

For decades, the columnist of "...civil discourse" has been prominent in Cape Cod government & media. While he has the reputation of being Mr. Conservative, the phrase that forms this Thinksheet's title fits him better (though he's using the phrase of me as a self-confessed "contrarian Christian"). The column below was in the CAPE COD TIMES (our only daily) yesterday, the day after a letter to the editor congratulated him for "changing sides" to the liberal cause: he'd severely criticized social insensitivity in high & low places.

The culture of mean-spirited sloganeering has been replacing the culture of truth-seeking, diversity-accepting, unity-loving discourse in public & private life. The collision of these cultures is the central battle of our time.

A new chapter on civil discourse

THERE IS so much anger and cruelty in the world that one wonders at the capacity of mankind to hate so much more effectively than to love. Christmas, for millions, is the time to celebrate the birth of Christ, the Prince of Peace.

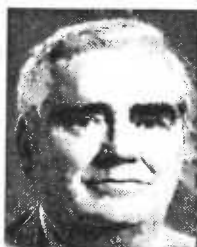
Nearly 2,000 years after his birth, the world is still a savage place where ancient animosities are re-kindled and passions inflamed to holocaust proportions. Has it become worse, or are we just more privy to man's inhumanity and depravity because of TV? Why we know about these atrocities is unimportant. The important thing is that they occur at all.

Many Americans dismiss the existence of mass slaughter in foreign lands because they believe people there are uncivilized. They shrug it off, saying "They are not like us." It's not that simple. In "us" is "them" because within us are the strains and genes of virtually every ethnic, religious, racial, cultural and national peoples conceived.

In declaring independence as a nation, our Founding Fathers believed passionately that we are governed by "the Laws of Nature and of Nature's God" and therefore as citizens were "endowed by their Creator with certain unalienable Rights..." These rights were codified in the Constitution. Whether critics like it or not, we have developed a distinctly American culture rich with the blessings of freedom and the blessings of God.

Why are there such contentious quarrels, divisive fights and bitter words between adversaries in this, the most free and wonderful nation in the history of mankind? Can we find the promises of peace in religious belief and practice?

Willis Elliott, lineal and spiritual



**Francis I.
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descendant of the New England Puritans I much admire, has paraphrased Alexis de Tocqueville, noting that "America is a nation with the soul of a church."

When we held out the greatest promise and greatest rewards to those fortunate enough to be born here or to find refuge here, the basic warp and woof of our social fabric consisted of the threads of religion — no state-imposed beliefs but God-directed ones.

In Dr. Elliott's excellent new book, "Flow of Flesh, Reach of Spirit" (W.B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., Grand Rapids, Mich.), the Cape Cod theologian addresses many issues dominant in our world today. A self-described "contrarian Christian," he has proved it repeatedly, challenging doctrinaire mantras of the left and right.

"Flow of Flesh, Reach of Spirit" is a book for men and women unafraid of being challenged. It is written with humor and is, as Newsweek senior writer and religion editor Kenneth L. Woodward writes in the forward, "conversational." As one who uses Dr. Elliott as a resource, Woodward says: "Indeed, Elliott's most important achievement... is to remind us that all really good theology is, or ought to be, good conversation."

I, too, have sought answers from Willis Elliott. I haven't always heard what I wanted but always what I asked for: thoughtful conversation

and impeccable scholarship that is not only helpful but essential for understanding.

I hope to write a review of "The Flow of Flesh, Reach of Spirit," but for this pre-Christmas column, I content myself with "chapter surfing." His thoughts on evil are introduced by his comment that "Evil creeps before it pounces. When it pounces, it's too late. While it's still creeping, it's not too late." He believes in sin and redemption. An ardent conservationist who views threats to our environment in cataclysmic terms, he also sees the threat to humanity posed by those who would remove God and religion from among the pillars on which human society rests.

Willis urges us to "Fight for compassion against bathos" and recognize the difference between real compassion and the sentimentality that is naught but empty hugs and nice words. Writing in a chapter devoted to the poor, he notes there is an irrational hatred of God among intellectual leaders in our secular society that has helped develop a public godlessness that puts us on a collision course with good will and comity, and deludes people into believing that government "can be the savior of 'the poor' or even the primary resource and actor toward that salvation... Our trust is to be in God, not in 'horses'."

As Christmas approaches and we consider even fleetingly the promises of the "Prince of Peace," I recommend Willis Elliott to you and suggest that adherence to and worship of the word of God is the best way to restore civility here and abroad. Merry Christmas.

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