

REVIEWS

Myth of Religious Violence: Secular Ideology and the Roots of Modern Conflict by William T. Cavanaugh (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2009), viii + 285 pp.

William Cavanaugh is well-known and respected for several earlier works, especially *Torture and Eucharist* (Wiley-Blackwell, 1998) which reflects upon the exclusion of known torturers from the Roman Catholic eucharist during the reign of terror Chile suffered under General Augusto Pinochet (1973–90). Excommunication was a potent symbol of authentic Christian identity, and of the church's commitment to a risky politics of protest, resistance, and reform. Chile's Catholic episcopacy and Catholic social organizations networked with other civic groups and local government agencies to empower the people and protect human rights. As an observer and participant in those efforts, Cavanaugh has a well-founded commitment to the role of religion in politics and society, reducing violence and promoting popular voice and participation.

Cavanaugh is also a former student of Stanley Hauerwas, professor of Christian ethics at Duke University who envisions the church as a "community of character" in which Christian virtue and practices, especially nonviolence, are formed around faithfulness to Christ's cross. Unlike Cavanaugh, Hauerwas sharply distinguishes Christian discipleship from worldly politics, seeing the Christian social-ethical role as countercultural witness, not reform. Special targets of critique by Hauerwas are liberal Protestantism and liberalism in general. Liberal Christians, he believes, are too complacently optimistic about the possibilities of progressive politics and about the upward trajectory of human history. They are also self-deluding about the reality of sin—their own and others'—and unwilling to accept the sacrifices that true Christianity demands.

Myth of Religious Violence shares Hauerwas's antipathy toward liberalism, if not his skepticism about religious investment in social change. Here the book differs markedly from the works of Christian ethicists (such as Jeffrey Stout, Eric Gregory, and Richard Miller) who believe that Christian social ethics should make common cause with liberal democracy, in order to build or strengthen respect for equality, human rights, political participation and the rule of law. *Myth of Religious Violence* claims that secular liberalism not only treats religion and politics as if they were separable into private and public spheres, but sees all religion as prone to violence, divisive, and dangerous.

In Cavanaugh's view, the "myth" that religion is peculiarly irrational and violent serves to distract attention from and conceal the fact that liberalism itself uses violence to promote its own, supposedly "rational," ends. It is liberal, secular violence (both economic and military) that has provoked a reaction in kind from some religious groups such as radical Muslims. Cavanaugh states his aim negatively: to dismantle the myth of religious violence, and so destroy the key plank of "a groundless religious-

secular dichotomy that causes us to turn a blind eye to secular forms of imperialism and violence," creating "villains" in the form of "non-Western Others," and legitimating their subjugation by military might (p. 14).

Whether in the hands of the Supreme Court, the liberal academic and media intelligentsia, or the neo-liberal neo-cons, the myth of religious violence "unfairly marginalizes voices labeled religious from public discourse while it simultaneously promotes a secular religion of U.S. nationalism," helping to drum up support for adventures such as the invasion of Iraq (p. 194).

Cavanaugh accomplishes his aims in four chapters. In the first, "Anatomy of the Myth," he makes a case that the stereotype of religion as irrational, divisive, absolutist, and violent is operative in the writings of nine scholars and journalists, including scholars of religion like Martin Marty and Scott Appleby. In the second, "The Invention of Religion," he maintains not only that religion is not inherently violent, but that "there is no transhistorical and transcultural essence of religion" (p. 59). It is the modern liberal nation-state (indebted to Locke) that has constructed religion as a distinct and universally identifiable phenomenon that can and should be kept "private."

The third and longest chapter, "The Creation Myth of the Wars of Religion," attacks the widespread view that Reformation-era religious wars necessitated the salutary emergence of sane and secular public discourse. Far from being the solution to religious violence, the modern state subsumed under nationalism and patriotism the same absolutist impulses usually associated with the sixteenth-century "wars of religion." In fact, state-building, which began well before the sixteenth century, was a major cause of violence during that era, absorbing into the state the power and sense of the holy traditionally invested in the church. Moreover, the ending of the wars of religion by the Peace of Westphalia (1648) did not lead immediately to liberal states and general tolerance. Rather, it established each nation as sovereign to determine which church or churches would or would not be recognized within it.

The final chapter, "The Uses of the Myth," drives home the point that the targeting of religion by secular elites reinforces "a dichotomy between the rational and peace-loving West... and irrational and violent non-Western cultures, especially Muslims..." (p. 183).

All Christians committed to political action—and we are many—who have had the frustrating experience of having our religious identities and motives denigrated *per se* as baseless, irrelevant, or reactionary can relate to Cavanaugh's ire. He has written a detailed and carefully researched rebuttal of the idea that there is some essence or necessary function of religion that makes it a more consistent cause of violence than other worldviews, belief systems or ideologies. He effectively unveils the self-serving nature of secular liberal condescension toward religion.

Myth of Religious Violence provokes three further questions for me as a theologian and social ethicist. The first concerns the definition of religion. Cavanaugh repeatedly asserts that there is no one essence or function of religion, and shows that sociologists have a notoriously hard time defining what counts as religion. His purpose is to discredit the unitary definition that his secular adversaries have promoted. He also wants to show that religion is always historically and culturally located, and that it is impossible to confine it to a putative nonpolitical sphere, or to isolate it as the single cause of social and political events. While I have no quarrel with these aims, I do question whether it is true or theologically helpful to maintain that religion has no consistent identity or content. Why not grant that as evolved the concept "religion" refers to human responses to the divine or what is perceived to be divine; or, analogically, to what has taken the place of the divine in commanding human worship? It would then be possible to consider religious violence on the basis of a distinction between true and false religion. Cavanaugh recognizes this distinction in Augustine

but does not incorporate it as part of his own normative analysis. Yet such a distinction may be operative in the minds of authors whom Cavanaugh discusses, including Marty and Appleby. Sometimes I felt that Cavanaugh was trying too hard to force authors discussed into his “liberal construction of religion” narrative and did not do justice to their nuances and qualifications. Some of those whom Cavanaugh interprets to think that all religion is prone to violence, I saw as saying rather that, whether religious violence is more frequent than other kinds or not, and even when religion exacerbates rather than causes conflicts, religiously-validated violence can be particularly immoderate because it names a partisan cause as transcendent and absolute.

A second and related question is, What does in fact cause the violence with which religion undeniably can be associated? How and why should Christians be accountable for that violence? How can it be remedied? I would maintain that religion that espouses and enacts violence is false religion. It represents not a true relation to God but a form of idolatry. Religious persons are accountable for that violence insofar as they permit or encourage religious believers to hide behind a type of “collective egoism” (in Reinhold Niebuhr’s phrase), in which they endow some collective identity with absolute and transcendent value by subsuming it under or collapsing it into religious identity. Once it is religiously legitimated, the collectivity “under God” can absorb all the petty and personal values, aims, interests and prejudices for which individuals would never dare directly to claim supremacy. While religion in and of itself may not lead to violence any more than other ideologies, it is more advantageous and thus more tempting for other ideologies to co-opt religion because such a strategy allows claims of ultimacy for what are in reality finite if not sinful causes.

Finally, I am gratified but not satisfied to learn that religion was not really responsible for the so-called religious wars. My question is, What *positively* can religion bring to build peace, social respect and cooperation, and democratic, participatory government? How is it doing this, and when and why is it successful? It is not so important for theologians to fend off elite liberalism (surely not a majority viewpoint, worldwide), as it is for us to proclaim, explicate and begin to implement the evangelical transformation of a violent world. An important next step for the Christian social ethicist is to show how and why peace-building expressions of religion are not only more authentic but also possible to realize over against their violent opposites.

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The Anticipatory Corpse: Medicine, Power, and the Care of the Dying by Jeffrey P. Bishop (Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame Press, 2011), xv + 411 pp.

Contemporary western culture—and specifically contemporary medicine—lives in denial of death. The economic, political, and social behemoth that is contemporary healthcare deploys all the weapons in the medical armamentarium to reject death, to forestall it, to refute its very existence and its power over us. The biotech industry, particularly in its pharmaceutical incarnation, joins this battle, promising that soon, very soon, youth will be extended, aging and senescence will be an historical artifact,

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