

Book Review of A. Powell Davies' *America's Real Religion*

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A. Powell Davies in *America's Real Religion* gives a Unitarian pastor's perspective on how the American political system is related to the religion of the Founding Fathers and many of this country's subsequent leaders, namely those who in his opinion were called "infidels" by the nation's "orthodox" Christians. Davies links the development of democracy in this country to a "higher religion," a "faith *within* democracy... neither local nor ephemeral... the victory of truth over superstition, of liberty over servitude, of the universal over the provincial, of ennoblement over debasement, of brotherhood over exclusiveness, of the God of light over the gods of shadows, of love over fear."¹ The purpose of the book is, essentially, to argue against the "orthodoxy" that the "religions of fear" (any religion that maintain creeds and dogmas) profess, and to argue that "it is the higher religion... the only one that can lead the stricken world of the present into a happier, more hopeful future."²

Such an agenda should not be surprising considering the author's background. The Oxford Dictionary of the Christian Church defines Unitarianism as:

A type of Christian thought and religious observance which rejects the doctrines of the Trinity and the Divinity of Christ in favour of the unipersonality of God. Unitarians have no formal creed. Originally their teaching was based on scriptural authority, but J. Martineau (1805-1900) in England and T. Parker (1810-60) in the USA led the way from biblical to Rational Unitarianism. Hence reason and conscience have now become the criteria of belief and practice for Unitarians. Owing to their belief in the abiding goodness of human nature, they are critical of the orthodox doctrines of the Fall, the Atonement, and eternal punishment.³

Davies works precisely within these parameters throughout *America's Real Religion*. He initially lays a Unitarian background for the reader, then proceeds to show that the vast majority of the Founding Fathers and many subsequent notable figures in America, which Davies calls the American Apostles, were either Unitarian in profession or belief. His argument becomes, basically, that the founders, upholders and believers in democracy in America all rejected traditional Christianity, and that since it was precisely this rejection that allowed democracy and freedom, attributes of the "higher religion," to flourish, all traditional Christianity should be rejected in favor of a Unitarian approach. As the Oxford Dictionary suggests, Davies makes his arguments using reason and conscience instead of Biblical references, inferably because the latter is the product of "orthodox Christianity."

¹ A. Powell Davies, *America's Real Religion* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1965), p. 82.

² Ibid.

³ "Unitarianism," *Oxford Dictionary of the Christian Church*, 3rd ed. 1997.

For Orthodox Christians (with a capital “O”) in America such a book provides very important insight into the religious thought of all Christians in America. The idea of American Messianism, that America has a duty and responsibility to maintain and spread democracy, liberty and freedom throughout the world, should not be a foreign to anyone, particularly amidst the present-day “War on Terror.” President Bush, an Evangelical Christian, clearly subscribes to the American Messianic agenda as a method for justifying the invasion of countries which pose a direct threat to the US by harboring terrorists, and an indirect threat to our ‘superior’ way of life through rule by totalitarian means. Such arguments seem to appeal to a great number of Americans, particularly Evangelical Christians, as shown in the recent reelection of President Bush. However, it is not difficult to trace the origins of American Messianism to the Unitarian philosophy set forth by Davies in *America’s Real Religion*, and therefore any Christian, Orthodox or otherwise, should be aware that blind allegiance to the former concept is inherently dangerous, since its roots lie in the latter, blatantly heretical, doctrine.

Although it seems unlikely that Davies was familiar, nor even aware, of the Orthodox Church and Her teachings, nevertheless his conclusions are aimed directly in opposition to the infallibility which the Church professes. He picks apart writings of, and hearsay about, many figures in American history to defend his point that a Unitarian-like religion is the real religion of America. Perhaps many of the figures he quotes actually believed what he claims they believed, but that alone does not justify his conclusions. He makes no direct refutations of Christian doctrine or dogma. Rather, he allows the figures he cites to make the arguments for him. For example, he discusses how President Lincoln was influenced to hate the idea of “eternal punishment:”

...he was greatly shocked by words spoken at a funeral; it was the funeral of his partner, Barry, whose father was a minister and officiated at the graveside. When the casket was lowered into the ground, the father of the dead man looked down at it and solemnly said, “Son, I believe you’re in hell!” The impression such an incident would make on a temperament as sensitive as Lincoln’s is not difficult to imagine. Besides being inhuman and barbarous, it was grotesque.⁴

Instead of making arguments based on theological sources to support his views, Davies resorts to eliciting emotional sympathy for the figures and their beliefs, namely liberty, democracy, freedom, and social equality. For this reason the reader must be aware of Davies’ own bias, and compare his assertions with both Orthodox teaching and the history presented.

⁴ Davies, p. 69.

For many who may not be strong in the faith, Davies' book might make appealing arguments against the 'tyranny' of traditional religion, particularly for those who have a preconceived inclination against "organized religion," or those who may have had a difficult experience in a church. Therefore it would be best advised for Orthodox Christians to approach this book in a study group environment where the concepts can be thoroughly discussed and compared to Orthodox doctrine. For one who is mature in faith, it is not difficult to realize that the arguments set forth by Davies are far more rooted in the creeds of men than Christian dogma, since American democracy is a recent product of the philosophizing of men, whereas Orthodox Christian doctrine is millennia old and according to the Will of God, formed according to teaching of Christ and the work of the Holy Spirit. However, it is very possible that the arguments set forth by Davies may be found very appealing to an idealistically more liberal audience, or to an Evangelically Christian minded patriotic American, Orthodox or otherwise, since it sets America forth as the protector of all inalienable freedoms, a concept appreciated by left- and right-wingers alike.

Bearing this in mind, we can see how important the concepts discussed in this book could be as a means of evangelism by Orthodox Christians. Davies sets forth democracy and freedom as attributes of true religion, since he, a Unitarian, believes that the inherent goodness of men will bring peace, happiness and prosperity to the world, provided they are not oppressed by the tyrannical dogmas of religion. This concept, of course, is ridiculous to the Orthodox Church, which recognizes that evil exists in the world because of the fall of man, that man is under influence of sin and death, and that only through Christ, the Word of God Incarnate, can man be led to the Godly life, salvation. Davies' arguments may be appealing to many on a superficial level, but when one considers that even under democracy evil exists and thrives, one can easily conclude that Davies' conclusions are mere ideology. Therefore, this book can be used as an aid for the evangelization of people with a wide variety of backgrounds.

For example, in America today many people do not come to church, nor ally themselves with any particular religion, citing hypocrisy and dogma as deterrents. They often call themselves spiritual, but quantify that they do not believe in organized religion. Much like Davies they identify dogma and doctrine as oppressors which place an unnecessary burden on men, preventing

one from freely pursuing life, liberty, and happiness. Instead, they argue, they can pursue spirituality personally, without the tyranny of religion overshadowing their relationship with whatever deity they profess. Often, such contempt for religion is a directed response to a particular doctrine or dogma which the individual disagrees with, particularly within the realm of morality and ethics. Like Davies, who identifies the social reform of the past two centuries, namely “public schools, abolition of slavery, prison reform, care of the insane, poorhouses, the Red Cross, free public libraries, care of the blind and deaf, abolition of flogging, women’s rights, peace societies, planned parenthood, improved labor conditions, civil service,”⁵ as a direct result of his “higher religion,” they link particular dogmas or doctrines that they oppose with all religious authority, and therefore choose, essentially, relativism, both religious and moral, as an alternative. Yet, many of these very same people are also those who say they can not understand where all the evil in the world comes from. Clearly, an understanding of Orthodox ethics and soteriology⁶ would help to resolve this inherent conflict in their worldview.

No human philosophy, be it liberty, democracy, or equality, can replace the teaching of Jesus Christ, the Son of God Incarnate. Our Lord said, “I am the way, the truth, and the life: no man cometh unto the Father, but by me” (John 14:6). Naturally, the wisdom of men pales in comparison with the words of the Creator. Therefore, the aforementioned tenets of liberty, democracy and equality are only relevant within the context of the teaching of Christ. All men should be free to pursue salvation in Him, and all men are created equal in the eyes of God. But, one can not and must not worship the form of government which provides these freedoms. Worship is reserved for God our Creator alone. The concept of freedom, which we have because God granted all men free will, can not be perverted to justify a dogma or doctrine contrary to that which was given to us by Our Lord. Naturally, one can choose whether to follow the teachings of Christ or not, but if one disagrees with a teaching of the Church, that does not mean the teaching is incorrect or irrelevant. Such a concept is absurd.

This book is both educational for Orthodox Christians, and also a teaching tool that can be used to evangelize. The concepts discussed reveal the true beliefs of many who consider themselves believers in this country. This, if examined carefully, can easily strengthen the faith of

⁵ Ibid., p. 59.

⁶ “The theological doctrine of salvation as effected by Jesus,” <dictionary.com>.

someone who is already an Orthodox Christian. Likewise, revealing the actual motivation for, and development of, “democratic” views, such as American Messianism and moral reform, to the aforementioned believers could drive them to seek a deeper understanding of philosophy, ethics, and theology. Although probably not to be used in a very direct manner which could lead people into anger and despair, the conclusions offered by Davies in the book might very well be a good “wake up call” for many who subscribe to the “democratic” views discussed. Therefore, it might be a good idea to invite Orthodox and non-Orthodox alike into a study group where the book can be examined and discussed in an Orthodox perspective. Conceivably, this could help strengthen those already in the Church, and lead nonbelievers to Jesus Christ and the Orthodox Faith.