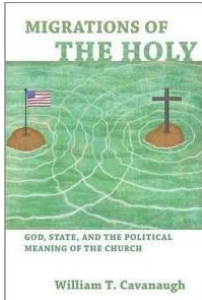


Book Review of *The Myth of Religious Violence: Secular Ideology and the Roots of Modern Conflict*, William T. Cavanaugh, New York: Oxford University Press, 2009; 285 pages.



Book Review of *Migrations of the Holy: God, State, and the Political Meaning of the Church*, William T. Cavanaugh, Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2011, 200 pages.

My thanks to Oxford University Press for a review copy of the first book, and to Eerdmans for a review copy of the second.

I learned of the first publication and that reviewed below in following through on the Canadian Broadcasting Corporation's "[After Atheism](#)" *Ideas* five-part series by David Cayley. In [After Atheism: New Perspectives on God & Religion, Part 3 - William Cavanaugh](#), the author interviewed mainly discusses his book *Migrations of the Holy* (2011), reviewed below. It in some ways follows through on the first book under review. This book could have been discussed in the second related series of seven broadcasts by David Cayley entitled "[The Myth of the Secular](#)".

The book's title is designedly provocative. In the West, everyone *knows* that "religion" (Christianity) historically, and in resurgent worldwide Islam, is indisputably violent. Cavanaugh asserts nonetheless that the claim that "religion is ... essentially prone to violence is one of the foundational legitimating myths of the liberal nation-state (p. 4)."

Conventional wisdom implies that "religions" such as Christianity, Islam, Hinduism, and Judaism over against "ideologies and institutions" such as nationalism, Marxism, capitalism, and liberalism, are "essentially more prone to violence – more absolutist, divisive, and irrational – than the latter." In response, the author is blunt: "It is this claim that I find both unsustainable and dangerous (p. 6)." "Violence" in relation to those cited in the book "generally means injurious or lethal harm and is almost always discussed in the context of physical violence, such as war and terrorism (p. 7)."

Not only does the author use the term "myth" to indicate the claim is false, "but to give a sense of the power of the claim in Western societies (p. 6)." The claim seems a given and inevitable – and therefore difficult to refute.

Cavanaugh gives a detailed helpful summary in the Introduction of the content of each of the four chapters. If one wanted only the conclusions reached, the Introduction adequately offers that. I shall briefly summarize the chapters as discussed in the Introduction.

Chapter I, “The Anatomy of the Myth”, discusses no less than nine academics who variously espouse the myth. So many are discussed, many eminent in their field, to establish that the claims of the myth are not idiosyncratic but are deeply entrenched. Cavanaugh states in response to all nine: “They all suffer from the same defect: the inability to find a convincing way to separate religious violence from secular violence (p. 8).” Such arguments in fact “immunize themselves from empirical evidence (p. 8).” He argues on the contrary that “so-called secular ideologies and institutions like nationalism and liberalism can be just as absolutist, divisive, and irrational as those called religious (p. 8).”

Cavanaugh in fact organizes the nine interlocutors in Chapter 1 under the three categories of claims that “religion” is 1) absolutist, 2) divisive and 3) irrational.

He concludes the chapter, indicating “The point is that the distinction between secular and religious violence is unhelpful, misleading, and mystifying, and it should be avoided altogether (p. 56).”

In the second chapter, the genealogy of the concept of “religion” is considered. Cavanaugh states that there is “no such thing as a transhistorical or transcultural “religion” that is essentially separate from politics (p. 9).” Second, “the attempt to say that there *is* a transhistorical and transcultural concept of religion that is separable from secular phenomena *is itself* part of a particular configuration of power, that of the modern, liberal nation-state as it developed in the West (p. 9).”

Cavanaugh explains that there is no “religion” separate from culture, politics, and other areas of life in society, outside scholarly definition that it is so. “Religion” is an invention of modernity in the West.

“Religion” as such consequently retreats into the private sphere, while the secular takes over. Outside the West, various human phenomena labelled “religions” such as Hinduism and Buddhism were invented by Western scholars, with varying definitions of essentialism (the essence of what religion is), substantivism (beliefs), and functionalism (how religions operate). Cavanaugh suggests that economics, politics, and liberalism all function equally as “religions”. In economics, there is belief in “the invisible hand of the market”; in politics there are Marxism, communism, and fascism that perform like “religions”; and liberalism in Western democracies has a civil religion accompanying it. Nationalism can also qualify as a religion. The United States is a classic instance of having “civil religion” surrounding its nationalism, as was the cult of the French Nation after the 1789 Revolution. So Cavanaugh asserts: “Religion as such is not privatized [in the United States]; traditional religion is privatized, while the religion of politics occupies the public realm (p. 116).”

So the author asserts that the “problem with the myth of religious violence is not that it condemns certain kinds of violence, but that it diverts moral scrutiny from other kinds of violence (p. 121).” The secular state is thereby exempt.

Chapter 3 addresses the often cited example of the wars of religion in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries in Europe. The modern Western state did not put an end to “wars of religion” at this time. It simply saw the “migration of the holy” to the state in its exclusive exercise of legitimate violence. As well, so-called wars of religion can no more be blamed on religion than on emerging nation states. There was simply no separation of religion from politics. The emergence of the secular state did not end the wars of religion as often contended. Such emergence involved violent conflict throughout in Europe, conflicts that fell less along religious lines than on many other political manoeuvrings that overshadowed religious motivations.

“*Dulce et decorum est / Pro patria mori* [Noble and right it is/ To die for one’s fatherland] would take on normative status (p. 12).”, Cavanaugh argues, that also involved readily killing for one’s country.

So the four components of the myth, three of which assign blame to religion for all the violence during the 16th and 17th centuries, the fourth posits the rise of the liberal nation-state as the solution to the wars of religion, are all shown to be wanting. Each of the four components is examined and critiqued in detail. With reference to the last, Cavanaugh claims “The so-called wars of religion appear as wars fought by state-building elites for the purpose of consolidating their power over the church and other rivals (p. 162).” And later: “The so-called wars of religion were the birth pangs of the state, not simply the crisis which required the state to step in as savior (p. 166).”

In the final chapter the author examines how the myth of religious violence has been used to marginalize “religion” to a completely private sphere removed from the public square. This is examined in the first section.

In the next two sections, Cavanaugh details how the myth “helps to construct non-Western Others and to legitimate violence against them (p. 13).”

In the fourth section, examples are given of such justifications to underpin military actions in the Islamic world. Cavanaugh sees such massive military incursions as “little different from previous forms of Western imperialism (p. 14).”

Cavanaugh sees in the use of the myth a shift from “a predominant religious communitarianism to a predominant secular individualism in American jurisprudence and American culture (p. 194).” Consequently, the myth unfairly marginalizes religious voices while a secular religion of U.S. nationalism is promoted.

Cavanaugh cites neoatheists Sam Harris and Christopher Hitchens in their unabashed diatribes against “religion” as by definition claiming that all that is violent and poisonous in human

culture is religion. Violence must thus be used against religious believers everywhere for such believers pose threats to world order with their violence.

From the left, Cavanaugh discusses Paul Berman, professor of journalism, who supports the Woodrow Wilson doctrine of making the world safe for democracy. To do so, there must be violent repression of enemies the world over, in particular radical Islamists. Cavanaugh cites John Lukács: “If we judge events by their consequences, the great world revolutionary was [President] Wilson rather than Lenin (p. 224).” It is American military might with its attendant violence that has been ubiquitous throughout the twentieth, into the twenty-first, centuries; that has used the greatest violence, that spends more on all things military than all other countries combined.

The author provides five significant benefits to retiring the myth of religious violence:

1. The end to a priori divisions of violent practices into secular and religious
2. Secularism would not be seen as the universal solution to religious violence
3. Westerners would be helped to see the Islamic world in all its complexity, only one piece of which has been violence
4. Violence by the West would not be the automatic response to Islamic religious actors
5. Serious public dialogue might be allowed in seeing more complex causes, especially of Western imperialism, to the violence seen in Islamic states. The West is certainly not exempt from massive violence, as seen in World War II in Dresden, Hiroshima and Nagasaki, Iraq, the Abu Grahیب prison, etc. He could also have mentioned widespread carpet bombing in Germany and Japan during World War II, and South and Central America where despotic regimes were fully supported by the West, etc.

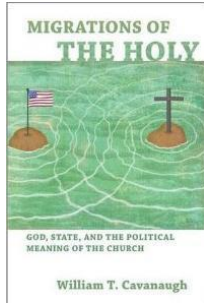
Not only does he cite numerous examples of mass violence by the United States, designed to prop up liberal values the world over; he also draws on the work of Mahmood Mamdani, author of *Good Muslim, Bad Muslim: America, 9/11, and the Roots of Terror* (though Cavanaugh cites a different source by the same author) to demonstrate that modern Muslim militancy, including the creation of an international terrorism organization in the formation of Osama bin Laden’s Al Qaida, was the direct result of American secular liberal foreign policy.

The book is meticulously researched.

It lays to rest any way of isolating “religion” from all the other realities of human life in a given state, that support the exercise of violence by the state.

It also laid to rest any easy way of indicting Western Christianity for an embrace of violence readily separable from all the other cultural influences that impinge on human endeavour. Put differently, for Western Christianity there was not only at work a theology of just war that primarily influenced Christians to engage in warfare for the state. There were multiple other influences that legitimated such violence, including in particular nationalism and liberalism.

Cavanaugh acknowledges he has no alternative theopolitical vision to offer. “The purpose of the book is negative: to contribute to a dismantling of the myth of religious violence (p. 14).” He presents a compelling case.



Book Review of *Migrations of the Holy: God, State, and the Political Meaning of the Church*, William T. Cavanaugh, Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2011, 200 pages.

Most of the book is a collection of essays written over time by Cavanaugh. There is consequently not a unifying quality to the essays.

“In these chapters I try to unthink the inevitability of the nation-state... (p. 3).”, writes the author. Cavanaugh wishes to “point to church practices that resist the colonization of the Christian imagination by a nation-state that wants to subordinate all other attachments to itself (p. 3).”

The “state” is relatively new in European history (originating between 1450 and 1650), and signifies the rise of sovereignty as supreme authority within a given territory. The “nation-state” with its concept of nationalism is of even more recent vintage (18th century), one that conjoins the idea of “nation” with the political apparatus of the state. Its prevalence became marked only from the 19th century on. Such societies arise as a consequence of war and the ability to make war. One writer provides “the analogy of the protection racket for the formation of the Western state (p. 16).” War-making and state-making by entrepreneurs go hand in hand: “This view of state-formation has gained wide acceptance (p. 17).” In this scenario, the common good is not sought so much as keeping others from interfering with others: a highly individualistic sense of being human. This, incidentally, is the inversion of *ubuntu* in which a person is a person through others, not over against. Whether the modern state be communist, fascist, or democratic, there is no difference in the total power of the state to demand loyalty.

Civil society is consequently absorbed by the state in at least three ways, Cavanaugh contends. First there is exponential growth of the state, with war the primary method. Second, intermediate associations such as church, unions, the family are reduced in their power. The third is the symbiosis between the state and corporations. There is a move towards union of corporations and state power. In the formation of the nation-state, that entity and society became fused, displacing all intermediate loyalties.

“Globalization is, in part, the hyperextension of the triumph of the universal over the local, on which the nation-state is founded (p. 39).” Capitalism and the state arose simultaneously, Cavanaugh claims. Therefore “the nation-state is simply not in the common good business (p. 42).” Theologically, the nation-state may be understood “as a kind of parody of the church, meant to save us from division (p. 42).” Cavanaugh says the church must learn urgently to demystify the nation-state and “‘complexify’ ” space, that is, promote the creation of spaces in which alternative economies and authorities flourish (p. 42).” Cavanaugh calls for a church that understands itself as participating “in the life of the triune God, who is the only good that can be common to all (p. 45).” Its international nature challenges the particularity of nation-state interests. Its eternal nature anticipates Kingdom Come – distinctly at odds with the nation-state, especially as it is wed to economic interests and warfare to bolster it.

The nation-state “presents itself as a repository of sacred value that requires its citizens to kill and die on its behalf (p. 54).” “The nation-state itself becomes a kind of religion (p. 49).”, Cavanaugh argues, and later quotes approvingly Carolyn Marvin’s statement that “nationalism is the most powerful religion in the United States (p. 54).” Cavanaugh adds: “and it is a religion that produces unity through blood sacrifice in war (p. 54).”

The author reads St. Augustine to say that “The task of the church is to interrupt the violent tragedy of the earthly city with the comedy of redemption, to build the city of God, beside which the earthly city appears to be no city at all (p. 63).” He draws on Samuel Wells’ book *Improvisation: The Drama of Christian Ethics* that sees Christian life as “likened to dramatic improvisation, where actors are formed in certain habits – virtues – and then allowed to take the action in some unanticipated directions (p. 65).” – that imitate God’s ways with creation. Wells argues that “God neither simply accepts nor rejects (‘blocks’) the sinfulness of the world, as if it were a given, but rather ‘overaccepts’ the sin of the world in the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus (p. 65).” The term in single quotation marks in the theatre “indicates an improvised reframing of the action of a drama in light of a larger story one wants to tell (p. 65).” One can think of Dietrich Bonhoeffer’s martyrdom in this respect. Bonhoeffer knew that Christ had transfigured death. He wrote, “Death is the supreme festival on the road to freedom.” For Wells and Augustine, *original goodness* is ultimate Creation reality, more basic than sin.

Therefore, truly embracing eschatology eschews accepting the tragic nature of sin with resignation nor any kind of triumphalism about the church as realized eschaton. “It requires a fully penitential ‘overaccepting’ of human finitude and sinfulness by receiving the healing kingdom that God, through Christ and the Spirit, has planted right in the midst of our bloodstained history... Our fate has been transformed into our destiny, which is to receive the kingdom of God in humility and thankfulness. The city of God is not the shape of our triumph, but of our repentance (p. 67).”

Cavanaugh concludes Chapter Two by discussing America’s decision to invade Iraq. A “one-city” view of the nation-state was dominant in American churches: Most Christians were obligated to support the state once it decided to invade Iraq.

A two-city view of the nation-state would have seen Christians committed to a different drama: one of reconciliation, not war. “This would, of course, require a significant shift away from the common American Christian imagination of church and state as two parts of a whole (p. 68).”

In Chapter Three, Cavanaugh asserts that the nation-state is “merging its interests with those of the transnational corporation (p. 72).” – not for the common good, but for individual profit. Money freely moves between nation-states, but not migrant workers. Why? Because citizens of those states resent the migrant worker providing cheap labour. In reality, the nation-state needs such sources, though they are perennially denied human rights conferred on its own citizens, and therefore may readily remain underpaid, generally marginalized and exploited.

He discusses the various identities of the “migrant” (who must be kept without human rights to assure cheap labour); of the “tourist” who must always have “nonmodern” peoples (and hence without rights) to “gaze” at; of the “pilgrim” who represents “a model of mobility that is not

dependent on an imperial gaze (p. 79).” The Christian pilgrim historically was not out to exploit but to transform the self through forgiveness of sins. Ultimately, the church is ever pilgrim, for it moves constantly towards communion with God and others, for which the Trinity is the model.

But supporters of those on pilgrim were needed: for which the monk and monastery played a key role. And a vow of stability was expected of the monk in the Benedictine Rule, for instance.

Cavanaugh then asks “What kinds of stability and mobility should the church renounce and embrace in a globalized age (p. 86)?” It must eschew nationalism and “The tourist gaze, as I have called it [that] conquers and coordinates the world’s differences into a single consciousness. The military imposition of Western models of economics and politics on the two-thirds world is the most troubling manifestation of such a consciousness (p. 86).” The church must be both pilgrim and monk, a stance that “puts the church at the margins of the law and at the margins of any national identity (p. 87).”

Chapter Four is entitled “Messianic Nation: A Christian Theological Critique of American Exceptionalism”. Cavanaugh argues that “when a direct, unmediated relationship is posited between America and a transcendent reality, either God or freedom, there is a danger that the state will be divinized (p. 89).”

American exceptionalism was first a theological idea in America, based on a doctrine of election. It quickly was embraced by Americans of all stripes that saw America as a Messiah nation. This blended with ideas of progress, expansion and capitalism. It was a secularized “Manifest Destiny”.

The Enlightenment strand had also a kind of secularized version of Providence. There is widespread belief that a kind of secular “god” guided America to become preeminent in the world at the end of the Cold War. America is charged with making history come out right. The nation itself thereby is worshipped for the freedoms it offers.

An evangelical author, Stephen Webb, argues that in fact America plays a key God-given role in world history just as Israel biblically. With the triumph of Western liberalism, it is clear that God has pronounced in favour of American-style democracy and free markets. Webb eschews reading theology from the vantage point of the cross, and bypasses the church, Cavanaugh argues (p. 100). Webb tries to combine the secular with the biblical version of American exceptionalism, such that political authority is divinized, and the sovereignty of God is transferred to the sovereignty of the state (p. 105). Cavanaugh takes issue over against a biblical view that sees the church emerge as supreme locus of citizenship, not the nation-state.

Cavanaugh ends the chapter with: “We need the church to perform its crucial role of judging the powers of this earth by the standards of Christ and his gospel, lest God’s will and America’s [or any nation-state’s such as Nazi Germany] will come to be identified as one (p. 108).”

Chapter Five turns to torture, a book on which topic he has written ([*Torture and Eucharist*](#)). He quickly dispels the myth that the Catholic Church ever widely used torture even at the height of the Inquisition (p. 110). The historical record says otherwise. But the legend of this kind of

torture is part of an Enlightenment narrative “that celebrates modernity and its institutions as darkness overcome (p. 110).”

This myth is used to favour the modern Western liberal state over against a dark religious past, and also to discredit non-Westerners under the sway of violent religious Islamic dogma in particular. He discusses briefly Samuel Huntington’s famous thesis on the clash of civilizations between the West and the Muslim world.

While torture is nonetheless part of the Christian past for which repentance is due, it is also part of the present in the West, directly as at Abu Grahb prison and Guantánamo Bay, but also in “renditions” to many proxy countries knowingly employing torture. Cavanaugh asserts that “In real ways, the United States has not really secularized at all. What has happened instead is that in the modern era the holy has migrated from the church to the state (p. 112).” The United States does not openly admit to carrying out torture as policy, but implies its necessity by broadening the definition of torture in abjuring but using it. Torture is a current instrument of the state in the West, in particular in the United States. In denouncing terrorism however, the author warns against creating “new Inquisitions of our own (p. 114).”

Cavanaugh argues compellingly. One wonders: How does one move from acknowledging the reality, to changing it? Nothing concrete is offered by the author.

Chapter Six discusses liturgies of the American nation that compete for body and mind. In particular, the nation-state calls on sacrifice of life for the nation as a sacred ritual. Another is the mystical nature of the flag.

In Christian liturgy, there is nothing “sacred” for all of life is God’s.

Chapter Seven deals with “The Church as Political”. Cavanaugh asserts that the church must not be marginalized from politics. The Roman Empire understood the church as political threat precisely because it understood itself as a political entity. The author discusses several authors in relation to the church and politics. He concludes: “As the embodiment of God’s politics, the church nevertheless muddles through. God is in charge of all of history. The church’s job is to try to discern in each concrete circumstance how best to embody the politics of the cross in a suffering world (p. 149).”

Chapter Eight addresses “The Sinfulness and Visibility of the Church: A Christological Exploration”. Cavanaugh follows Gerhard Lohfink in seeing salvation as ever social, consisting in incorporating Christians into a social body. The visibility of the church is crucial. But it is at once human/sinful and divine. Cavanaugh insists that all ecclesiology is Christology, and looks at the Chalcedon sorting out of the two natures of Christ for clues to aid ecclesiology.

Cavanaugh discusses ecclesiological Monophysitism, where the church is seen as ideal society, and ecclesiological Nestorianism, where the church is truly avowedly sinful. “The church, to put it another way, plays out the tragedy of sin while living in the hope that, in the end, the drama is in reality a comedy and not a tragedy (p. 162).”, he writes. The church fathers at once saw the

church as bride of Christ and as prostitute – as in the story of Hosea and his temple prostitute wife.

He concludes that for the church, repentance is prior to sin, grace prior to breaking the law, peace prior to violence. Therefore “Christian nonviolence issues from an imitation of Christ’s nonviolence, but also on a waiting on God’s repentance to be worked in us. It is in this repentance that the church may make Christ and the drama of sin and redemption visible (p. 169).”

In chapter Nine, Cavanaugh discusses the interactions of democratic theorists Jeffrey Stout, Romand Coles, and Stanley Hauerwas.

Cavanaugh asserts near the end of the chapter that “Worship is a posture of unseeing trust, the ultimate vulnerability of acknowledging the difference between Creator and creature – and thus the reality of one’s own death... But the other side of the vulnerability of worship is the confidence that someone is ruling the universe, and peace is not accomplished by human striving. Hence the words of the psalm: ‘Be still, and know that I am God’ (Ps. 46:10). It is God who ‘makes wars cease to the end of the earth’ (Ps. 46:9). Violence is a function of forgetting that God is God, and I ain’t (p. 194).”

Cavanaugh ends the book thus: “The good news however, is that worshipping the God who rules in the Crucified One can and should make Christians vulnerable to those who don’t (p. 195).”

Cavanaugh invites the reader to ponder deeply one’s place in the nation-state.

My greatest difficulty with the book is: the author seems to be a voice disembodied from a Christian community such as idealized in the series of essays. He provides concrete examples at times, but does not draw from life experience in a Christian community. Further, one despairs at finding such an idealized community of believers. Who outside academic circles even works on this kind of material? Where does one go with it?

My related and perhaps greater difficulty is, I am not sufficiently conversant with the many authors discussed.

It is also not easy to transpose these insights to the Canadian context.

I am therefore left unsettled by the material in these essays, and in the first book reviewed.

Comments by others more conversant with these books and the many authors and ideas discussed would be very helpful.