

# Jean Bethke Elshtain, 72, Christian ethicist

by [Sarah Pulliam Bailey](#)

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Christian ethicist Jean Bethke Elshtain, a scholar at the University of Chicago who shaped national conversations on war and peace, died August 11 at age 72.

She'd had two heart attacks in 2012 and, according to the school, she had another "cardiac incident" earlier this summer that led to her death.

The widely admired political philosopher regularly wrote and lectured on ethics, politics and religion. She defended American military intervention in Iraq and Afghanistan using "just war theory," a position that suggests there are times when it is necessary and perhaps right to go to war.

When a hundred scholars and ethicists signed a petition that read, "As Christian ethicists, we share a common moral presumption against a preemptive war on Iraq by the United States," Elshtain took the opposite view, publishing the book *Just War against Terror* in 2003.

"You won't get a better person for combining philosophy and theological ethics with comment on the contemporary scene," said Martin Marty, the dean of American church historians. A longtime friend and colleague of Elshtain, Marty differed with her on issues like the Iraq war, but added: "If you reduce her to the Iraq war, you'll miss her."

Elshtain, who contracted polio as a child in Colorado, was raised Lutheran and was part of the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America but converted to Catholicism later in life.

Cardinal Francis George of Chicago called Elshtain a "woman of deeply held principles. Her many academic accomplishments were integrated into her personal

concerns for family, for the public life of women in society, for good and just government, for religion's contribution to the common good."

A mother of four and grandmother of four, Elshtain commuted between Tennessee and Chicago because of her husband's work for the state of Tennessee in its disabilities office. Before joining the University of Chicago faculty, she taught at Vanderbilt University from 1988 to 1995 and was the first woman to hold an endowed professorship there.

She contributed to a range of publications, including the *New Republic*, *First Things*, *Commonweal* and *Books and Culture*.

She held a long list of academic accomplishments, including being chosen in 2005–2006 to deliver the prestigious Gifford Lectures at the University of Edinburgh. She published more than 20 books, including *Augustine and the Limits of Politics* and *Public Man, Private Woman*.

"Depending on who you talk to, she was an ethicist, philosopher, legal thinker," said Marie Griffith, director of the John C. Danforth Center on Religion and Politics in St. Louis. "She had so many hats and wrote about so many issues that related to a lot of us."

In her book *Women and War*, Elshtain explained that as a child she cut off her hair to imitate St. Joan of Arc. "One day I would be a leader of men, too. Maybe a warrior. Maybe a martyr—though there didn't seem to be much call for martyrs anymore," she wrote. "I begged for my own gun."

She dedicated the book to the memory of John Lennon, writing that the Beatles' music was so "life-affirming" and "the solemnity of the academy gets to me." —RNS

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