

Violence: Religious, Theological, Ontological

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

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What would it mean to consider violence a theological category, to see invocations of violence, both popular and scholarly, as invocations of political theology? The often invoked category of religious violence purports to isolate a species of violence, but in doing so would conceal the impossibility of non-religious violence, of violence extricated from a theological vocabulary. Violence seems so self-evident, and so self-evidently condemnable, that the concept's genealogy is rarely examined. At most, more species of violence are identified, subtler species that refuse violence's usual connection with immediacy. Violence may be systematic; for example, it may refer to the unemployment and poverty caused by international financial institutions (see Žižek, 2008). But if violence should be considered a theological category, to offer more sophisticated accounts of violence while leaving its theological context uninterrogated would reinforce the political theology of which violence would form a part -- of which, perhaps, violence would anchor.

In contrast, violence's ostensible opposite, peace, is easily acknowledged as utopian, if not eschatological, if not outright theological. The language of peace, particularly when attached to scholarly endeavors, suggests contamination by some overarching, non-scholarly agenda. With peace substituted for violence, the titles of recent books by historians and anthropologists

sound like a reading list for a seminary class or a devotional meeting: *Routine Peace*, *Peace and Subjectivity*, *Mirrors of Peace*. It might be objected that such titles are risible because scholarship is necessarily about complications and difficulties, and about examination rather than resolution; peace would smooth difficulties, would urge resolution. But might peace and violence be dependent on the same eschatology, peace to be achieved at the end of time in contrast to the violence that characterizes the world in time? If that were the case, the recent scholarly interest in violence would suggest that secularization has suppressed the *eschaton*, the desire for eternal peace transformed into a desire to wallow in the fallen world.

That violence is a theological category is the unintended thesis of William Cavanaugh's *The Myth of Religious Violence*. Unintended is rather too strong a word; repressed may be more appropriate. Cavanaugh is a theologian, but he has set aside that vocation to write an ostensibly secular investigation, a genealogy, of religious violence. Religious violence turns out to be an ideological construction of the secular liberal state, but for Cavanaugh (wearing his theological hat, 1998; 1999; 2002) the secular liberal state is itself aspiring to theology; secular liberal ideology is a simulacrum of the theological. 'No violence without (some) religion; no religion without (some) violence' Hent de Vries (2001: 1) asserts at the start of his book on philosophical approaches to religious violence, and this conventional wisdom is echoed even more crudely in the popular imagination. This equation continually denigrates the lives of religious people, and it is this equation that Cavanaugh's investigation is meant to destabilize. Cavanaugh's repressed claim inverts this equation: no religion without peace and no peace without religion -- where religion refers to 'true' religion, Christianity. Violence is a theological category because it names heresy, false religion.

Conventional wisdom has it that religion is inherently violent. Or it is not: violence is

sometimes committed in its name. Or, in some circumstances, some religions promote or condone violence. This third approach is the scholarly one; the scholar's work is to determine which circumstances and which religions. But is this third, scholarly approach so different than the first two? It takes for granted the legitimacy of the concepts of religion, and of violence, joining them in its object of investigation: religious violence. But these concepts have congealed over time through the workings of power, the forms they take advancing certain interests. To accept them as legitimate, to accept the terms of ordinary language as the starting point of scholarly inquiry, is to add scholarly support to the powers behind their constitution.

The by now quite familiar antidote is genealogy: instead of accepting and refining the terms of debate, the genealogist tracks the forces that have shaped those terms and examines the impact that those terms have in making certain practices and beliefs seem obvious. This is precisely William Cavanaugh's project in *The Myth of Religious Violence*, and he does an exemplary job of employing the technique of genealogy in a manner that is accessible, engaging, and compelling. The theories of Nietzsche and Foucault are not discussed in detail (or, as one might less charitably put it, employed as authorizing apparatus), but their thought is put to work. After a broad analysis of scholarly treatments of religious violence written after 11 September, Cavanaugh offers a synthetic account of the burgeoning literature on the genealogy of religion, a literature largely ignored by scholars whose focus is religious violence. Cavanaugh proceeds to examine the way that the Wars of Religion have been used by liberal political theorists as a paradigmatic instance of the necessary connection between religion and violence, of religious violence. In the final chapter, Cavanaugh notes three seemingly disparate ways 'the myth' (that religion is especially prone to violence) is employed: in U.S. Supreme Court cases, in the self-identity of the West, and in the foreign policy of Western nations. The bottom line: that religious

violence functions to secure the supremacy of the Western nation-state over competing political, and religious, configurations.

One of the rather startling features of Cavanaugh's analysis is the convergence it reveals of scholarly and popular discourses on religious violence, particularly in the last decade. Examining a wide array of studies by sociologists, political scientists, and religious studies scholars, Cavanaugh displays the naïveté with which the concept of religion is employed, allowing scholars to conclude that religion is absolutist, divisive, or irrational -- and so, in some circumstances, violent. For these scholars to succeed in claiming that religion is especially prone to violence, they must separate out what they mean by religion from ideologies that look quite similar. Christianity is obviously a religion, from the perspective of these writers, and so are Judaism and Islam, but what about Hinduism or Confucianism? What about Communism or capitalism or American nationalism or secularism?

Through immanent critique of nine recent treatments of religious violence, Cavanaugh argues that scholars writing on the topic are never able to satisfactorily answer these questions. However, they obscure their inability by offering possible criteria to separate out religions, criteria which they selectively employ. The criteria they offer end up supporting the conclusion that they set out to prove, that religion is especially prone to violence. To take one prominent target of Cavanaugh's critique: John Hick sees 'absoluteness' as a characteristic of religion in general, not unique to any particular religion. 'Ultimate Reality' is what religion is about; Jesus and the Buddha and other religious teachers simply interpret 'Ultimate Reality' in different ways. But, according to Hick, those different interpretations introduce worldly concerns which become confused with 'Ultimate Reality,' and so are treated as absolute. Cavanaugh points out that with such an understanding of religion it is extremely difficult to discern why Hick does not consider

Marxism a religion. Isn't Marxism concerned with 'Ultimate Reality,' explicitly, and couldn't it be accused of occasionally making parts of 'the path,' rather than 'the goal,' absolute? Certainly Marxism would seem to fit this definition more clearly than, say, Confucianism, which Hick is willing to count as a religion. To what else can Hick's exclusion of Marxism and other secular ideologies be attributed except presupposing his conclusion, religion is inherently violent so religion must be defined in such a way as to explain its violence?

Cavanaugh queries: instead of looking for certain beliefs that would distinguish a religion from secular ideologies, why not look at actions? The religious language sometimes used to describe, say, Communism or nationalism, is often dismissed as merely metaphorical – people don't really believe a flag is sacred. But if the question at issue is whether religion has a particular tendency to promote violence, isn't it actions, violent ones, rather than beliefs, that are most relevant? Cavanaugh provocatively suggests that, according to the typical criteria used by scholars of religious violence, Christianity may be much less of a religion than nationalism, as many more people are willing to die for their nations than for their churches. It might be objected that Marxism, nationalism, and other ideologies have very different origins and histories than religions, and the apparent similarities which Cavanaugh highlights are more or less coincidental – like the apparent similarity of orcas to whales when in fact they are a type of dolphin. But this is not an objection that worries Cavanaugh because his purpose in pointing to these similarities is simply to motivate his genealogy. Given the difficulties in carving out the category of religious violence, he is suggesting, isn't it worth inquiring into the forces that might have produced this category?

In recent years religious studies scholars have responded to criticisms of the amorphous nature of their object of study by using subtler way of defining religion (and other religious

concepts such as sacrifice and ritual), techniques that are intended to prevent scholarship from becoming contaminated by the supposed Protestant heritage of those concepts (Smith, 1982; McClymond, 2008). Wittgensteinian family resemblances are invoked, as are ‘polythetic’ definitions. Instead of offering a set of necessary and sufficient conditions to pick out religion, religions bear some resemblance to other religions, even if there is no single feature shared by every religion. In contrast, Cavanaugh’s point is not to show that the concept of religion is vague, or to show the need for a subtler definition. His point is to examine what social and political forces shape a particular definition and what institutions and practices are authorized by a particular definition. Indeed, one could go even further than Cavanaugh does to say that the subtler definition employed, the more hidden are the forces that shape and authorize the definition.

Genealogies of the concept of religion are not new; the work of Talal Asad (1993), Russell McCutcheon (1997), Tomoko Masuzawa (2005), and others is justly celebrated. But authors addressing religious violence largely ignore this literature, and Cavanaugh’s contribution is to bring together these two conversations. The second chapter of *The Myth of Religious Violence* offers a clear, useful summary of recent work on religion’s genealogy, surveying the ancient and medieval understanding of *religio*, how religion develops as a concept (is ‘invented’) in the modern West, and the role that the concept of religion played in colonialism. Cavanaugh’s narrative underscores the degree to which the rise of the nation-state and the rise of the concept of religion were entangled, sometimes in quite complex ways. For example, nineteenth century Western scholars counted Confucianism as a religion, but nineteenth century Chinese nationalists began using the concept of religion to claim that religion is not indigenous in China. However, Confucianism was praised by Chinese nationalists as a non-religious, indigenous, progressive

force. More recently, the Chinese Communist Party has created an official list of five religions, but has excluded Confucianism and Maoism as they are both thought to arise from the national character. Cavanaugh understands cases like this as exemplifying the way that the concept of religion is always constructed to serve certain interests, and those interests, in modernity, are often those of the nation-state. If Confucianism is a religion, as Western scholars argued, and some continue to argue, it would suggest the contamination of the Chinese nation by irrationality; if it isn't, it can support the secular nation.

Theorists of religion and violence not only tend to ignore genealogical analysis, they also tend to ignore historical work complicating the apparent causes of religious wars. From Hobbes and Locke to Quentin Skinner and John Rawls, the sixteenth century Wars of Religion have been taken as demonstrating the deep danger lurking in religion. The Wars, the story goes, were caused by the animus between Protestants and Catholics, by doctrinal disagreement, understood as fundamentally irrational. In the wake of the Wars, it becomes clear that religion must be a private matter, and religious reasons must not be allowed to enter into public debate. In an exhaustive, and uncharacteristically tedious, review of historical evidence, Cavanaugh presents example after example to undermine this view. There were alliances between different religious groups (for example, Catholic France and the Muslim Ottomans joined in alliance against the Catholic emperor Charles V, and there were numerous alliances between Catholics and Protestants); there were attacks of Protestants against Protestants and of Catholics against Catholics; and there were many political, social, and economic causes of the Wars at least as if not more important than the supposed religious cause. Furthermore, political, social, and economic causes are often impossible to disentangle from religious causes. For example the 1534 Placards Affair was ostensibly an attack on Catholic mass, but a subtler reading suggests it also

was an attack on the social unity affected by the mass. Cavanaugh points to an alternative explanation for the violence in question: it was precipitated by the resistance of local powers to the consolidation of the nation-state; religious identity was mobilized to advance state-building projects.

The Wars of Religion in particular, and the myth which they are supposed to exemplify more generally, have had a remarkably widespread impact. Cavanaugh shows how U.S. Supreme Court Justice Hugo Black pointed to religious persecution as a reason to affirm a 'wall of separation between Church and State' -- in a case concerning whether public funds could be used for transportation to religious schools. Indeed, the violent potential of religion has been repeatedly invoked by the Supreme Court, particularly in the past few decades. From a quite different direction, notorious Orientalist Bernard Lewis invokes the same myth as the root cause of tension between the West and the Muslim World, going so far as to assert that imperialism, when used by the Muslim World, has a particularly religious meaning. Anti-imperial violence becomes religious violence. What Cavanaugh finds most troublesome is the way that the myth of religious violence allows those in the West to refuse to engage in earnest dialogue, and instead it allows them to resort to (secular, nationalist, supposedly rational) violence. There is a refusal to engage with grievances against the West because such grievances are thought to arise from religion; the only way to deal with them is, ironically, through violence.

Cavanaugh's official purpose is to destabilize a myth, and in so doing destabilize the 'us' versus 'them' mentality on the part of Westerners that it supports. If nationalism, and perhaps secularism, is not analytically separable from religion, if each is sometimes prone to violence, then the violence of the West is not superior in any way to the violence of the Muslim World. But Cavanaugh is also making a stronger claim, one that he is less willing to own up to. The rise of

the nation-state turns out to be especially invidious; it is the nation-state that constructs, defends, and benefits from the myth of religious violence. This is a theme that Cavanaugh has explored in his earlier work. However, his earlier work is structured around a choice: we can either accept the *mythos* of the liberal nation-state or we can accept the *mythos* of Christianity. Cavanaugh is a theologian, although in *The Myth of Religious Violence* he presents himself as neutral on religious questions. In his contribution to *Radical Orthodoxy: A New Theology* (1999) and in his book *Theopolitical Imagination* (2002), Cavanaugh juxtaposes the ‘state story’ told by Hobbes and Locke of humanity in a natural state of war, in need of state coercion in order to be saved from this pervasive violence, with the ‘Christian story’ of humanity created peaceful, fallen into violence by human rejection of God, and returned to peaceful communion by Christ. Cavanaugh earlier made the same critique that he makes in *The Myth of Religious Violence* of the prevalent understandings of the Wars of Religion, but as part of debunking what he calls ‘the myth of the state as saviour’ -- so that readers would be able to better recognize their true saviour, Christ. In other words, in his earlier work the violence of the Wars of Religion is theological violence, the violence of the secular state which is aspiring to take the place of authentic religion (Christianity) in performing the work of redemption.

It would be unfair to fault Cavanaugh for writing to a different audience than usual. But might *The Myth of Religious Violence* be structured in such a way as to make Cavanaugh’s omitted conclusion inevitable, or at least more plausible? The book does an exemplary job of utilizing the tools of genealogy to destabilize the category of religion -- but what about violence? Obviously not every concept can be brought into question at once, and leaving such entities as the ‘West’ and the ‘Muslim World’ unquestioned is necessary for the critical thrust of the project. But isn’t the myth of religious violence as dependent on a certain understanding of violence, of

what counts as violence, as it is on a certain understanding of religion? Cavanaugh treats war as the prototypical example of violence, and persecution also qualifies. But it is unclear how he would treat economic sanctions, or the effects of neo-liberalism, or the foreclosure of possibilities for women or homosexuals. It is also unclear how he would treat the violence of norms that always already misfit the practices they are supposed to govern, which is to say, the violence entailed by living in the world. The genealogical questions of what produces this understanding of violence and of its effects go unanswered. However, by accepting violence uncritically as he attempts to shift the principle cause of violence from religion to the nation-state, Cavanaugh makes space for 'Christian communion' to offer a peaceful alternative. In other words, violence serves a theological function for Cavanaugh, in the same way that peace serves a theological function. Violence beckons redemption.

Cavanaugh's concern with theological violence is not particularly novel. Walter Benjamin (1986) distinguished the everyday violence of the law from the violence at the law's foundations, and he hoped, prayed, for redemption through divine violence. In a sense, Benjamin opposed the theological pretensions of the state's violence, deemed idolatrous, to the theological fulfillment of the messianic. Violence calls for theological evaluation and judgment, is inextricable from claims to transcendence. In a different context, Emmanuel Levinas laced his work (e.g., 1969) with references to the violence of 'being', opposing this violence to sensuous, peaceful images illustrating what it meant to think the infinite properly. Yet Jacques Derrida's (1978) close reading of Levinas has demonstrated how the purported peace that Levinas would harken never escapes the 'economy of war', leaving us with a choice between Jewish violence and Greek (Greco-Christian) violence. In short, violence is deployed in rhetorical contests about foundational matters, be they explicitly theological or masked in a secularized idiom. And this is

nothing new: Augustine's harmonious, peaceful city of God is always in opposition to the dissonant, violent city of man. This is an image which Cavanaugh, in his earlier work, wholeheartedly embraces.

To describe violence as deployed in rhetorical contests does not automatically disqualify it from popular, or scholarly, importance. John Milbank (2006), building on the work of Gillian Rose (1984), has written compellingly about the 'ontological violence' of theorists who would posit a concept (such as being, or power, or writing) in a transcendental register, shielding it from critique but using it to critique the empirical world. Milbank would happily admit that he is deploying violence rhetorically, favorably positioning his Christian alternative by denigrating the alternatives presented by 'secular reason.' He would admit this because his goal is to 'out narrate' his opponents: it is a contest of rhetorics, of languages of persuasion. In other words, Milbank, whose work Cavanaugh elsewhere closely follows, acknowledges violence as a rhetorical, and theological, category, one that distinguishes genuine religion (Christianity) from its imitators.

Cavanaugh finds himself in a precarious position. As a theologian, he has associated himself with Milbank's work, making the opposition between secular violence and Christian peace the cornerstone of his scholarship. In *The Myth of Religious Violence*, Cavanaugh endorses genealogy, in its Nietzschean-Foucaultian form, as a method of destabilizing the category of religious violence. Yet the genealogical method is indicted by the critique of secular violence. Milbank describes genealogy as a principal species of 'ontological violence.' Genealogy links power and knowledge, an identity which is asserted as 'ahistorical and transcendental.' It tells a history of violence, tracking how the power-knowledge complex has its way with the world. Milbank goes on to argue that the genealogist recognizes in Christianity a perfect opposite, a

transcendental commitment to peace. Nietzsche inverts and parodies Augustine's political (theological) history: 'What else... is the *Genealogy of Morals* but a kind of *jeu d'esprit*, a writing of the *City of God* back-to-front from a neo-pagan point of view' (Milbank, 2006: 289)? Milbank urges a return from the parody to the original: he endorses a genealogy 'which sees in history not just arbitrary transitions, but constant contingent shifts either towards or away from what is projected as the true human *telos*' (Milbank, 2006: 279).

Yet the significance of Foucault's approach is obscured in this presentation. In his 1976 lectures, recently published as *Society Must Be Defended* (2003), war, battle, and violence are central themes. Foucault tracks the changing strategic employments of history, presenting the writing of history as always involved in political struggles. Most fundamentally, he describes scholarship as beginning with 'the confusion of violence, passions, hatreds, revenge, and the tissue of minor circumstances that create defeats and victories.' (Foucault, 2003: 269) 'This tangle' as Foucault describes it, is hidden by the 'growing rationality' of the late modern condition. At first, it seems as though Foucault is enacting just the sort of reversal of which Milbank accuses him. Just as for Augustine peace was primary and violence an illusion, for Foucault violence is primary and peace illusory ('Fury must explain harmonies,' he writes, 2003: 269). But Foucault's project is more audacious. It begins with the decapitation of the king -- that is, of the model of power as emanating from the sovereign. With this, we can read a radical rejection of political theology, of the claim that political concepts, foremost among them sovereignty, are secularized theological concepts (Schmitt, 1985). Foucault would not argue that this claim is false, but that it is uninteresting. The claim makes sense only in terms of the image of politics made possible by sovereign power, and that image deceives. The sovereign may play a parallel role to God, and be understood in a parallel vocabulary, but this distracts from the way

that power actually operates in the modern world (or, perhaps, in every world). In fact, power circulates, through the state's administrative apparatus, through social institutions, through the sciences, through the family, through the body (Foucault, 1990). Sovereign power and disciplinary power are incommensurable; Foucault attempts to affect a radical break with political theology.

In the model of sovereign power, violence is enacted by the will of the sovereign and the mechanisms he authorizes, for example the law. This is the sort of violence that Milbank has in mind in his critique of Foucault, but it is not the sort of violence that Foucault means when he writes that 'Fury must explain harmonies.' Milbank describes violence as a 'willed intrusion,' the attempt of humans to assert themselves instead of conforming themselves to God's will (Milbank, 2006: 5-6). But this notion of the will asserted by the purportedly sovereign individual is the very basis of the model of power that Foucault moves away from. In the new model of power that Foucault proposes, violence is not associated with the sovereign-authorized law but with socially authorized norms. These norms are authorized not by a decision but by the slippage from the normal to the norm (it is the norm that gives force to the law). Administrative, scientific, and legal institutions are tasked with determining, enforcing, and promulgating the norm. Those who deviate from the norm -- there will always be those who deviate, and everyone will deviate from some norm in some way -- face the consequence: violence. In other words, power circulates by means of the violence of the norm. Foucault is not particularly clear on this point, but his imaginative description of a realm of violence and passions beneath the level of administrative rationality is reminiscent of his imaginative description of the time before the division of madness and sanity (1965); neither is meant to suggest any sort of ontological commitment. The realm of violence and passions to which Foucault directs the researcher is the

affective terrain opened by the constant mismatch of norms and practices, the constant violence, rewards, and threats that characterize the workings of disciplinary power.

Understood in this light, the practice of genealogy no longer requires the ‘ontological violence’ of insulating power-knowledge in the transcendental register, and Foucaultian genealogy no longer appears to be a parodic inversion of Augustine. Genealogy begins with the affective experience of a mismatch between norms and practices, with the homosexual, or psychiatric patient, or criminal whose life is foreclosed by social norms (in Judith Butler’s (2004) evocative phrase, who does not have a ‘livable life’). Genealogy reveals the contingency of the norm in question by tracking how it took shape and the mechanisms that have been used to conceal its provenance. This is the sense in which ‘fury must explain harmonies’: in Foucault’s ‘discourse from below,’ it is the affective experience of the violence of norms that motivates genealogical investigation of norms; there is no neutral standard of justice or reason to offer a starting point.

With this understanding of genealogy, what are we to make of Cavanaugh’s investigation of religious violence? At first it seemed as though Cavanaugh could claim that ‘violence’ was left unexamined for pragmatic reasons while ‘religious’ underwent genealogical investigation, but the effectiveness of this maneuver is jeopardized if the concepts of violence and religion are both part of political theology. Indeed, this partial genealogy may function to further naturalize the concept of violence by disguising its apparent shortcomings. Approached from a different direction, the limitations of Cavanaugh’s work point towards the perils of extracting and employing a genealogical method. Foucault’s method involves tracking transformations: in his earlier work epistemic transformations, in his later work transformations in the workings of power. What seems like an investigation of, say, madness or punishment or sexuality is actually

an investigation of these larger transformations; forgetting that results in history from above, not history from below. Religious violence is especially well positioned to demonstrate the vestiges of the model of sovereign power that still have a hold on the popular, and scholarly, imagination. What Cavanaugh has presented is the sort of Augustinian, Christian genealogy Milbank proposes, a genealogy that serves to make plausible the Christian *mythos*. A Foucaultian genealogy would not make plausible a peaceful alternative; it would demonstrate the hold that Christian political theology still has on the popular, and scholarly, imagination.

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