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The Myth of Religious Violence: Secular Ideology and the Roots of Modern Conflict

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William T. Cavanaugh. *The Myth of Religious Violence: Secular Ideology and the Roots of Modern Conflict.*

New York: Oxford University Press, 2009.

Reviewed by Bryan W. Cottle

Whether or not religion is essentially prone to violence is not a new debate within academia. While many scholars argue religion creates more violence in the world than any other institution, others argue that secular movements are by far the greater culprit, and the remainder struggle to find a middle ground. Despite disagreements, the scholarly discussion has largely hinged on the formation of a religious versus secular dichotomy. Does this paradigm damage our appraisal of religious violence, and are there alternative paradigms to consider?

William Cavanaugh's work, *The Myth of Religious Violence*, answers in the affirmative. Cavanaugh, a professor of Catholic Studies at DePaul University in Chicago, Illinois, is not a newcomer to the discussion of religion in public life. He has dealt with issues such as religion and economics, religion and nationalism, and the Christian reaction to torture. In this recent work, Cavanaugh analyzes so-called religious violence to indicate how this myth is tied up in a secular-religious dichotomy, which has hindered religious violence studies and productive international relations. It is important to note that Cavanaugh does not argue that religion is immune from violence or that secular institutions are just as violent as religion. Cavanaugh's work is interested rather in how the terms "religion" and "secular" were originally constructed and how that knowledge aids in the study of violence. Although published a few years ago, this foundational study has only become more relevant and more needed as violent events in the name of religion continue to escalate in various parts of the world.

In his introduction, Cavanaugh defines the myth of religious violence as "the idea that religion is a transhistorical and transcultural feature of human life, essentially distinct from 'secular' features such as politics and economics, which has a peculiarly dangerous inclination to promote violence" (3). He contends that such a notion is inaccurate

because there *is* no transhistorical or transcultural essence to religion, and any effort to distinctly separate religious violence from secular violence ends up being incoherent. Though the ideas behind the myth are incoherent, the myth remains powerful because Western societies have used it to legitimize the modern secular state. This power of mythos greatly increases the need to deconstruct the falsity of the belief.

To deconstruct the myth, Cavanaugh devotes the first chapter to evaluating the work of nine prominent scholars. These scholars (including Charles Kimball, Mark Juergensmeyer, and Scott Appleby) each argue that religion is violent through either its absolutist, divisive, or irrational nature. However, the definition of religion is debatable and becomes problematic when scholars attempt to make it a construct distinct from the secular and therefore especially prone to violence. Some of these scholars avoid an exact definition of religion in their arguments, making religion so broad that almost anything can be considered religious and inclined to violence. Others simply do not provide any definition of religion at all, assuming that the reader knows what religion is when it is discussed. These approaches fail because they are based on a clean separation between the religious and secular. These nine scholars either blur the line between the religious and secular or completely ignore any “secular” violence.

In chapter 2, Cavanaugh continues to explain why these scholarly arguments fail. He reasons that the distinction between the religious and secular is a relatively new Western construct. In explication, Cavanaugh gives the reader a genealogical history of the word “religion” in relation to its current concept in Western society. Given the shifts in the very definition of “religion,” separating it from the “secular” is highly anachronistic because prior to the early modern era religion and politics were never viewed as separate. Taking the reader through ancient Rome, Augustine, Aquinas, medieval Christianity, and the early modern thinkers of the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, Cavanaugh indicates that “there is no transhistorical or transcultural concept of religion. Religion has a deep history, and what counts as religion and what does not in any given context depends on different configurations of power and authority” (59). Further, religion was never separated from what is currently believed to be “secular.” It was the modern West that created the concept of a separation between the religious and secular, and to say that religion “is separable from secular phenomena is itself a part of a particular configuration of power, that of the modern, liberal nation-state as it developed in the West” (59). It is this configuration of power that has legitimized the myth of religious violence.

In chapter 3, Cavanaugh proceeds to the religious wars of sixteenth- and seventeenth-century Europe, which the modern nation-state often uses to validate its existence. From the perspective of the enlightened nation-state, the removal of religion from the public sphere ended the religious wars. However, as Cavanaugh argues, the prevalent assumption that the development of the modern state created the solution to these conflicts is historically false. Cavanaugh deconstructs the religious wars assumption by evaluating the history of the conflicts. Catholics killed Catholics, Protestants killed Protestants, and occasionally Catholics and Protestants joined forces. Cavanaugh also provides examples of how nation builders reinforced ecclesiastical differences as a method of inciting violence. Thus, the idea that elites of the nation-state helped solve the crisis of religious violence is incorrect; they actually aided in creating violence for political ends.

Finally, in his last chapter, Cavanaugh explains how the myth of religious violence has been used not only to maintain a separation of church and state in the United States but also to influence its foreign policy. Unfortunately, Western cultures have often painted Muslim societies as irrational “others” who cannot separate their religion from their politics. This creates foreign policy troubles as the West condemns Muslim acts of violence and justifies our own secular acts of violence. As Cavanaugh explains, the myth of religious violence is often used in maintaining policies or power structures that hinder society rather than help it.

Apart from maintaining policies and power structures that hinder society, the myth of religious violence also prevents the best possible scholarship on religious conflict. Although Cavanaugh’s work does not discuss Mormonism, his process of deconstructing the myth is important for those interested in Mormon history. The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints has, on rare occasion, experienced, suffered, or been involved with incidents of religious violence, such as the Missouri War and Mountain Meadows Massacre.¹ In engaging with these histories, an understanding of the myth will allow for open discussion of sensitive Mormon history without poorly defaulting to the standard religious versus secular dichotomy prevalent in religious violence studies.

1. For relevant studies, see Alexander L. Baugh, *A Call to Arms: The 1838 Mormon Defense of Northern Missouri* (Provo: BYU Studies, 2000); Ronald W. Walker, Richard E. Turley, and Glen M. Leonard, *Massacre at Mountain Meadows* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008); and *Mountain Meadows Massacre: The Andrew Jenson and David H. Morris Collections* (Provo: Brigham Young University Press, 2009).

For example, Jon Krakauer's depiction of Mormon and Mormon fundamentalist history in *Under the Banner of Heaven* falls into the problematic analysis Cavanaugh warns against.² From its very prologue, Krakauer associates the concept of religion as a transhistorical and transcultural feature of human life, separate from a secular world, that for some reason inevitably brings the inclination or promotion of violence. In other words, Krakauer falls into the myth of religious violence. It just so happens that in his evaluation of the nature of religion, he uses Mormon history to promote his perspectives, including stories such as the Mountain Meadows Massacre. This is just one example of how Cavanaugh's work can help improve future scholarship regarding religious violence in general, and more specifically that of Mormon conflict.

The scholarly task Cavanaugh undertook in deconstructing the myth of religious violence was complex and tedious. Nevertheless, he patiently untangles the myth of religious violence in a coherent manner. Unfortunately, his evaluations can become tedious for the reader. The first chapter of the book is designed to be theory driven and, as mentioned earlier, Cavanaugh deconstructs the work of nine authors in a protracted fashion. Despite the length of this deconstruction, the discourse is crucial for understanding Cavanaugh's argument. Recognizing that the general reader might find even the opening portion of the prose difficult to finish, Cavanaugh actually apologizes for trying his readers' patience (57). Even so, his thoroughness can also be a strength. Professors and students of religious violence will greatly benefit from the opening chapter's summary of the current scholarship.

The Myth of Religious Violence does not try to find middle ground between the tensions of a religious versus secular discourse but instead creates a new direction for religious violence scholarship. In deconstructing this myth, Cavanaugh not only sets the bar of future scholarship higher but also avoids oversimplifications that can obstruct conflict resolution. Future scholarship on religious violence will inevitably need to interact with the theories laid out in this book.

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2. Jon Krakauer, *Under the Banner of Heaven: A Story of Violent Faith* (New York: Doubleday, 2003).