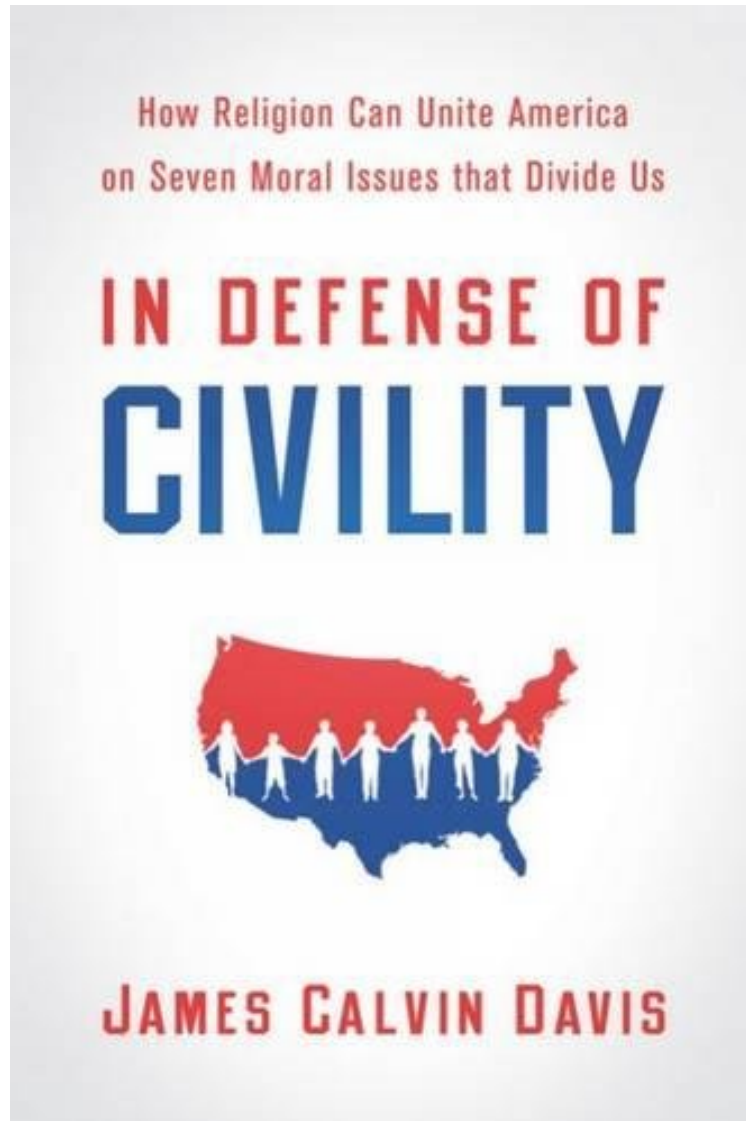


(Read now) In Defense of Civility: How Religion Can Unite America on Seven Moral Issues That Divide Us

In Defense of Civility: How Religion Can Unite America on Seven Moral Issues That Divide Us

James Calvin Davis

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James Calvin Davis : In Defense of Civility: How Religion Can Unite America on Seven Moral Issues That Divide Us before purchasing it in order to gauge whether or not it would be worth my time, and all praised In Defense of Civility: How Religion Can Unite America on Seven Moral Issues That Divide Us:

8 of 8 people found the following review helpful. An audacious pipe dream: talking, not shoutingBy BHodgesThe subtitle of James Calvin Davis's new book "In Defense of Civility" describes an audacious pipe dream. If the book

aims to tell readers "How Religion can Unite America on Seven Moral Issues That Divide Us" I'd be satisfied with a book that resolves a single divisive issue! Nevertheless, given the recently-heated political climate I thought it might be well to think about a less-discussed virtue of civic engagement: civility. As it turns out, Davis is not offering simple resolutions for divisive issues like abortion, same-sex marriage and environmentalism. To the contrary, he bluntly states that "civility cannot guarantee consensus on any issue" (160). Davis seeks first to describe and justify an ethic of civil public dialog and second, to embody the ethic by describing seven particularly sticky moral/political issues. Above all Davis underscores not merely the legitimacy, but also the potential benefits of recognizing religious perspectives in the public sphere. The book provides crucial food for thought for those reflecting on the tone of political dialog generally, those who aren't waiting for another election year to care about the political process, and those who think religion deserves either a stronger or weaker presence in political discussions. The book is divided into three parts. Part one, "Public Religion and the American Moral Tradition," lays the historical groundwork by discussing the roots of religion's role in American politics. With all due respect to the Revs. Jerry Falwell and Pat Robertson, Davis challenges the claim that America is a "Christian nation" by pointing out that "many of the most prominent men responsible for the new government professed beliefs that hardly resembled traditional Christianity" (25). After describing what Jon Meacham has elsewhere called the "American Gospel," Davis warns against misapplying "the designs of eighteenth-century patriots (however we understand them) to our very different twenty-first-century political culture" (31). Davis also cautions against invoking the "wall of separation" argument in attempts to exclude religion from political discussion. Historically speaking, the wall has been somewhat "porous" (37), Davis explains, citing many examples which "involve regular Americans contributing" to crucial debates on issues like slavery "from explicitly religious perspectives and in intentionally religious language" (47). In the final chapter of part one Davis admits that arguing to include religion in public debate "is a harder sell in the highly diverse society we live in today." Some seek to exile religion on the grounds that it is a "conversation stopper" (54). Religious perspectives are too divisive or too stupid to make any positive impact, they argue. Many issues being debated, Davis counters, are morally grounded, and religious discussion can rightfully be brought to bear on them as much as any other world-view. In a particularly relevant section of the book, Davis outlines the type of religious argument which is guaranteed to be a "conversation stopper." Party A Claim: Bald assertion: Abortion is wrong because the Bible says so. Party B Response: "So what? The Bible holds no authority over me." End of discussion. Davis concludes: "The mistake that secular liberals [and, I would argue, some religiously inclined folk] often make, however, is assuming that this is the only form a religious argument can take...If they are not open to reason, they cannot contribute meaningfully to conversation among a religiously and philosophically diverse public" (60). Davis again provides examples of religious thinkers who were capable of making "reasonable" and "accessible" arguments in the public sphere. Faith and reason need not exclude each other. Davis hopes to foster an attitude of mutual respect by distinguishing between being persuaded versus understanding an argument, and between understanding versus accepting an argument. "If mutual respect simply requires that we work to make ourselves understood by others--and struggle to understand their points of view--then a religious argument can convey respect just as successfully as a nonreligious one" (61). Davis doesn't stop at simply arguing for the propriety of religious arguments, but lists seven positive advantages in "a political environment that is open to religious reasoning" (63). Such advantages include an increased ability to critique moral conventions and a more open discussion of morals generally. (Morals are more often snuck in the back door of political conversation anyway through unstated assumptions.) In sum: part one dissects myths on the right (America is a Christian nation, etc.) and left (Separation of church and state, etc.) and then examines what religious thinkers can offer in style and argument (Davis recognizes that each argument is not necessarily confined to the right or the left; this right/left construction favors more recent trends). In part two Davis attempts to exemplify the way religion can increase the quality of political discussion. He begins by "Rethinking the Big Four." These chapters embody the tone of interchange described in part one while discussing abortion, embryonic stem-cell research, euthanasia, and gay marriage (interestingly, Mormonism doesn't come up in his same-sex marriage discussion). In part three Davis takes readers "Beyond the Big Four" with discussions on war, environmentalism, and the economy. Perhaps the most fascinating should-have-been-obvious-why-didn't-I-already-think-of-that point of the book is the strange classification system Americans seem to embrace regarding "moral" issues. He cites a 2004 National Election Poll in which voters were asked to name the "most important issue facing the country." Davis explains: The poll pitted "moral values" against war, terrorism, the environment, and the economy. Doing so implied that those other issues had nothing to do with "moral values"; they were topics of political or social importance, but they were not matters of ethics....But war is a profoundly moral issue, just as how we treat the natural world and how we deal with one another in our economic relationships are matters of great moral significance (117-118). This section works well together with Davis's earlier admonition to resist the myth that moral arguments exist only one side of any given debate, whether regarding abortion, gay marriage, stem cell research, or capitalism (7). Davis's stirring concluding chapter is written "In Defense of Civility" (155). Here he defines "civility" as "the exercise of patience, integrity, humility, and mutual respect in civil conversation, even (or especially) with those with whom we disagree" (159). Noting the tendency of radio and TV political coverage to favor "sexier news" over compromise and reasoned discussion, Davis still believes there are

many who desire "a public dialogue that is patient, substantive, and subtle" (157). He carefully notes that he isn't calling for "simple passivity, nicety, or acquiescence," or that all conflict must be avoided. Pretending differences don't exist is as fruitless as shouting about differences. More importantly, civility is not a magic ingredient: "civility cannot guarantee consensus on any issue" (160). But Davis, citing Os Guinness, believes it promises progress: "What we are looking for [in civility] is not so much truths that can unite us as terms on which we can negotiate and by which we can live with the differences that divide us" (161). Davis again invokes history for examples of civility as a "consistent aspiration" of American leaders, albeit with imperfect execution (161). Davis encourages readers to encourage civility in the politicians to whom we write or interact with, the TV and radio programs we pay attention to, and the discussions we have with others in person, online, or anywhere else. Rather than sounding like a whiny diatribe or a preachy soapbox sermon, Davis's book is a reasoned description and example of the sort of intelligent and civil discussion which can serve to enrich public discourse. There are a few blind spots (I would have liked a discussion of an organized religion's right to promote political platforms, for example, or a description of tax exempt implications). Davis himself seems to lean slightly left of center on some issues and right of center on others. Overall he maintains balance quite well, however. I hope these leanings do not distract readers from the central purpose of the book, which isn't to resolve policy issues, but to exemplify a civil and religiously inclusive discussion on them.

3 of 3 people found the following review helpful. Thorough and Thoughtful
By Eric Van Meter
In a political climate marked by division, name-calling, and misrepresentation of facts, James Calvin Davis' call for religious intervention may seem naive, if not a bit insane. Religion has always been a topic of debate, and has lately found itself at the service of the very political factions Davis criticizes for their rancor. How could religion possibly have anything to offer in the midst of such political and social strife? According to Davis, the answer lies not in finding the correct solutions, but in changing the nature of the debates altogether. With *In Defense of Civility*, the author tackles questions of so-called moral values and their place in public discourse. He begins by exploring the history of religious involvement in public debates, a subject far more complicated than glib references to America as a Christian nation or to separation of church and state. Rather, religious (particularly Christian) thought has played an important role in every major American struggle, and has not been the sole property of any single ideology. Once he establishes religion's right to participate in American public discourse, Davis turns to what he calls the "Big Four": abortion, same-sex marriage, embryonic stem-cell research, and end-of-life issues. While he acknowledges the near impossibility of ever resolving those conflicts, he insists that religious adherents refrain from claiming that their position is the "moral" one. He carefully presents how each side shows a deep concern for justice and holiness in their position, and calls on faithful people to reject extremism and rhetoric in their dealings with one another. Finally, Davis looks beyond the Big Four to areas that show more promise of cooperation among liberals and conservatives: economic justice, ecological responsibility, and the struggle for peaceful resolutions to conflicts. He points out how evangelicals such as Rick Warren have found commonality with liberals rock stars (U2's Bono) to combat AIDS, raise concern for the poor, and promote care for the environment. These strange but fruitful partnerships are possibly only because individuals of deep religious convictions were able to listen respectfully to those with whom they often disagree. The author does not suggest that the world's problems will be solved if everyone will just try harder to get along. He does insist, however, that religious people can model a way of disagreeing that still allows for mutual respect and partnership on creating a better society for everyone. In particular, he calls on his readers to speak with patience, integrity, humility, and mutual respect--especially to those with whom they disagree. *In Defense of Civility* provides a voice of well-reasoned encouragement to people of faith who feel a tension between their religion and their politics. By his careful examination of some of the most complex issues of our time, the author models the kind of dialogue he encourages. His clear, lucid prose gives the book a wide potential leadership, including individuals and small groups. James Calvin Davis teaches at Middlebury College in Vermont, where he serves as Associate Professor of Religion. His previous works include *The Moral Theology of Roger Williams: Christian Conviction and Public Ethics*.

From "the big four" (abortion, homosexuality, euthanasia, and stem-cell research) to war, poverty, and the environment, this timely book considers religion's impact on moral debates in America's past and present. James Calvin Davis argues for religion's potential to enrich both the content and the civility of public conversation. This book will interest all concerned citizens yearning for more careful thinking about the role of religion in public debate.

About the Author
James Calvin Davis is Associate Professor of Religion at Middlebury College in Middlebury, Vermont. He is the editor of *On Religious Liberty: Selections from the Works of Roger Williams*.