

Historically, two of the topics not covered in polite conversation around the dinner table were religion and politics. In recent years that has mostly gone by the wayside and our society has suffered for it. In reviews of previous chapters we've covered the why of these assumptions and attempted to debunk them. We are, or are not, a Christian nation. There is, or is not, a strict separation between church and state and therefore, one has nothing to do with the other and vice versa. In chapter 4 Davis takes on the accusation that religion is a conversation stopper. He takes a while to get there in making his point but it is essentially as follows: just because there are *some* folks who make religious arguments based on religious conviction(s) poorly and do not allow for conversation, does not mean that *all* arguments based on religious conviction(s) are poor. There are arguments based on religious conviction(s) that are perfectly reasonable and accessible to those even without an understanding of the religious conviction itself upon which the argument is based. Davis argues that in much the same way we cannot draw a hard and fast distinction between church and state, nor can we draw a hard and fast distinction between faith and reason. "... for many believers today, faith and reason are not mutually exclusive; they are complementary sources for knowing the right and doing it. Seldom in the history of Western religions have faith and reason been seen as absolute foes."¹ Even though *some* religious arguments made poorly have proven to be conversation-stoppers, not *all* religious arguments need be. "When done well, religious arguments will have a logic, a line of reasoning, that can be understood even by those who ultimately reject the theological premises on which the arguments are based or the conclusions that they draw."² In other words, the challenge is extended to those of us who would make arguments based on religious conviction(s) *better* than we, or our peers, have been to this point.

Davis then provides seven points about the positive contributions that religious reasoning has made to the political environment throughout the years. 1) "... religious perspectives help return the language of morality to our political discourse."³ Capitalism is, in and of itself, *not* a value. And even if it was, it certainly would not be a moral one. Morality would provide lanes for how we legislate and regulate capitalism as it continues to be the thing our country and society strive most for. 2) "... religious perspectives can contribute constructively to public discourse by bringing centuries of moral tradition to bear on current disagreements."⁴ This is a friendly reminder to those of us who feel like this is the worst that it's ever been, that many of the disagreements we have are likely ones that we have had before throughout history. 3) "... including these religious points of view promises to enlarge the context in which we think about moral issues. In contrast to the hyperindividualism that dominates American culture, religion often insists that we think beyond ourselves, to ask how our moral choices affect and are affected by other persons, communities and creatures - and how our choices are affected by our knowledge of and relationship with the divine."⁵ At the risk of stating the obvious, God would insist that we are our brother's keepers. God the Father insists that we love God and neighbor. God the Son corroborates this as the greatest commandment, and God the Spirit convicts of our failures when we do not abide by the greatest commandment. 4) "... religious language sometimes can articulate moral priorities that are widely shared across the American public, both religion and nonreligious."⁶ Honoring life is *best* articulated in the Judeo-Christian scriptures. Honoring life is a moral priority widely shared across the American

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 61

² Ibid. p 61

³ Ibid. p 63

⁴ Ibid. pp 63-64

⁵ Ibid. p 65

⁶ Ibid. p 66

public. 5) "... religious language serves moral discourse when it *critiques* the moral conventions of our society."⁷ Religion does not seek to *rule* the masses by government legislation or by any other mode. Religion does not seek to *dictate* to the masses what is good, kind, and just. Religion seeks to hold societies accountable for the way they treat all of their people. 6) "... welcoming religious perspectives into our public discussions helps to give voice to that 'quiet middle' that is so key to rescuing American politics from the divisive extremes."⁸ I am not conservative. I am not liberal. I am not a Democrat. I am not a Republican. None of these identifying labels speak exclusively to my religious perspective. In this sixth point Davis is speaking about *me*. I would bet he is speaking about many of you as well. 7) "... the better angels of religious traditions provide reminders and resources for rediscovering civility, a desperately needed virtue in our current political climate."⁹ Civility; the ability to treat one another as neighbors and friends, fellow humans living in a shared space, and not enemies. Another American societal moral good best explicated by the Judeo-Christian tradition. This was Davis' concern over a decade ago when he wrote this book. I can only imagine that recent history has not encouraged him any in this realm of civility. We can do better.

Finally in a return to his first topic from the chapter, James advocates a rubric against which *all* arguments, including religiously motivated ones, might be measured against to test whether or not they should be taken seriously. Notice Davis is *not* saying that some arguments should be thrown out or disallowed, that would be an infringement upon freedom of speech, he's just saying that it would be helpful to have a rubric by which we might be able to measure the validity or plausibility of an argument. He pulls from the work of Harvard theologian Ronald Thiemann to offer a way forward in civil argumentation and dialogue. There are three norms of plausibility. 1) Is the argument publicly accessible? This is to say is the argument open to questioning and critique? If someone making the argument is not open to answering further questions or receiving constructive criticism, then we should consider not taking that person's argument seriously. They can still make it, we just take it with a grain of salt. The goal of democratic conversation is to *persuade* others of your position, not bullying or fear mongering them into accepting it. "... but persuasion cannot take place without understanding, and understanding requires an argument be open to questioning and critique."¹⁰ 2) Arguments worth being taken seriously, and those doing the arguing, practice mutual respect. This is the concept of being self-aware enough to acknowledge that I don't know everything which is grounded in *humility*. 3) Arguments worth being taken seriously practice integrity. That is to say that arguments worth being taken seriously, and are perhaps the most persuasive, will "exhibit a moral consistency within themselves".¹¹ The example Davis uses, which was also used by Cardinal Bernardin, is the *inconsistent* pro-life ethic. Many pro-life people are against abortion and euthanasia because they are pro-life. But the argument falls apart, and lacks integrity, when those same people are not as vehemently against the death penalty ("I thought you said you were pro-life?"). Davis concludes this chapter this way: "Rather than rewarding incivility with media points and political advantage, we need to insist that our public moral debates be conducted with respect, integrity, and a spirit of genuine accessibility."¹² To which religious perspectives are very much invited and welcome.

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 66

⁸ Ibid. pp 66-67

⁹ Ibid. p 67

¹⁰ Ibid. p 69

¹¹ Ibid. p 70

¹² Ibid. p 72