REVIEW ESSAY

Onward, Secular Soldiers, Marching as to War

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A Myth Nearly Everyone Believes

In *The Myth of Religious Violence: Secular Ideology and the Roots of Modern Conflict* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2009), William T. Cavanaugh, a professor of theology at DePaul University (Chicago), takes up the difficult and thankless task of overthrowing the entrenched view that religion uniquely fosters violence and that by imposing secularism the modern state has saved us from what would otherwise be a world of ongoing and remorseless sectarian violence.[1] Because this conventional wisdom is so deeply embedded in modern Western culture as to constitute a kind of second nature, Cavanaugh presents it in detail before unleashing his critique. He carries out the necessary demolition with great success. The book expands a line of argument that Cavanaugh pioneered in his essay "'A Fire Strong Enough to Consume the House'" (*Modern Theology* [Oct. 1995]: 397–420), but given the book's specific focus, some of that essay's interesting material does not appear here.

The book proceeds straightforwardly. In chapter 1, Cavanaugh canvasses the views of nine prominent scholars who deal with religion in modern society, including John Hick, Charles Kimball, Richard Wentz, David C. Rapoport, Bhiku Parekh, R. Scott Appleby, and Charles Selengut. These writers believe, Cavanaugh writes, that "[r]eligion causes violence because it is (1) absolutist, (2) divisive, and (3)

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1. Readers might wish also to consult William Cavanaugh's "Killing for the Phone Company: Why the Nation-State Is Not the Keeper of the Common Good," *Modern Theology* 20 (April 2004): 246–60, and A. J. Conyers's *The Long Truce* (Dallas: Spence, 2001).

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insufficiently rational" (pp. 17–18). Alas, in the works Cavanaugh surveys, he can find no serious attempt to define religion in a fashion that links "religion" in particular to violence in some way distinguishable from economic, political, or social motives for violence. Vague definitions and a priori linking of religion and violence seem to suffice for the essentialist accounts the Nine put forward. Cavanaugh tentatively concludes: "There is no reason to suppose that so-called secular ideologies such as nationalism, patriotism, capitalism, Marxism, and liberalism are any less prone to be absolutist, divisive, and irrational than belief in, for example, the biblical God" (p. 55).

In chapter 2, the stakes get higher. Having found (so far) no satisfactory definition of "religion" in the literature, Cavanaugh does find substantivist and functionalist approaches. Substantivists study religion in terms of content (gods, transcendence). Functionalists ponder ideology, practices, and structures of meaning. A third approach takes religion as "a constructed category" proper to modern Western ideology. These schools tend to ignore one another. Cavanaugh asks whether something called "religion," found "in any era and any place" (p. 61), can be neatly separated from other human activities. No ancient language reveals such a concept. The Latin term *religio* referred to duties and practices, not to doctrines. In the Middle Ages, it referred to a "way of life" or "rule" and not to "a universal genus of which Christianity is a particular species" (p. 65). For St. Thomas Aquinas it was "a set of skills that become 'second nature'" through discipline (p. 66).

As piety, practice, or virtue, *religio* pervaded medieval society. For moderns, religion is a category identified with "an essentially interior, private impulse . . . distinct from secular pursuits such as politics, economics, and the like" (p. 69). The turn came with writers such as Cusa and Ficino, who "interiorized and universalized" religion (p. 71). Sixteenth- and seventeenth-century fideists reinforced this shift by stressing doctrines and propositions. Religion as "a state of mind" took off among Calvinists. Religion as a universal genus fostered a retreat into self—the sole alternative supposedly being priestcraft. The asserted universality of "religion" suggested its "private *origin*" (p. 78, emphasis in original).(Compare here Hobbes and Locke on the origins of government and their outward reconciliation of individualism with the modern state.)

But, Cavanaugh writes, the *idea* of religion has its own history, and "religion" is not transhistorical and transcultural. (He is not arguing mere names here, but pointing out that although there are essences in the world, some asserted essences are not such.) In historical experience, "religion" was not clearly separable from the rest of life. Claims for such neat boundaries are *part* of the modern state's successful displacement of the church. And here is the remote origin of the liberal state's self-appointed job of keeping "substantive, collective ends" off the table (p. 84). The category of "religion" constructed and enforced new relations of power.

Western imperialists, armed with their notion of religion as a global genus, at first found no religion in the foreign places they seized (and hence no native rights). On rethinking, they extracted and cataloged propositions from what natives *did*, thereby inventing "Hinduism," "Buddhism," and so forth. Defining practices as

generic religion served to make them unreal. Comparative evaluation set in, with ritualistic Hinduism likened to Roman Catholicism and text-based Buddhism to Protestantism. (German romantics affirmed Hinduism, as did America's very own Ralph Waldo Emerson.) In any case, British rule was "public"; Hindu life was "private." Shinto (as religion) was a project of the Japanese state.

For Cavanaugh, too many writers suffer from an unjustified sense of clarity about what "religion" is. Substantivists wallow in vagueness and question begging, whereas functionalists define religion so widely as to rob the word of all meaning. He is not surprised when sundry writers declare consumerism, markets, science, economic liberalism (with its invisible hand equaling Providence), Marxism, fascism, and nationalism to be religions. Along such easily satisfied lines, the American civil religion—with America as the New Israel, a ("unitarian") post-Christian God, flag worship, and blood sacrifice—ought to count, too. (Cavanaugh's critique of religious experts so far calls to mind Noam Chomsky's rough treatment of Cold War liberal social scientists in *American Power and the New Mandarins* [New York: Pantheon, 1969].)

A Liberal-Secular Creation Myth

In chapter 3, the book's core, Cavanaugh directly challenges the notion that generic religion was the dark, strife-ridden force from which modern states delivered us. Contemporaries such as Spinoza, Hobbes, and Locke took that view, but Cavanaugh finds the account extremely implausible. From Bodin and Hobbes onward, the state-building narrative about ultimate "sovereignty" always included this claim. Contemporary writers such as Quentin Skinner, Jeffrey Stout, Judith Shklar, John Rawls, and J. G. A. Pocock have massively affirmed the myth. Cavanaugh sees Skinner and Stout leapfrogging from the wars to secular liberalism, a move that slights the absolutist regimes that imposed one church or another on their peoples for more than a century after the wars. This outcome suggests that states subordinated churches to their purposes, not that they wisely protected All Mankind from the ills of religion. Nor is it easy to link the alleged secular settlement in U.S. Constitution with "Wars of Religion," when nothing of the kind took place in North America. Worse luck, twentieth-century wars, which hardly rested on confessional disputes, have to be written off as unexpected survivals of preliberal atavisms if the savior state is to be relieved of blame.

"War Made the State, and the State Made War"[2]

The myth holds that (1) struggles arose over religious issues as such; (2) those issues were the chief cause; (3) therefore, "'*[r]eligious' causes must be analytically separable from political, economic, and social causes*" (p. 142); and (4) the modern state was

2. The phrase is Charles Tilly's.

not a cause of the wars, but their cure. As to religious issues, Cavanaugh notes that the Catholic Holy Roman emperor Charles V fought the pope, not the Lutherans. The pope opposed the emperor. Officially Catholic France opposed the officially Catholic emperor. France sided with the Turks against the empire, and Protestant princes supported it. Catholic Bavarians opposed the empire. The pope opposed Catholic king of Spain Philip II. French internal strife displayed shifting alliances between particular Catholic factions and Huguenots. Lutherans did not fight Calvinists, despite their many differences. Here we meet with Cavanaugh's most striking exercise in demolition—at length (pages 142–50) and well supported.

Religion as primary cause ought to have pitted principled Catholic and Protestant blocs against one another. The record does not show such a pattern. The key conflict was between French and Habsburg state interests; hence, these armed conflicts were *not* wars "*of* religion." There is, as Cavanaugh notes, the further problem of specifying which motives count as "religious." If Emile Durkheim was right, we simply *cannot* separate the social from the religious. In these wars, states imposed national unity, including the state's preferred (and controlled) church. In Cavanaugh's view, state-led confessionalism was part of building an obedient populace.

Instead of the modern state as the solution to wars caused by religion, Cavanaugh offers a "shift to state dominance over the church" (p. 161). This shift was a *cause*, not a cure, of the wars and was closely allied with the "invention of sovereignty." The wars were among the "birth pangs of the state." Building on the work of Charles Tilly, Hendrik Spruyt, Perry Anderson, Otto Hintze, Antony Giddens, Michael Mann, and Michael Howard, Cavanaugh finds the causes of the General Crisis of the seventeenth century and the accompanying wars precisely in territorial states' drive to increase and centralize political power. This drive provoked regional resistance that involved local elites, peasants, and other classes, and this resistance cut across religious lines. Cavanaugh concludes that state-building projects were in fact "a principal *cause* of the wars in question" (pp. 177–78).

After this famous victory for the state (not for tolerance as an end), a subject's primary obligation was to the mystical body of the state. The state was sacralized, not secularized. The result was a new form of salvation in which death for the state is never in vain. Thus, sacrifice "provides the glue that binds a liberal social order together" (p. 179). For Cavanaugh, it does not follow that liberal practices such as institutional separation of church and state are necessarily wrong. There may be grounds for such a policy. The myth, however, does not provide good grounds and also causes much mischief.

The Myth of Religious Violence and Actual Violence

In Cavanaugh's view (chapter 4), American elites sponsored (and later merely tolerated) a nondenominational Protestant establishment down to about 1940. The Supreme

Court thereafter invoked the threat of "religious" wars to undermine that establishment in a series of decisions (for example, *Gobitis* in 1940, and *Everson* in 1947) that imposed a secularizing, individualist worldview. For Justices Felix Frankfurter, John Marshall Harland, Arthur Goldberg, and William Brennan, a *patriotic* God was just fine, but what really mattered was, as Cavanaugh puts it, "faith in the United States of America" (p. 190).

Bad enough at home, the myth in its various readings is disastrous in foreign policy. Concrete grievances seem never to matter, and all the trouble in the Middle East allegedly arises from Islamic failure to secularize. Cavanaugh considers (and rejects) the views propounded by Bernard Lewis, Andrew Sullivan, and Mark Juergensmeyer in this area. For many liberal Westerners, secular violence to force liberal practices on backward places is self-evidently good. Writers who decline to argue for social ends manage to find, in Cavanaugh's words, "no theoretical limit on the degree of one's obedience to the secular nation-state" (p. 212). Sam Harris thinks we are at war with Islam and writes that all Islamic religious militants, incapable of being deterred, must be killed, possibly with a nuclear first strike. Such secular, atheist spokesmen as Alan Dershowitz, Peter Singer, Richard Dawkins, and the late Christopher Hitchens have endorsed an American crusade against Islam. Here indeed is the ultimate "'liberal war of liberation'" (p. 223), corresponding perhaps to a trace of violence in liberalism itself. It is, in Cavanaugh's words, the odd case of "absolutism in defense of the shunning of absolutes" (p. 223).

Thus, the fable of uniquely religious violence becomes a key axiom of Western secular faith. Those who have not secularized are necessarily irrational and violence prone: after all, if invaded, they may shoot back; there is the proof. Cavanaugh protests that Western secularism is *not* a "universal solution to [some] universal problem of religion" (p. 227). It does not help us deal with Islam. And without this myth, Americans might manage to have a real foreign-policy debate, involving real causal analysis, for the first time in seventy years.

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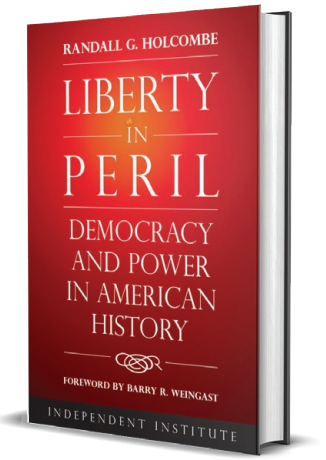

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