I started the book – you have to see the Jewish-Christian background of Washington and others to make sense of what they did.

On the social utility part, neither of us directed our attention to that very much. But E.J., from a Jewish and Christian point of view, it would be a very odd God who would make a way for you to follow that wasn't practical and creative in the end. It would be self-defeating. Therefore, there is almost certain to be social utility. But that is not the reason you do it. As soon as that's reason you do it, you falsify the principle of integrity underlying it.

Washington was a man of integrity. When he lost every battle, when everything went bad, he still believed Providence was with him and with the country. [He believed] it is inscrutable, and you don't know why he's testing you this way, but it's very important to the outcome in the end. He did that in his personal life; he lost children all around him, of his own, of friends, of Martha's. He said you just can't understand these things. You can only bow your mind and recognize there is a gracious Providence who is teaching his lessons even if you can't see what they are and your feelings can't engage them. As he grew older, he developed a more complicated understanding.

The notion of religious liberty as Americans grasp it, as you see in the declaration of religious liberty of Jefferson [see, [Virginia Statute for Religious Liberty](#)], and in Madison, is religion is the duty man owes to his creator. Sometimes [the founders] said "self-evident duty," meaning if you see the concept of creator and individual, then you see the duty of the one to the other. But if a duty, then a right. The duty is to follow God according to conscience. This is the Christian and Jewish part – first from Judaism, second from Christianity. The duty to God as an individual with conscience. That's distinctive in world history: it's a duty, then a right.

But the self-denying part of the ordinance – this is the beautiful thing – does not apply just to Jews and Christians; it's universal. It applied to atheists, to Mohammedans, to Hindus. They said this expressly in the debates in Virginia. It's the most extraordinary achievement of human history on this axis, brilliantly conceived.

When I went to Korea at this time of year, I was amazed to see Seoul filled with Christmas decorations. Korea may be 30 percent Christian. And in Japan, many fewer – they'll never have to worry about putting the Christ back into Christmas in Japan. But Korea also had the Buddhist month where everything is in purple. And [they had] one other [holiday], I don't know if it's Confucian or whatever. They space their calendar out; they recognize the different traditions, but nobody gets all the recognition. Who was the governor of New Jersey or the mayor of Newark who did this – he recognized different religions at different times of the year? You can solve some of these problems with time: equal time but at different times. You ought to represent the whole pluralism of the American people.

Last point: Jon, God may not need crèches in malls and in courthouses, but human beings do. This is where I think Madison went wrong. Madison argued for such a pure conception of religious liberty it was angelic. It would be good if you were pure spirit, but we're not that way. We've got to do things physically that we can see and touch. Madison believed you shouldn't have chaplains in the Army or Navy. But as president, he couldn't do that. They forced him to abide.

**DIONNE:** I agree with Michael it would be a strange God who presented socially useless or socially counterproductive rules. My question was in particular about the interests of the founders [in religion]. Was it primarily because religion was true or because it was socially useful whether true or not? That was what I was trying to get at.

**NOVAK:** Thank you for the clarification.

**MEACHAM:** Quickly on the Madison point: Yes, Madison was against the chaplains, but remember those last notes found after he died. He said it was a trifle; it was something that he couldn't fight. Strictly put, was it a violation of the establishment clause? Yes, having military chaplains paid by the government was, in fact, a violation, but it wasn't worth the political fight.

The only place I disagree with Michael is I don't know – I have a hard enough time figuring out what I believe outside of the Apostle's Creed. As Elizabeth I said, [one] shouldn't make windows into men's souls. It's very hard to figure out at this distance what the founders genuinely believed in their heart of hearts. We are then led to E.J.'s other point, in which I think your second option is right. They believed in the social utility of religion; they understood its ubiquity. Adams was very explicit. He said man is a religious creature, and he cannot be governed any other way. Homer said, "All men need the gods." We are theocentrically tending people. It is the exception, not the rule, for people to not believe in some order beyond time and space.

In Washington's farewell address, he linked education with morality and religion when he said virtue and morality are the necessary springs of popular government – no, that's not it. [He said,] "Whatever may be conceded to the influence of refined education" – this is a good point for Democrats – "Whatever may be conceded to the influence of refined education on minds of peculiar structure" –

**NOVAK:** He meant Jefferson there.

**MEACHAM:** Right – "reason and experience both forbid us to expect that national morality can (sic) prevail in the exclusion of religions principles." National morality cannot prevail in the exclusion of religious principle – that's the utilitarian argument, whether it's true or not. My sense of deism is slightly different, but it gets into a very academic argument. I think there was a particular kind of American deism that allowed for Providence and the answering of prayers.



Jon Meacham

The last point, which is very important, is this idea of aggressive Christianity. I don't understand, as a clinical matter, when American Christians argue they are under assault. I just don't. I know the arguments, I've heard them. The first time I sallied forth on this field was while writing a cover story for *Newsweek* on Mel Gibson's "Passion of the Christ." This was pre-Blackberry, so I went into the office on Tuesday, opened my email

and had a note from someone saying, "Dear Meacham, I'm praying for you, but I hope you go to hell." (Laughter.) I answered, "[That shows a] certain doubt in the efficacy of prayer." (Laughter.)

People genuinely believe there is a war on Christianity in this country. I don't see it. My sense of why things feel so harsh on both sides is it's been 40 years since the left felt truly in charge, the high-water mark being the Civil Rights Act in 1964, the Voting Rights Act in 1965, and 1966, when Vietnam turned down, and Johnson was coming off that landslide – this was going to fulfill the New Deal, and the Millennium was going to come to Earth.

It's been 35 years since the religious right, largely driven by *Roe v. Wade*, entered the public square, with two central demands: a school prayer amendment to the Constitution and a pro-life amendment, neither of which has ever come remotely close to passing.

You have a situation where both sides feel they're losing, and that is a recipe for extremism and not particularly well-thought-out debate.

**CARYLE MURPHY, "ON FAITH":** Novak, you said God doesn't need crèches but humans do. Do those crèches have to be in publicly financed locations? Why not just have the crèches in homes, churches, and other privately owned facilities?

**NOVAK:** You can argue that if you think of religion as solely a private matter, but I don't think either Judaism or Christianity can be construed that way. They are addressed to our bodies and to ourselves as public creatures. Aristotle said humans are political animals, and we have political as well as private roles.

The largest church service in the United States during the Jefferson administration was in the U.S. Capitol building, and the second largest was in the Supreme Court building. Jefferson attended as often he could the one in the Capitol building, and he insisted the Marine band be there at government expense.

One time he was challenged by a minister on his way over to church: "There you are, J., with your red prayer book under your arm; where are you going?" "To church, sir." The minister said, "But you don't believe a word in it." Jefferson didn't deny that. He just said, "Christianity is the best support for republican government that there ever was, and so long as I am magistrate of this land, I have to give it my full public support."

The tradition goes very far back in America, that on the whole it's better for the country if people are brought up in homes and environments, including civil environments, with as sense of the value of the individual, the importance of liberty, and – how can I say it? – the incarnate-ness of the human being, that we're flesh and blood, and we have a public life as well as a private.

**MURPHY:** But today that raises a terrible practical problem because this country is far more religiously plural than it was at the time of the founding fathers. If Christians feel they have a right to put crèches in airports or schools, what about the Muslims and the Jews and the Hindus and the Sikhs?

**NOVAK:** Why not have them all? The Seattle airport is 40 million square feet, or something like that. There's room for them all. I don't see any problem with that.

**UNIDENTIFIED:** It's [not what the airport did](#). [Update as of 12/13/06]

**NOVAK:** No, it took out the crèches [note: a Christmas tree was the issue], which was the easy, secular solution and not an attractive one.

**JODIE ALLEN, PEW RESEARCH**

**CENTER:** Michael, you make a point of always referring to the Judeo-Christian religious tradition, and yet of course many Jewish people find crèches directly insulting – that Christ came along, and they do not recognize him. Your answer is put a menorah next to the crèche, but there are a gazillion religion – we now have pot-smoking religions, and a new one crops up every week. There must some kind of religious holiday, I would guess, almost every day of the year. It seems like the public space would get rather littered.



Jodie Allen

**LUGO:** These questions are getting at the practical limits of your inclusive standards, Michael, particularly since post-1965 immigration has greatly diversified the religious landscape in this country.

**NOVAK:** In a lot of locations, these religions wouldn't be a factor at all, as a practical matter, and in some they would. I don't see why that variety can't be represented. If there are a lot of Buddhists in an area in Michigan, around Ann Arbor or something, [there can] be recognition. The mayor of Newark gave such recognition in public in Newark. Wherever there are people of a certain sort gathered, let them have a public representation of themselves. Children should see a public image of themselves to which they can respond.

**MEACHAM:** I agree with that, but why does it have to be on public ground? It feels almost needlessly adversarial. We have plenty of private property in the country. The founders took care of that, thank God. I think it's just sound and fury. We make a lot of people upset. We produce a lot of litigation. But we don't thereby affirm there is one God who is directing – what was the great line? – there is an angel in the whirlwind who directs the storm. We are not doing that. We're arguing about secondary things: A, Jesus probably wasn't in a crèche; we just know he was in the stable. B, I don't think there was a Germanic Christmas tree in Bethlehem. Lisa Miller, who is here with *Newsweek*, [wrote a wonderful piece this week in the magazine](#). When we were picking the art for it, we found a Renaissance painting of the nativity scene with a crucifix hanging in the stable. (Laughter.)

**UNIDENTIFIED:** Prophetic.

**MEACHAM:** That was one innkeeper who knew what was happening. (Laughter.)

We're taught in the New Testament to pray in secret so your Father who is in heaven will hear you. We're told to give alms in secret. We are told the last shall be first and the first shall be last. When the disciples are debating who shall be the greatest, who will sit at his right hand, Jesus says, you just missed the whole point.

This goes back to my homiletic position that the majoritarian position should be to give way. If it makes someone uncomfortable, we are instructed to treat them as we would wish to be treated, and I would not like to be made uncomfortable.

**LUGO:** Michael, you were saying there are many opportunities for public expression that are not necessarily government expression. Does the society that allows open expression on private property meet the test you're after without the government or governmental institutions necessarily sponsoring the displays?



Luis Lugo

**NOVAK:** You are arguing for a disembodied public. This republic asks young men and women to give their lives. It asks the families to sacrifice them. It asks people to endure laws that are great offenses to their consciences. Pluralistic living demands that. Since most people do not learn ethics from philosophers – as De Tocqueville said, good thing they don't because philosophers never agree – they learn them from their religious traditions. These ought to be reinforced and taught in public if you want the republic to stand. That's been the argument traditionally. It's only since the 1940s that the notion we're better off yielding all the time to make public space secular has gained ground.

If you go to a major university in most places, the zeitgeist is, the assumption is religion is an illusion; it's for the neurotically dependent, and healthy people are atheists. Not very much serious is done about religion. People don't even learn about the different kinds of religion in America. That makes people think the elite vision of what the United States ought to be – secular and clean and neat – is being imposed on people who are accustomed to a very different tradition. They don't understand the disconnect between public life and their beliefs.

**LINDA GREENHOUSE, *THE NEW YORK TIMES*:** This wasn't why I raised my hand, but just to make a comment on your point about dissing religion in the universities: That's kind of an overstatement. I may be wrong, but I think the single largest student undergraduate group at Harvard University is Harvard Hillel – a very thriving community.



Linda Greenhouse

**UNIDENTIFIED:** The Christian Fellowship



is very big, too.

**GREENHOUSE:** So I just don't think that's the case.

Anyway, the visions of the founding generation is a little off the point toward understanding where we are today. These objects – the crèche, the tree, whatever – have become cultural objects, cultural statements, and we're in a culture war. What is interesting to me, having watched the evolution of this over the last 20 or 30 years from the court perspective, is the way the polarity has changed. After the Allegheny County case, which you discuss in this [briefing paper](#), I thought the country had come to rest at a point, a tenuous point, but one that seemed to satisfy many people: You have a tree, you have a menorah, you've discharged your duty to be evenhanded, and it's OK.

In the current round of litigation – there's a case pending at the court now; there's litigation all over the country – the tree is no longer good enough; it's got to be the crèche. That's a real change, and I'd be interested to understand how that came about. It snuck in under the radar, but now it's everywhere.

There is a case pending at the court coming out of the second circuit in the New York City public schools where somebody filed a lawsuit saying the fact there is not a crèche in my children's public school is a violation of my children's right to the free exercise of religion. This has gone all the way up to the Supreme Court. That's very strange to me, and I'd be interested in hearing people's thoughts on it.

**LUGO:** The basic argument here is that keeping it out is to take sides. If you don't allow it, you're institutionalizing secularism and therefore violating the free exercise –

**GREENHOUSE:** And that the tree is no longer satisfactory as a symbol of Christmas.

**MEACHAM:** There are two different points. Yes, secularism is a religion because it's an organizing philosophy – there is no question about that. Religion in the ultimate sense ties people together.

If people have gone from, say, DEFCON 4 because of the Christmas tree, and they're now at DEFCON 2 because they need a crèche, then it's because of this sense that Christianity is somehow losing ground. Linda, you led with the culture war. People believe we are in – as Hitler said, "War is life." They have taken this Darwinian, ferocious view that everything is a struggle, everything is a war. They are feeling particularly besieged, and when people feel besieged, they lash out and raise the stakes.

We have this debate a lot. [Sam Harris](#), whose work I admire, has done no good whatsoever toward increasing the civil, caring conversation because he's written this book – it's about 70 pages – that says if you raise your children this way, you're a fantasist and insane. When somebody leads off with calling me insane, I'm not going to listen much. After a few minutes, I think it's fine because they're basing it on data. (Laughter.) But to do it a priori is a mistake.

People raise money off this. The drama of litigation is you are standing against a secular tide, filling a role of destiny in arguing for what Michael says – obviously what happens

in our public lives is a reflection of what we believe personally. My only argument is why don't we just avoid the situation by doing it on church lawns, which are untaxed, and move on?

**NOVAK:** Peter Berger, the sociologist, points out that among the peoples of the world who are most religious are the people in India, and least religious the people of Sweden. The trouble with America is we have a people composed mainly of Indians led by an elite composed mostly of Swedes. It's a formula for conflict, and that's what happening.

I also think – but I would yield to people who follow law more closely than I do, Linda – the litigation was all on one side for 30 or 40 years. It was attacking religion in the public square. People tolerated that for a long time, as Jon said. They yielded, and they yielded, and they yielded, but finally it just got to be too much. They want to say, "Wait a minute; the reason we want things in the public square is Judaism and Christianity are incarnated religions. It's chosen people. It's God-made flesh. It's the making of flesh, the humility." That's very, very important.

If we're going to make a defense here, let's not make it on German Christmas trees, which weren't present at the founding.

**MEACHAM:** Michael, your remark raises a central question: Which is the core American virtue we should devote most of our resources to defending? Is it a theological principle that we are all made in the image and likeness of God and therefore must defend the system, the customs, and the theological beliefs we have been handed down? Or is it the idea I firmly believe came from that theological tradition, which is of liberty under law?

**NOVAK:** Jon, the fundamental value is liberty, but where does liberty come from? The notion that liberty is rooted in the conscience of every single man and woman came from Judaism and then Christianity, and if you don't recognize that lineage, you're not going to understand what is at stake because most religions don't get there. The beauty of it is it's a self-denying ordinance. Christians and Jews, by that very principle, have no right to impose on anybody else, and that is the beauty of the American way.

I don't think you can defend liberty on a secular or human rights basis. Tom Paine was right about that; people try, but it didn't help Lincoln in the Civil War to oppose slavery on a purely secular basis. When Jefferson in the declaration of religious liberty and Madison in his *Remonstrance* say "religion," or "the duty of creatures to their creator, according to the light of their own conscience," that is a Jewish and Christian argument; it is not a Lockean argument because they go on to say this relation of God and man doesn't arise with social conduct, it antecedes it. Nobody, not the state, not civil society, not even family, can interfere with it – that is a really powerful notion.

We are lucky to be in a country that recognizes it applies to Mohammedans, Hindus, atheists, and everybody equally. They had a vote in the assembly in Virginia to say, "When you say 'Holy Author of our religion,' let's just say 'Jesus Christ.'" It was voted down. They didn't want to exclude Mohammedans, Hindus – they say that expressly – atheists and others. That is a beautiful thing. So liberty is the value, but you have to recognize where liberty comes from. It's a peculiar idea in history.

**AMY SULLIVAN, WASHINGTON MONTHLY:** Jon, I like your distinction between civil religion and public religion, because you're right there can be a dangerous temptation to confuse worship of God with worship of the state seen to be in divine favor. The problem is there are constantly situations coming up where government has to make a decision whether to encourage public religious expression or whether to say you can do whatever you want in the public square, but not in the political square. As Linda just pointed out, that has been increasingly seen not as a stance of neutrality but as hostility to religion. Is there a way to have your vision of public religion in which there is no government role at all?

**MEACHAM:** Probably not because we can't do anything without government despite our best instincts and despite what we have tried to do. But the idea itself is not linked to the action of the state. Franklin talked about a "republican virtue," the idea if society were made up of moral people, then society itself would take on the reflection of that. It's a Roman idea.

I wrote this book because I got mad one August morning in 2005 when – this is a true story – when on the front page of *The New York Times*, a Nobel Laureate was quoted telling a student questioner you could not be a scientist and be a believer. On about page A-10 of the paper was a story about Pat Roberts issuing his fatwa against Hugo Chavez. I thought, "America is on A-10, where the Tiffany ads are. There has to be a middle way."

I thought it would be useful if the left, broadly put, understood George W. Bush is not the first president to mention God, which drives me up the wall, and if the right understood we're not in a war, that Christianity is not under siege in America. Perhaps then there would be a way to talk about these things that would lower people's blood pressures, so you wouldn't be screaming on "Hardball."

As a journalist, I am as guilty as anybody of exalting extreme voices because that makes the best drama. But the idea of focusing on people and the collection of customs, habits and beliefs they carry around seems to offer some hope of filtering itself up in politics, in the same way Madison talked about everything else filtering up in *Federalist 10*; that if you can work things out within the republican contract, then religion becomes one factor among many, like geography, partisanship or economics.

Religious people shouldn't say my religion doesn't affect my politics because of course it does. But more secular – Michael keeps calling them "the elite" – I want to know who they are –

**NOVAK:** They are hard to find.

**MEACHAM:** (Chuckles.) More secular folks who want to say religion has no place in this are equally wrong. That's ahistorical and illogical, and you'd think that would be enough to kill it.

**RUTH MARCUS, THE WASHINGTON POST:** I wanted to ask about a phenomenon



I think is more difficult than the issue of Christmas trees or crèches, an activity that has become more pronounced in recent years – the particular focus has been evangelizing in the military. My colleague, Allen Cooperman, had an excellent, thought-provoking [story in the paper yesterday](#) about a group called Christian Embassy.



Ruth Marcus

They've taken the video off their website, but if you really search the Internet, you can still find it. This video has a number of high-ranking military men – I think they are all men – in uniform talking about how faith is very important for their lives, how proselytizing is important to their lives, and how Christian Embassy has become an integral part of their ability to live their lives fully and do their jobs.

I find myself wishing we could go back to talking about crèches because I find that much easier. As a member of a minority religion, if you gave me a choice between walking into a government building with a crèche in the front of it, with candy canes or no candy canes, or working in a government workplace where almost everybody was gathered at prayer breakfasts or Bible study sessions during the day that did not include my religion, and from which I felt excluded, and professionally disabled, if not incapacitated, I would go for the crèche.

On the other hand, I entirely respect people's commitment to their religion, the fact they don't take off from their beliefs between 9:00 and 5:00. I find it very confusing to figure out how, to use the language of the court, to accommodate that without endorsing it and without discomforting others.

**LUGO:** [NPR also ran a good piece on this yesterday](#). Michael, have you been following the controversy about the chaplains and the armed forces?

**NOVAK:** Yes, though not as closely as Ruth. My favorite crèche scene shows in the background a Jesuit in robes, who is there to sign up Jesus for a Jesuit prep school. (Laughter.)

Look, I'm Catholic in background, and I don't like the proselytizing side of evangelical religion. It seems to me much the better course to be low key. When people ask you questions, you reply, but you don't press it. But it is an integral part of evangelical faith. They view vast regions of the United States as unchurched. Their favorite targets are Catholics because Catholics already believe the principal things, and all they have to show them is Catholicism is a false way of doing it. The greatest number of evangelical converts come from Catholicism.

I do find it annoying. On the other hand, the god of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob is known all around the world largely through Christian missionary [work]. Thankfully, it is the god of liberty. We have to take the good along with the bad of each one of our groups. We can tell evangelicals, "Lay off; this is offensive to some of us. You do what you

need to do within the bounds, but please understand you're trespassing on the private zone of others." That still allows the evangelical impulse – there's an opportunity to give and take, but don't push.

**LUGO:** The particular concern here is not just evangelism generally but evangelism in the armed forces. There are issues of authority. Can you respond freely to these things when it's your superior officer? It's the specific context that heightens concern about evangelism, and not just evangelism as such, although some people have problems with that too.

**DIONNE:** This goes back to Madison and the chaplaincy, where the First Amendment has a free-exercise clause and a non-establishment clause. An evangelical chaplain who holds a reasonably high rank will argue, "My faith requires me to witness to the good news of Jesus Christ wherever I am under any circumstances, and if you get in my way, you are violating my free exercise rights."

On the other hand, the Catholic, atheist, Jewish, Buddhist, lower-down officer or enlisted person says, "This guy is using the authority he has over me in an illegitimate way, and no matter what he claims, in fact, he is exerting enormous pressure on me." If we press this to the limits, we are going to have to get rid of the chaplaincy. Because if someone is using their authority in that way and insisting any limitation on that authority will violate their free-exercise rights, then we are not going to be able to have a military chaplaincy.

**MARCUS:** I don't think that would solve the problem.

**UNIDENTIFIED:** Getting rid of the chaplaincy?

**MARCUS:** Yes, because you would still have evangelical Christians in – and I'm not suggesting we get rid of the evangelical Christians – (laughter) – let me be clear.

**DIONNE:** You don't have atheists in foxholes, right, or we'll be in trouble.

**MARCUS:** The chaplaincy may be a place where the problem manifests itself, but you could stay away from the chaplains. It's more difficult if it's the Air Force secretary or your commanding officer rather than the chaplain who is not necessarily in the line of command [above] you.

**MEACHAM:** E.J., you say if we press it to the limit, we have to get rid of it. If you press any of this to the limit, the American experiment of religious liberty falls apart. We're trying to have it both ways; classically American. We are trying to have a religious disposition – it's at the heart of our public discussion – and yet we want to protect the ability of those who don't want to participate. It's fundamentally in conflict, and it's a tension we're going to have to live with until the last day.

**LISA MILLER, NEWSWEEK:** Back to this symbology question: It occurs to me you're talking about Judaism and Christianity both being incarnate. But



Judaism doesn't have symbols in the same way. Islam also doesn't have symbols in the same way emphatically. So even having the conversation about symbols is difficult.



Lisa Miller

Why is it Jews and Muslims are so offended by the crèches in the public square? It's because the menorah sitting next to the crèche just feels ridiculous. Jews don't care.

The menorah isn't the center of a Jewish home in the same way a crèche would be the center of a Christian home. Certainly depictions of, for example, Mohammed in Islam are forbidden. How do you resolve that? This is a pragmatic question, but it is a theological one as well.

**NOVAK:** That is interesting, Lisa. But the fundamental objection of Judaism and Islam together to Christianity is to think of God as man at all. That is a horrific sacrilege. First of all, it seems to violate monotheism, and secondly, it reduces God to the absurd. God is much more remote than that, much more like the god of Aristotle – pure mind in inaccessible light.

My experience of Jewish ritual is it's highly symbolic. I agree, it's not quite doing the same thing in public, but most Protestant churches are not very symbolic either. I just was at a concert at the National Presbyterian Church. There is no colored glass; there are no stations of the cross; there are no statues. I miss the people; I miss the democracy of the dead. But we do have to get used to one another's sensibility.

If the world is inflamed with the idea of liberty, it's not a little owed to Judaism and Christianity. I don't think Judaism and Christianity are the same thing. I don't like to say Judeo-Christian; I say Jewish and Christian, meaning there are a number of Jewish traditions and a number of Christian [traditions], but they are closer than most other traditions in the world.

**MEACHAM:** To stay in the scriptural mode for a moment, this is an abashed advertisement for a website called [On Faith](#), which my friend Sally Quinn has put together. I carry the sedan chair along the way. We try to debate a lot of these things there, and I think it's a good forum for these kinds of conversations.

Jefferson, as usual, had it right. He said, "I inquire after no man's religious opinions, and I don't want anyone to inquire after mine, and I would like to be judged on how I conducted myself with other people at the end." That not a bad test for all of us.

**LUGO:** Thank you, Jon Meacham and Michael Novak. By whatever you call this holiday – have a good one. (Laughter.) Thank you so much for being with us.

*Speakers at Pew Forum events are given an opportunity to review and approve their remarks. This transcript also has been edited for clarity, spelling and grammar.*