

In chapter 2, Davis supplements his first priority of wresting control of the “moral” agenda away from politically conservative, fundamentalist “Christians” by asking the question, are we indeed a “Christian” nation as so many trying to assert control over the word “moral” like to contend? Davis’ conclusion is as follows:

We cannot say with any certainty that the founders all intended for the United States to be a Christian nation, any more than we can say with confidence that they wanted it to be a completely secular republic. The legacy of the founders is messier and more complicated than either of these simplistic readings, and this muddled legacy is all that history gives us. What we can take from reflection on our history is the assurance that, from America’s founding, religious voices, ideas, and perspectives have played an important role in shaping American identity, at the very same time that our constitutional structure ensured that religious freedom and pluralism would be written into our national character. Beginning with the founders, the overall trajectory of American history has been a dynamic tension between the so-called separation of church and state and a robust role for religion in the public of the United States.<sup>1</sup>

Davis argues that our historical record would suggest that, in counterpoint to those who claim we are a Christian nation, the founding fathers subscribed more to a rational theism as popularized by René Descartes and Immanuel Kant during the Enlightenment as opposed to a biblical Christianity. Rational theism acknowledges the existence of a Divine Being by which morals come into being but argues that said morals may be arrived at through rational thinking. So while it is accurate to say that many of the founding fathers considered themselves to be Christians, it is equally accurate to say that their understanding of what it meant to be Christian was to live by a rational moral code. George Washington “never publicly espoused belief in the Trinity, the divinity of Christ, or the authority of the Bible”.<sup>2</sup> John Adams acknowledged that “good religion consisted simply of recognizing divine providence in the movements of history and honoring God through a dedication to good works”.<sup>3</sup> In fact, Adams actually advocated a more stringent separation between church and state than many of his contemporaries in arguing that ministers should *not* be allowed to hold any political office. Thomas Jefferson, while in favor of the teachings of Jesus, was quite antagonistic towards organized religion, Christianity included, and James Madison, who wrote much of the Constitution, strongly objected to the employing of chaplains to lead the Continental Congress in prayer while debating the wording of the First Amendment.

Davis also doubles down on his argument from the previous chapter that morality does not require religion. We learned from the first chapter that morals can be discussed as virtues and not strictly in religious terms. People find and establish virtues in religion, surely, but also in a myriad of other life experiences and worldviews beyond religious ones. Davis again refers to James Madison in an argument he had with Patrick Henry in Virginia in the mid-1780’s for our increased understanding of how nuanced the discussion of religion, any religion, in the life of the United States body politic is. Madison “insisted that religion was an ‘unalienable right,’ a relationship with the Divine that ‘must be left to the conviction and conscience of every man [*sic*],’ rather than an obligation that could be imposed by the state”.<sup>4</sup> Madison went on to remind his fellow Virginians that, from a historical perspective, Christianity “both existed and flourished, not only without the support of human laws,

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<sup>1</sup> 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 31.

<sup>2</sup> Ibid. p 26.

<sup>3</sup> Ibid. p 28.

<sup>4</sup> Ibid. p 34.

but in spite of every opposition from them”<sup>5</sup> A summary of James Madison’s position would then be as follows: “government-mandated support for religion not only violates the natural right of its citizens; it also fails to achieve its objective, namely, the stability of the state. It was unnecessary, and in fact such an invasion of personal liberties put society at risk”<sup>6</sup> If you disagree with Madison’s position, look no further than Nazi Germany and the spineless cozying up to the Third Reich by the national “church” and Dietrich Bonhoeffer’s martyrdom for standing in opposition to it.

So, are we a Christian nation? The preponderance of evidence would suggest that we are not, nor have we ever been. However this has not stopped secular liberals from overstating the case for separation of church and state and demanding that religion can have *no* public input at all which is also not true. To this we will turn next week in our review of chapter 3.

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<sup>5</sup> Ibid. p 34.

<sup>6</sup> 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 35.