WILLIAM CAVANAUGH, RADICAL ORTHODOXY, AND THE MYTH OF THE STATE

William T. Cavanaugh, *The Myth of Religious Violence*
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Mythology cannot be defeated in the sense that one wins over one's opponent through the rigor of logic or the force of evidence; a mythology cannot be defeated through arguments that would reveal it as groundless belief. . . . A mythology is utterly groundless, hence stable. What characterizes a mythology is not so much its crude or naive character—mythologies can be extremely complex and sophisticated— but, rather, its capacity to elude our practices of verification and refutation.[1]

The nation-state is made stronger by the absence of shared ends, and the absence indeed of any rational basis on which to argue about ends. In the absence of shared ends, devotion to the nation-state as the end in itself becomes ever more urgent. The nation-state needs the constant crisis of pluralism in order to enact the *unum*.[2]

Nation-states are fetishes. They have power because people believe in the need for their security. They have power because people will kill and die— and sometimes torture—for them. Christians in modernity have often bought into a devil's bargain in which the state is given control of our bodies while the church supposedly retains our souls. This arrangement would be bad enough if it stopped there. But the state cannot be expected to limit itself to the body; it will colonize the soul as well.[3]

William Cavanaugh is today's greatest mythbuster. In *Torture and Eucharist*,[4]

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Cavanaugh busted the myth of torture: not a morally regrettable yet politically necessary tool to exact information for the sake of state security and the common good; not "a merely physical assault on bodies" but a "formation of a social imagination." As exemplified by the Pinochet regime in Chile, state torture is always a perverse liturgy offering sacrificial victims but precluding martyrs, and supplanting the Eucharistic sacrifice of the church. In *Theopolitical Imagination*,[5] Cavanaugh busted the myth of the "peacemaking" state. Alasdair MacIntyre, another formidable mythbuster, has written:

> The modern nation-state, in whatever guise, is a dangerous and unmanageable institution, presenting itself on the one hand as a bureaucratic supplier of goods and services, which is always about to, but never actually does, give its clients value for money, and on the other as a repository of sacred values, which from time to time invites one to lay down one's life on its behalf. . . . It is like being asked to die for the telephone company.[6]

But, as Cavanaugh shows, it is more like being asked to *kill* for the telephone company. The ultimate truth and holy reality is "what its members can agree is worth killing for, or what they can be compelled to sacrifice their lives for."[7] And today in the West, it is the nation-state, not Jesus Christ, for which people are willing to suffer and cause death. In *Being Consumed: Economics and Christian Desire*,[8] Cavanaugh busted the myth of consumer-capitalistic culture: not materialistic at heart and productive of real wealth, but a secularized perversion of the Christian spiritual quest to transcend the limits of the material world, and productive of nothing but "desire for desire": "Things and brands must be invested with mythologies, with

spiritual aspirations; things come to represent freedom, status, and love. Above all, they represent the aspiration to escape time and death by constantly seeking renewal in created things."[9]

Cavanaugh's latest book, *The Myth of Religious Violence*, is the culmination of his previous mythbusting, incorporating and extending his previous unmasking of state torture, state politics, and state economics by completely unmasking the state itself, providing a more complete and compelling historical, philosophical, and theological argument. The *übermythos* at the heart of the modern nation-state, and thus at the heart of all its various economic, cultural, and political practices, is the myth of religion as inherently violent, and the secular as inherently peacemaking. Concomitant with this myth is the concept of religion as transhistorical and transcultural, and its separability from politics. These are both the mythical creation and creators of the nascent, modern, liberal nation-state of the Westphalian settlement.

I do generally agree with and admire Cavanaugh's radically antiliberal historical revisionism and critical assessment of the contemporary nation-state. However, I do have some serious reservations about his *constructive* political project—what can possibly replace the state, even if it is morally and spiritually bankrupt and idolatrous? My suspicion is, for Cavanaugh, *nothing*—and that this is a good thing. If Cavanaugh's position amounts ultimately to Catholic anarchism, it is certainly not an acceptable position for anyone subscribing to Catholic social teaching. I think that the great lacuna in Cavanaugh's thought—a rationally plausible and genuinely Christian alternative to the nation-state—may stem from his subscription to certain aspects of Radical Orthodoxy, specifically, its insufficient understanding of

the real autonomy, though a relative and circumscribed one, of philosophy.

In the first chapter, Cavanaugh analyzes the work of nine mainstream scholars whose work incorporates and promotes the myth of religious violence. None of them, as Cavanaugh masterfully demonstrates, is able coherently to separate religious from secular violence. But to convince themselves and their readers that they can, they impose an a priori identification of all organized violence as religious, no nationalism as religious, and all secular violence as peacemaking. Cavanaugh's deconstruction of these scholars is not only devastating but also illuminating, for it reveals that academia is thoroughly blinded by this myth and is its main propagandist. In the second chapter, Cavanaugh shows that religion as commonly understood today, as a transhistorical and transcultural conceptual *genus*, is not just incoherent but "*is itself* part of a particular configuration of power, that of the modern, liberal nation-state as it developed in the West" (9).

In the third chapter, Cavanaugh builds upon and deepens his 1995 landmark essay "A Fire Enough to Consume the House: The Wars of Religion and the Rise of the State,"[10] in which he argues that the modern state was instrumental in creating the mythological identity of man as an autonomous, atomistic "individual," with no intrinsic and constitutive ties to other men, and the main catalyst for the breakup of the religious unity of Christendom. Indeed, the state itself was directly responsible for the violent religious conflicts that, according to the myth, necessitated the centralized, "religiously neutral," "peacemaking" power of the state:

> The rise of the state was not necessitated by the "Wars of Religion"; rather, these wars were the birth pangs of the state,

in which the overlapping jurisdictions, allegiances, and customs of the medieval order were flattened and circumscribed into the new creation of the sovereign state (not always yet nation-state), a centralizing power with a monopoly on violence within a defined territory.[11]

In the last chapter, Cavanaugh brings his argument home, as it were, and shows the uses to which the myth has been put in American foreign and domestic policy: court decisions that marginalize Christianity and idolize patriotism; military actions that demonize Muslims and angelize torture.

This is a superb and challenging book in which I think Cavanaugh has successfully "busted" the myth of the state as peacemaker and religious-violence savior. But I have two lingering questions about *The Myth of Religious Violence* as well as Cavanaugh's general state-busting project. The first is whether Cavanaugh is successful in truly *destroying* the myth of religious violence—or any of the myths he has tackled thus far in his career. And this doubt has nothing to do with Cavanaugh as a scholar. I consider Cavanaugh's unmasking of secular ideology to be effective and highly credible, and I think that reading his work, as well as that of the other authors of *Radical Orthodoxy*, is vitally important for conservative theists so that any idols in our thinking can be recognized and summarily smashed.

However, deconstructing an ideology or smashing an idol is not the same as *annihilating* a myth; for I think myths are much more foundational and formative, akin to the soil in which and by which poisonous ideology and idols grow, and thus more insidious. And if the myth of religious violence is the topsoil, as it were, then the "bottomsoil" is the myth of modernity itself. I think the work of Pierre Manent (who explicitly defends

the nation-state) and Charles Taylor (whose work presents a more complex and positive engagement with modernity) must be held in dialectical tension with Cavanaugh's; both Taylor and Manent make a compelling case for the inescapability of modernity and the normative necessity of the nation-state, and thus a certain level of invulnerability of their myths. Cavanaugh's theological-cum-historical-cum-sociological-cum-psychological arguments unmasking the myths of modernity are rigorous, compelling, erudite, and even prophetic—but is unmasking enough?

As René Girard's lifework has shown, it takes more than rational argument to overcome the religious myths that veil the primordial murders upon which all cultures are created. The scapegoating mechanism channels the sins of concupiscence, self-righteousness, and murder into a culture-creating, disorder-dispelling, and salvation-offering communal ritual. God became man to save us from sin, death, and the devil, but the scapegoating ritual closely resembles the culminating apotheosis of this unholy trinity, and we need to be saved from this ritual by first becoming aware of it. By the incarnation, crucifixion, death, and resurrection of Christ, the blinders have been removed, as we are redeemed from scapegoating through scapegoating—in realizing, for the first time in history, the innocence of Him whom we have pierced.

Cavanaugh writes, "The myth of religious violence can only be undone by showing that it lacks the resources to solve the very problem it identifies" (7). But if Girard is right, to unveil and overcome the state's seductive, secret scapegoating, it is not enough to expose its mythical veil; the state at its very heart must be converted, redeemed, and transformed. Only the power of the gospel can do this, as both Girard and Cavanaugh insist,

but how this conversion might take place, what Christians can do to bring it about, and what its political implications might be are things Cavanaugh curiously sidesteps. This brings me to my second reservation.

What precisely are the political implications of Cavanaugh's project? It is one thing to dispel the mythology of the modern nation-state; it is another to dispel the state itself in the process. The question is whether Cavanaugh's mythbusting of state violence does not itself do violence, intellectually speaking, to the state. Yes, the contemporary state is corrupt and violent, but if there is ever to be a genuine, common-good community, organized and protected by law, not just by voluntary, small-scale communities of virtue with no coercive teeth, then there does need to be some form of state government to protect such communities by creating and enforcing laws.

The answer may very well be a slow, careful, and prudent dismantling of the leviathan, scapegoating, idolatrous nation-state; but the end of this cannot be a stateless society! What we need are human-scale, tradition-homogeneous, genuinely political states that can actually embody and effect a nature-perfecting common good open to and pervaded by the Divine. Both Cavanaugh and MacIntyre, however, seem to want nothing to do with *any* kind of state, even a small-scale state embodying and informed by nonliberal political and economic practice and theory. Is this because any state in the modern world would still owe its origin and identity to the modern liberalism they both detest?

For Cavanaugh to render his state-hate credible and ethical for readers, he must provide good answers to these questions: Why precisely is the nation-state incompatible with genuine political activity? MacIntyre, for example, explains his rejection of the nation-state in quantitative terms, with its

great size precluding it from embodying a consensus on a particular tradition of rationality and conception of the good; but he also speaks in qualitative terms, suggesting that it is the state's complex, bureaucratic structure that prevents it from performing genuine political activity.

If size, however, is *not* the essential problem, could the nation-state embody genuine political activity in the event of a nation-wide consensus on a particular conception of the good? If a nation-wide consensus is too much to ask, could a state embody good politics if its size and scope were small enough to procure a real consensus, yet larger than the local, politically anemic communities he and MacIntyre prescribe? The fundamental question is whether there is something essentially and irredeemably antipolitical about the modern state, regardless of accidental differences like size, scope, and complexity, whether the political model of the nation-state is *necessarily* bound up with the errors and defects of modern, post-Enlightenment thought and culture.

Cavanaugh does not provide adequate answers to these important questions. For example, his judgment that the modern state cannot embody a genuine politics is based on his notion of the modern state's incapacity to embody conceptions of the good. But on examination, this notion is confusing. On the one hand, Cavanaugh and MacIntyre insist that the state *should not* embody a conception of the good; but on the other, they admit that the state *cannot help but* embody some particular conception of the good. In MacIntyre's words:

> Even though that neutrality is never real, it is an important fiction, and those of us who recognize its importance as well as its fictional character will agree with liberals in upholding a certain range of

civil liberties. . . . For the contemporary state could not adopt a point of view on the human good as its own without to a significant degree distorting, degrading and discrediting that point of view. It would put those values to the service of its own political and economic power and so degrade and discredit them.[12]

If the state is as amoral a structure as MacIntyre and Cavanaugh claim it to be, it is not clear why its "neutrality is never real"; for why could the desired neutrality not be produced in an essentially morally neutral structure? If state neutrality cannot be effected, does this suggest that the state is an essentially moral entity? If the state's complexity and bureaucracy render it impervious to being infused with moral substance, then how could it ever manage to behave in the morally nonneutral manner they both claim it inevitably does?

In any case, there seems no reason not to attempt to shape the state's nonneutrality in accordance with a true conception of the good by working to lessen its size and complexity in order to make it more amenable to moral influence and embodiment; one could begin with the state's more modest and accommodating embodiments, such as local and municipal governments. In short, it does not seem reasonable to abandon a potentially harmful agent of such immense power to its own anarchic whims, as it were, foregoing even the attempt to infuse it with and direct it to moral goods. If the explanation for the inevitably moral bias of the state is that it is structurally and irreversibly *immoral*, then this severe judgment requires both an adequate philosophical explanation and historical demonstration, neither of which Cavanaugh provides.

I wonder if the absence of clear answers to these vital questions stems from Cavanaugh's

association with Radical Orthodoxy. I myself find much to commend in this movement, but I also see some things to criticize, and even to condemn. For example, John Milbank's critique of liberal, globalist capitalism is top-notch, yet his understanding of the character of philosophy and its relation to theology is problematic, and insofar as Cavanaugh's political analysis stems from or is sympathetic to this understanding, it is bound to be deficient.

For Milbank, philosophy itself, however radical, cannot mount an effective critique of liberalism and the modern state because it is limited by its own methodology; its abstractness and formalism prevent it from making the kind of substantive and content-rich moral and theological judgments that could expose liberalism's bankruptcy and present a viable alternative to the modern nation-state. Even MacIntyre's deeply anti-Enlightenment theory of tradition-constituted rationality is much too abstract and formal, for Milbank, to grasp effectively alternative conceptions of rationality and virtue incommensurable in formative content: "Virtue, dialectics, and the *notion* of tradition in general" are not adequate to defeat liberalism, because there are no "arguments against nihilism of this general kind."[13] For Milbank, any attempt to refute liberalism using a "content-free" methodology is akin to using liberalism to attack liberalism:

> The tradition-specific *content* that one pours into this container ["a general conception of the structure of an ethics of virtue and its accompanying psychology"] cannot easily come under discussion by MacIntyre because it does not fall within the purview of philosophy as he understands it. Thus at the *philosophic* level, an air of noncommitment hovers over MacIntyre's

work, an implication even of the inevitable *liberalism* of philosophy itself.[14]

I must say I am sympathetic with Milbank's critique of MacIntyre here. Milbank characterizes his own project as "a temeritous attempt to radicalize the thought of MacIntyre"[15] and MacIntyre's project *does* require radicalizing. As Tracey Rowland has written:

> MacIntyre's work alone does not, however, provide a comprehensive post-modern Augustinian Thomist critique of the culture of modernity and understanding of the role of culture in moral formation. For this it is necessary to venture beyond the boundaries of philosophy to the realm of theology. This is because the culture of modernity and its practices have been formed not only by the severance of the orders of faith and reason, but also, more fundamentally, by those of nature and grace. . . . Although MacIntyre has examined the failure of the Enlightenment's attempt to construct a conception of human flourishing upon an allegedly theologically disengaged rationality, he has not examined the theological counterpoint to this project, namely, the attempted severance of the orders of nature and grace.[16]

The problem is, as Milbank rightly characterizes it, a *strictly philosophical* approach: "I approach social theory finally as a theologian, while he approaches it as a philosopher. The key point at issue here is the role that must be accorded to Christianity and Christian theology."

Although Milbank is justified in saying that reluctance to utilize the resources of theology renders certain fundamental arguments against liberalism less effective than they could be, if Milbank is implying that

what is required to defeat liberalism is the wholesale *supplanting of philosophy by theology*, he is moving dangerously close to a kind of fideistic, theological totalitarianism.

If Milbank is correct in claiming that all traditions are grounded primarily in *mythos*, not *logos* (though he is not saying that *mythos excludes logos*), and that rational argument is inextricably bound up with rhetorical persuasion and subordinate to it, then any project aiming at the articulation of a *rationally* persuasive argument for a tradition-diverse audience, that is, any *philosophical* project with *live* democratic political implications, must fail. Such a project could only serve to perpetuate the violent and nihilistic *mythos* of modern "secular reason." Only the articulation of an alternative *mythos*, grounded in the rational "ungroundedness" of Christian theology, would suffice:

> One's only resort at this juncture, other than mystical despair, is to return to the demonstration that nihilism, as an ontology, is also no more than a mythos. To counter it, one cannot resuscitate liberal humanism, but one can try to put forward an alternative mythos, equally unfounded, but nonetheless embodying an "ontology of peace," which conceives differences as analogically related, rather than equivocally at variance.[17]

Yet, Milbank's project, insofar as it privileges *mythos* over *logos* and rhetoric over dialectic, cannot give and, as far as I can tell, has not given a persuasive *philosophical* account of the why and how of such a radicalization; the supplanting or at least downplaying of moral and political philosophy by theology may be philosophically defensible, but Milbank does not provide an adequate *philosophical* defense of it. It is a *purely* theological one with any genuine philosophic

analysis on its own terms absorbed into an all-encompassing theological rhetoric. And I think that the unanswered questions we have seen in Cavanaugh are the result of a philosophical deficiency in his project.

Ironically Cavanaugh's proposed solution bears a striking similarity to pragmatic liberalism (Jeffrey Stout and Gary Gutting[18]) in its rejection of the capacity for a rational defense of a tradition to those outside it, and thus the rejection of a natural-law-embodying-and-upholding state. Both Cavanaugh and Milbank absolutize Christian tradition to such an extent that it makes rational evaluation and adjudication of the claims of one's own tradition and rival claims between traditions impossible, and it tends to minimize the need for a provisionally "tradition-neutral" (insofar as that is possible) public space for such adjudication to take place and eventually issue in real political instantiations of Christian truth and practice. If a morally grounded political order in a tradition-pluralistic society were at all possible, perhaps only as the first step toward a genuinely Christian politics where the church would not be relegated to the status of a merely natural and human community, the theological antiliberalism of Cavanaugh could not articulate its blueprint, as it would presuppose the capacity of intertraditional rationality.

I have not the space here to consider all the problems of those aspects of Cavanaugh's constructive project that seem, prima facie, anarchist; but suffice it to say, if it is anarchist, it contradicts the political philosophy and theology first articulated authoritatively in explicit terms by Leo XIII and continued by all subsequent popes. Benedict XVI has in no way advocated a secular, state-centered liberal democracy as the perennial political ideal for Christians, but he certainly has not condemned nation-state politics *tout*

court—on the contrary, in *Caritas in Veritate* the pope advocates the creation of a state institution to help govern not only the nation but the global community.

Certainly, Christians must reject the neutered, privatized, individualized, and disembodied church the myth-intoxicated and ever-expanding, anti-Christian secular state demands. But even if we do not all agree that the modern state is the Antichrist, I think we can see that what is needed in our time to combat successfully dehumanizing and violent myths and institutions of any sort is a politically influential, robustly corporeal, and truly mystical—because *not* mythical—body of Christ, with the authority and power to tame and tutor today's mythical regimes under the easy yoke of Christ.

1   Linda Zerilli, "Doing without Knowing: Feminism's Politics of the Ordinary," *Political Theory* 26, no. 4 (August, 1998): 443, quoted in William Cavanaugh, *The Myth of Religious Violence* (Oxford University Press, 2009), 6.
2   William T. Cavanaugh, "From One City to Two: Christian Reimagining of Political Space," *Political Theology* 7, no. 4 (2006): 306.
3   William T. Cavanaugh, *Torture and Eucharist: Theology, Politics, and the Body of Christ* (Oxford: Wiley-Blackwell, 1998), 195–96.
4   Ibid.
5   William T. Cavanaugh, *Theopolitical Imagination: Discovering the Liturgy as a Political Act in an Age of Global Consumerism* (New York: T&T Clark, 2002).
6   Alasdair MacIntyre, "A Partial Response to My Critics," in *After MacIntyre: Critical Perspectives on the Work of Alasdair MacIntyre*, eds. John Horton and Susan Mendus (Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press, 1994), 303.
7   Carolyn Marvin and David W. Ingle, "Blood Sacrifice and the Nation: Revisiting Civil Religion," *Journal of the American Academy of Religion* 64, no. 4 (Winter 1996): 767, quoted in Cavanaugh, *Myth of Religious Violence*, 118.
8   William T. Cavanaugh, *Being Consumed: Economics and Christian Desire* (Grand Rapids: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 2008).
9   Ibid., 48.
10 William T. Cavanaugh, *Modern Theology* (1995) 2:4, 397–420.
11 William T. Cavanaugh, "Beyond Secular Parodies" in *Radical Orthodoxy: A New Theology*, ed. John Milbank, Graham Ward, Catherine Pickstock (London: Routledge, 1998), 191.
12 Alasdair MacIntyre, "Toleration and the Goods of Conflict," in *The Politics of Toleration in Modern Life*, ed., Susan Mendus (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 1999), 143.
13 John Milbank, *Theology and Social Theory: Beyond Secular Reason* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1993), 327.
14 Ibid., 329.
15 Ibid., 327.
16 Tracey Rowland, *Culture and the Thomist Tradition after Vatican II* (London: Routledge, 2003), 6.
17 Ibid., 279.
18 Jeffrey Stout, *Democracy and Tradition* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2004); Gary Gutting, *Pragmatic Liberalism and the Critique of Modernity* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999).