

As stated in the final paragraph of last week's installment, despite the preponderance of evidence suggesting that the United States is *not* a Christian nation, that does not necessarily give secular liberals the right to proclaim that religion should have no input whatsoever in public discourse and debate. In trying to do so, they will often refer to a "wall" between church and state; a strict separation established in the first amendment. But is this supposed "wall" as separative as secular liberals would like it to be in both writing *and* in historical precedence? Or is it a bit more porous? This is what Davis explores in chapter 3.

Let's start by looking at the letter of the law. Davis points out that "the First Amendment declares simply that government may not enforce laws that represent the 'establishment of religion'; it does not rule out religious contributions to public discourse and to the debate over laws that possess a clear secular purpose."<sup>1</sup> Right from its inception you see the porous wall that is being created by the framers. In fact when you add in historical precedence the supposed wall becomes even more porous. Davis notes that "in the early years of the United States, the First Amendment was generally understood to restrict only the *federal* government from impinging on religious freedom. The states were free to keep their established churches and support them with tax dollars, and several of them did so well into the nineteenth century."<sup>2</sup> President Thomas Jefferson is generally credited with this use, and popularization, of the analogy of a wall between church and state. However, to secular liberals' chagrin, he used this analogy in *defense* of Connecticut Baptists who were seeking reassurance from the newly elected president that they would be free to practice their religion despite the state of Connecticut's sponsorship and official support of Congregationalism. The "wall" Jefferson was referring to was to keep the government legally out of religion. Throughout the 1600, 1700, and 1800's, religion was generally seen as a moral barometer for how the government was formed, functioned, and ensured justice for all. The two co-existed rather peacefully and it was expected that they were mutually informative.

It is at the end of the 19th century that Protestants, mainly due to religious bigotry, "pushed for the codification of a more explicit separation of church and state".<sup>3</sup> At this time there was a large influx of European, mainly Catholic, immigrants. Nativist Protestants "feared that a Catholic majority would render the United States beholden to the pope".<sup>4</sup> As such it was the middle of the 20th century, 1947, when the United States Supreme Court finally became involved in the ongoing debate between separation of church and state. And unfortunately for American jurisprudence and the Supreme Court, and the general public, Supreme Court rulings on church-state issues, beginning with the one in 1947, have been complicated and arguably contradictory ever since. We will soon see the Supreme Court again weigh in on the separation of church and state when they rule on the state of Louisiana's Ten Commandments law signed into law on June 19.

Religion has *both* a dark influence in United States civil history and jurisprudence and a bright shining light into the depths of depravity. Samuel How, Presbyterian James Henley Thornwall, and Catholic bishop John England all used the Bible to permit slavery. Moses Stuart, Presbyterian Elijah Lovejoy, and fellow Presbyterian Albert Barnes all used the Bible to call for the abolition of slavery. Frederick Douglass saw a clear distinction between the impartial Christianity of Jesus and whatever the religion of this land (the United States) was. This is what Douglass wrote in his autobiography:

---

<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 42.

<sup>2</sup> Ibid. p 38

<sup>3</sup> Ibid. p 40

<sup>4</sup> Ibid. p 40

I love the pure, peaceable, and impartial Christianity of Christ: I therefore hate the corrupt, slaveholding, women-whipping, cradle-plundering, partial and hypocritical Christianity of this land. Indeed, I can see no reason, but the most deceitful one, for calling the religion of this land Christianity. I look upon it as the climax of all misnomer, the boldest of all frauds, and the grossest of all libels.<sup>5</sup>

I read this quote and cannot help but ask myself, what would Douglass have to say about Christianity two hundred years later and would it be any less scathing? Lord, have mercy. The influence of religion led directly to the abolishment of slavery in the United States. Religion influenced the writing of American legislation; the 13th amendment to the Constitution. Religion has influenced president's as well. "In his Second Inaugural Address, Lincoln translated the tragedy of the war into ultimate religious terms ... [and that] religious interpretation of the Civil War arguably captured what no nontheological language could have expressed."<sup>6</sup> Similarly, religion highly influenced the Civil Rights movement of the 60's again leading to the writing of further American legislation; the Civil Rights Act of 1964. This all demonstrates that religion and politics were never "separate" in public debate over slavery and civil rights. The industrial revolution brought along with it unbridled capitalism which aggravated, *and still aggravates*, the disparities between the nation's economic classes. Walter Rauchenbausch (1861-1918), and many other pastors still today, claim that religious morals, grounded in Jesus' teachings, will "temper the self-interest of capitalism with a concern for the common good, especially the welfare of the disadvantaged".<sup>7</sup> Religion has work yet to do in calling the state to account for the way it treats its people.

Davis concludes his analysis on the United States being a Christian nation and the separation of church and state as follows:

In response to those whose confidence in the "separation of church and state" prompts them to disqualify any expressions of religion in public discourse, I simply want to point out that public religion enjoys a rich history in the American moral tradition, one deeper than any separation between religion and public life would imply. The separation of religion and public life is an idea that never has been taken literally in American history, and those who argue that the United States was established on such a strict separation will have as difficult a time reconciling their reading with the facts as those who insist that the framers unanimously desired to make this a Christian nation. The actual story of our country is more complicated.<sup>8</sup>

And in this political season, and every season, we hear something important in Davis' last sentence. **Truth** is always more complicated than simple sound bites or commercials or even a 15 minute interview can allow.

---

<sup>5</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 47

<sup>6</sup> Ibid. pp 47 & 48

<sup>7</sup> Ibid. p 51

<sup>8</sup> Ibid. p 53