CENTER VALLEY - Recently, the good folks at PBS television have brought about a confluence of events that brings the issue of public religion to the forefront of American interest.

Premiering this past week was an historical look at a ground-breaking legal case. “Judgment Day: Intelligent Design on Trial” examined the all-too-contentious relationship between science and religion in terms of teaching alternatives to evolution in a public school curriculum. The court’s ruling, issued by U.S. District Justice John E. Jones, concluded that intelligent design “is grounded in theology, not science” and therefore “still has utterly no place in a science curriculum.”

Also last week, our local PBS affiliate, WLVT channel 39, conducted a community dialogue about a documentary to be broadcast in December. Inspired by a best-selling book, “Prayer in America” examines how expressions of faith have shaped our culture in terms of social justice, personal forgiveness, armed conflict, and times of crisis.

At first glance, the broadcasts appear to be in conflict. The judge proclaims that teaching religious belief in creationism, re-labeled as “intelligent design,” contravenes the establishment clause of the Constitution and thereby transgresses the separation of Church and State. But the historians note that religious belief made known through prayer influenced the political, cultural, and even economic development of our country and thereby generates a civic religion in these United States.
Upon deeper reflection, the media contrast reflects not some cultural schizophrenia about the supernatural, but a rightful tension between faith and culture that actually enlivens our common heritage as citizens and our shared aspiration as humans. From this juxtaposition of legal statutes and lived experience, three truths emerge about our society.

Despite the diversity of backgrounds and beliefs, abilities and ambitions, we remain people of one nation, equal under the law that governs our land. Each of us, by voting, enjoys the privilege of contributing to the formulation of that law; all of us, from pauper to President, have the responsibility of abiding by that law. What makes the American experiment a success is not simply the democratic will of a majority, but even more so our respect for the rights of the minority. Judge Jones, a gentleman both affable and dispassionate, bravely championed judicial independence and issued a decision based solely on the law and the evidence at hand. People of faith credibly affirm that God has a hand in the creation of human beings. But belief is not science; and science is not equipped, on its own terms, to demonstrate religious truth.

Nevertheless, the distinction between science and religion, as also between law and morality, need not degenerate into mutual opposition. On the contrary, whatever contributes to the horizon of understanding by which we frame the meaning of our lives should be relevant when it comes to public discourse. For the vast majority in our country, that meaningfulness remains grounded in religious belief. So be it. Rather than denigrate faith perspectives and exclude them as inherently antithetical to living in a free society, we should esteem this plurality of positions as contributing to a broader marketplace of ideas that can give greater intelligence to our collective lives. The separation we hold, and which the law rightly proscribes, is a separation of Church and State, not a separation from either one.

From this harmony of diverse voices and viewpoints, we fashion our civic life. Yet there remains another significant voice, beyond the halls of courts and classrooms, namely, the voice of the divine. Living in “one nation, under God” we affirm not the establishment of some (or any) denomination to be followed by all citizens, but the recognition that a spiritual or supernatural or transcendent dimension is as much an element of our humanity as the science by which we comprehend and the politics by which we co-exist. To portray Americans as people of prayer is not an affront to our liberty, but its cornerstone. Freedom of religion remains the foundation to all our civic rights “inasmuch as it involves the right of each individual to seek the truth in accordance with his conscience and to live in conformity with that truth, in a spirit of respect and tolerance for others” (John Paul II).

These societal truths coalesce in this week’s annual celebration, when, by lawful proclamation, we acknowledge what President George Washington first called “the many signal favors of Almighty God” and give thanks for the blessings our nation enjoys.