

As Davis proceeds forward in attempting to create conversation, actual conversation, around seemingly intractable issues, he states his purpose clearly and concisely: “ultimately, I hope to portray a debate over abortion, stem cells, euthanasia, and gay marriage that is more complicated than the “theocrat” and “hedonist” caricatures so beloved by the media”.¹ Davis does not necessarily seek to provide a more complex and more nuanced starting point, but to find a starting point of *common ground* that can lead to a more civil, complex, and nuanced debate. I believe he is successful in his examination of abortion and stem cells.

Davis spends several pages proving that “abortion and ESCR already are religious issues for a majority of citizens, on both sides of the debate”.² While the religiousness of the anti-abortion side of the argument is self-evident, especially in the Catholic Church’s logically consistent stance, the religiousness of the pro-abortion side is, likely to most reading this, less evident. Davis makes the point that for many pro-abortion advocates their reasoning comes from a place of pursuit of social justice. Davis then further reminds us, from our reading of the previous chapter, that all the social justice movements in this country have been firmly grounded in a religious argument. Here is how Davis summarizes the religiousness of both arguments thereby making religious language a valid starting point of common ground:

... liberal religious emphases on respect for women and the integrity of free choice can encourage the promotion of social justice and equality. When these concerns are given theological grounding, they take on ultimate significance in a way non-theological language struggles to achieve. Similarly, conservative religious appeals to the basic value of every individual person as a child of God give vivid expression to the inherent worth of all human beings.³

Davis uses the work of philosopher Ronald Dworkin to find this common ground religious language starting point: the language of the sacredness or “sanctity” of life. Dworkin points out that liberals’ use of the word “tragic” when speaking about abortion conveys an awareness of the reality that a loss has occurred. Dworkin then contends that “this sense of loss ... betrays a regard for the sacredness of fetal life even among pro-choice thinkers”.⁴ Dworkin also recognizes and points out that, perhaps, “the language of life’s sanctity might better capture pro-life commitments than does the description of embryos and fetuses as persons”.⁵ Bearing these two, in my opinion, very good points in mind Dworkin is able to contend with a good measure of confidence that “the language of life’s sanctity of sacredness captures a certain level of *shared* (emphasis added) moral conviction between conservatives and liberals in the matter of abortion, despite their pronounced disagreement over how to interpret and respond to that sacred value”.⁶ I especially resonate with this because I too had recently been thinking through trying to find a new way forward in our conversation and dialogue and in doing so had been dwelling on the language of “honoring life” or “honor life”. I really believe Dworkin’s language of sacredness of life can truly offer a new way forward. The common ground assertion of the sacredness of all human life enables us to have a more complex and nuanced conversation around the question, “how do we balance the value we place in existing

¹ Davis, James Calvin. In Defense of Civility: How Religion Can Unite America on Seven Moral Issues That Divide Us. Westminster John Knox Press, Louisville, KY; 2010. p 76

² Ibid. p 85

³ Ibid. p 86

⁴ Ibid. p 86

⁵ Ibid. p 87

⁶ Ibid. p 87

persons (women, the sick), whom we may feel an obligation to assist, and the value we see in the earliest stages of human existence?”⁷ *This* question as a basis for conversation offers a far more hopeful vision, a far more Jesus envisioned, love of neighbor vision, for progress and mutual care than the tired old tropes of “baby killer” or “woman killer”.

⁷ Davis, James Calvin. In Defense of Civility: How Religion Can Unite America on Seven Moral Issues That Divide Us. Westminster John Knox Press, Louisville, KY; 2010. p 88