

Seminar	Terror und Theologie
Semester	SoSe 23
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Exposé

Autor:in A	
Text A:1	
Zitat (Leitzitat)	
Kontext	Vor welchem Problemhintergrund liest sich der Abschnitt? Was ist der übergeordnete Streitpunkt?
Ziel	Welche konkrete(n) Frage(n) versucht die Autorin zu beantworten? Was ist das Ziel?
Hintergrund	Trifft die Autorin bestimmte Hintergrundannahmen, die für das Verständnis des Zitates wichtig sind?

These(n)	Wie beantwortet die Autorin diese Fragen? Welche These(n) vertritt die Autorin?
Argumentation	Können Sie erkennen, mit welchen Argumentationsschritten die Autorin ihre Thesen begründet? Welche(n) Aspekte(n) möchten Sie in Ihrer Ausarbeitung näher untersuchen?
Vokabular	Führt die Autorin neues Vokabular ein oder deutet Bestehendes um? Gibt es bestimmte Begriffe oder Motive, die Sie in Ihrer Ausarbeitung analysieren möchten?
Sonstiges	Hier ist Platz für ergänzende Stichpunkte, Notizen oder Fragen.

Autor:in A	
Text A:2	
Zitat	
Ergänzung	Zeigen Sie, warum Sie dieses Zitat ausgewählt haben und welchen Mehrwert es für das Verständnis (einer) der Leitfragen zum Leitzitat hat.
<p>Widersprechen oder ergänzen sich A:2 und A:1? Ergänzt Zitat A:2 unbeantwortete Fragen aus dem Argumentationsgang aus Zitat A:1? (Wie) Hilft Zitat A:2 zum Verständnis von Zitat A:1 weiter?</p> <p>Auf welche dieser möglichen Spannungsfelder werden Sie in Ihrer Ausarbeitung eingehen? Können Sie Lücken erkennen und wenn ja, (wie oder welche) möchten Sie sie in Ihrer Ausarbeitung schließen?</p>	
Kommentar	Wo haben Sie Verständnisfragen? Wo erkennen Sie Kritikbedarf? Welche Aspekte finden Sie besonders interessant? Welchen dieser Fragen möchten Sie in Ihrer Ausarbeitung nachgehen?

On Cavanaugh's "Myth of Religious Violence"

Why it doesn't exist and what are the implications.

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Words: 7 830.

Number of characters without spaces: 40 341.

Number of characters with spaces: 48 158.

1. Introduction

In his article "Religious Violence as Modern Myth"¹, William T. Cavanaugh challenges the "modern myth" that represents for him the idea that "religion has a dangerous tendency to promote violence"². This thesis is in fact drawn from his most famous publication, *The Myth of Religious Violence*, in which five years earlier the theologian already argues against the assumption that there is a privileged link between religion and violence³. Indeed, as Ronald E. Osborn puts it:

Since the terrorist attacks of September 11, 2001, there has been a dramatic increase in social scientific literature on the topic of "religious violence," much of it arguing that there is a uniquely intense and disturbing connection between religion and political conflict and bloodshed.⁴

For there is no doubt that violence exists and has existed in religious contexts or violence perpetrated in the name of religion – whether it be the violence committed in the name of or under the command of, God in the Old Testament, the Inquisition and the Crusades, or the recent Islamist violence, to cite an example from each of the three monotheisms –, and given the "dramatic increase" of literature arguing there is an inherent connection between religion and violence since 9/11, the title of both Cavanaugh's works can appear surprising; indeed, knowing all this, how can one say that there is a *myth* of religious violence?

The aim of this study will be to understand what the author means by "myth of religious violence" and to examine the reasons that underlie his position, as well as the implications of such a stance for what we continue to call religious violence. In order to do so, we will be focusing mostly on his later article in which he addresses the objections and criticisms levelled at his book, for it allows him, in addition to summing up his argument, to take the discussion further away and in doing so to clarify his position.

Therefore, we'll start by reconstructing and explaining Cavanaugh's argument, with a particular focus on what allows the author to make such an argument – the absence of distinction between religious and secular and how it is supported. Since we believe his argument to be

¹ William T. CAVANAUGH, « Religious Violence as Modern Myth », *Political Theology*, vol. 15, n° 6, 2014.

² *Ibid.*, p. 491.

³ William T. CAVANAUGH, *The Myth of Religious Violence: Secular Ideology and the Roots of Modern Conflict.*, New York, Oxford University Press, 2009.

⁴ Ronald E. OSBORN, « Does "Religious Violence" Exist?: An Argument Against Essentialism with Particular Reference to the Conquest of the Americas », *Politics and Religion*, vol. 7, 2014, p. 568.

correct and therefore his rebuttal of the myth of religious violence valid, we'll then look at the implications of such a thesis; that is to say, we'll try to provide some leads as how to explain religious violence without resorting to the disproved prejudice. These will be modest and personal suggestions, as Cavanaugh himself didn't provide any alternative explanation for religious violence after disproving its commonly accepted cause. At last, we will discuss some of the criticisms that can be formulated against his work and the extent to which they pose a significant challenge for him (or don't).

2. Understanding the « myth » of religious violence

1. Cavanaugh's argument

William T. Cavanaugh's thesis, both in *The Myth of Religious Violence* and in "Religious Violence as Modern Myth", can be summarized as follows:

In order for the indictment of religion to hold, religion must be contrasted with something else that is inherently less prone to violence: the secular. I argue that there is no good reason for thinking that so-called religious ideologies and institutions are more inherently prone to violence than so-called secular ideologies and institutions, and that this is so because there is no *essential* difference between religious and secular to begin with.⁵

With this statement, drawn from the very introduction of his article, not only does the author advertise the problem he intends to tackle and disprove – that religion is more prone to violence than secular –, but also the reason why he does it – there is no essential difference between religious and secular. In doing so, the theologian immediately gives the reader the content of what is for him the "myth" of religious violence: not a denial of the existence of religious violence, i.e., violence in a religious context – for he makes very clear that "given certain conditions, [religions] can and do contribute to violence"⁶ a few lines before –, but really that religion institutions or ideologies are not "inherently *more* inclined toward violence than ideologies and institutions that are identified as "secular""⁷.

But why does Cavanaugh bring up the "secular" into his argumentation? Because it seems that it is the contrast between the two spheres that allows "the indictment of religion to

⁵ William T. Cavanaugh, « Religious Violence as Modern Myth », *Political Theology*, *op. cit.*, p. 487.

⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 486.

⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 486-487.

hold". Indeed, if the religious couldn't be distinguished from another realm, it wouldn't make sense to say that "religion has a peculiar tendency to promote violence"⁸, for one wouldn't be able to compare it to anything else; in other words, without a contrasting other context *where it isn't the case*, one couldn't say if the violence is directly correlated with the – religious – context it rises in. Those deductions can only be made if there is another sphere that doesn't breed violence in such proportions or at all to compare with.

We thus understand, at least on a logical level for now, the reason given for the author's denial of this "myth": if there is "no *essential* difference between religious and secular", the prejudice can't hold. But what shall we deduce from the claim that the religious and secular aren't different? Not that the theologian excuses, let alone justifies said violence, for he clearly states what his argument is not:

Let me be clear from the outset that my argument, if properly understood, cannot be used to excuse Christianity or Islam or any other faith system from careful analysis. Given certain conditions, they can and do contribute to violence. My argument is not a defense of "religion" or Christianity or Islam or anything else from the charge of promoting violence.⁹

On the contrary, Cavanaugh even goes as far as affirming there is a "need for the church to repent"¹⁰ in relation to the violence it takes part in, since he believes that "the church's aversion to violence of all kinds is not a sense that we are the pure, but rather that we are simply not good enough to use violence rightly"¹¹. The reason he invokes on why church shouldn't be involved with violence, with the emphasis on the fact that it's not because of some kind of purity, shows that he believes that the church – and, we can assume, religions more broadly – isn't exempt from the temptation of using violence, precisely because they aren't pure. Cavanaugh being a theologian, his use of the word "repent" also demonstrates further that he doesn't justify nor excuses violence, but rather blames it.

Therefore, if there isn't any essential difference between religious and secular, and that religions can't justify their usage of violence, it thus means that secular institutions or ideologies are as blameable for their usage of violence as religious ones are. It is indeed one of the core

⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 491.

⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 486.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 500., in response to Ephraim Radner's criticism (see *infra*).

¹¹ *Ibid.*

convictions of Cavanaugh that the indictment of the religious, while being false, is maintained for it serves as "an ideological justification"¹² for the violence perpetrated by so-called secular orders. This justification operates as follows: if we assume that there is indeed an inherent correlation between religion and violence, any institution that rejects religion or religious influence should logically be rejecting violence at the same time, making the secular a synonym for peaceful – or at least for peace-making, aspiring to peace. Moreover, since *we*, the West, have historically marginalized religion from public power in the name of rationality, our institutions – the secular – are rational, whereas religion, by its very essence, isn't; the societies who didn't ban religion from the public order, like the Muslim world, are thus irrational, divisive and violent. And so are our respective usage of violence. In result, as Cavanaugh succinctly and cynically puts it, "we find ourselves regrettably forced to bomb them into the higher rationality"¹³ – and this is precisely what the theologian seems to not want to indulge. It is interesting to note that this justification of secular violence falls exactly into the very pattern that the author wants to avoid in regard to the church, namely, justifying the use of violence of a certain group on the basis of a certain feature(s) – here, the secular's alleged rationality and aspiration to peace, which implies that their violence is in turn rational and peace-making, that is to say, legitimate.

2. The impossible distinction between secular and religious

We've seen that Cavanaugh's stance is founded on the assertion that there is no essential difference between religious and secular, for it is this very absence of difference that allows him to deny the intrinsic link between religion and violence. However, such statement is not self-evident, and numerous authors have argued to the contrary; some of whom the theologian has explicitly written against. So how does he exactly support this thesis?

The main body of his argumentation is to be found in *The Myth of Religious Violence*, of which the first chapter is entirely dedicated to this question. There, he proceeds to examine different examples of the argument that religion promotes violence and finds that they all fall into a three-fold taxonomy: 1) religion is absolutist, 2) religion is divisive and 3) religion is irrational. But instead of trying to defend religion from these accusations, Cavanaugh's approach to the matter is rather to compare the way religion and secular are treated:

¹² *Ibid.*, p. 487.

¹³ *Ibid.*

What interests me is the way that religion is treated in all the arguments as a transhistorical and transcultural phenomenon that is essentially distinct from secular phenomena. That is, religion is thought to exist in all times and places, and it is essentially absolutist, divisive, and non-rational in ways that secular phenomena are not.¹⁴

The core of his argumentation is then to show that the authors he's writing against, who thematize the correlation between violence and religion, are actually not capable of maintaining a coherent distinction between religion and secular. He focuses especially on four writers: Marty, Juergensmeyer, Hitchens and Wentz.

In this way, he explains that Martin E. Marty¹⁵, although he indicts religion for its divisiveness, recognizes seventeen different definitions for religion and ends up giving what he claims is his own definition – since “scholars will never agree on the definition of religion”¹⁶ – but that really is a set of five features displayed by religion. Therefore, it appears immediately that the ‘religious’ or ‘religion’ as a specific realm isn’t as obviously identified or distinguished from the secular as some might claim, since scholars themselves disagree so much on what religion is. Moreover, Marty himself, after giving away the five features defining religion, shows how they are also displayed by the politic – which reinforces the idea that religious and secular aren’t actually that distinct (or distinct at all!) for they share the same defining features. It also means that the divisiveness indicted to religion should be indicted to the secular as well. According to Cavanaugh, Mark Juergensmeyer also charges religion with a peculiar tendency to exacerbate violence, but in the same time statements as “the secular is a sort of advanced form of religion”¹⁷ or “secular nationalism is ‘a religion’”¹⁸ can be found in his works. In this way, it appears that for him the distinction between religious and secular is even more confused; besides, if secular is an “advanced form of religion”, the peculiar tendency to exacerbate violence should logically also be found – and rather more than less – in the secular. In turn, Christopher Hitchens¹⁹ does not only blame religion for all kinds of evils, but also justifies the violence of atheist regimes by declaring that those regimes are religious too – which shows, as

¹⁴ *Ibid.*

¹⁵ In Martin E. MARTY, Jonathan MOORE, *Politics, Religion, and the Common Good*, San Francisco, Jossey-Bass Publishers, 2000.

¹⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 10.

¹⁷ Mark JUERGENSEMEYER, *Global Rebellion: Religious Challenges to the Secular State from Christian Militias to al Qaeda*, Berkeley, University of California Press, 2008, p. 23.

¹⁸ Mark JUERGENSEMEYER, *The New Cold War?: Religious Nationalism Confronts the Secular State*, Berkeley, University of California Press, 1993, p. 15.

¹⁹ In Christopher HITCHENS, *God is not Great: How Religion Poisons Everything*, New York, Twelve, 2007.

Cavanaugh underlines, that the distinction between secular and religious is not established as a clear line but, and especially in this case, left to the scholar's appreciation. Finally, when Richard E. Wentz²⁰ tries to redefine the concept of religion in order to expand it so it can include ideologies otherwise considered secular – like consumerism or football fanaticism for example –, the theologian points out that religion "ends up meaning anything people take seriously"²¹, which results in the idea of religious violence becoming tautological; indeed, people would only engage in violence for things or ideas they value. In contrast, this would also mean that no ideology could be characterized as secular since the secular would become, as opposed to the religious, anything that people don't take seriously – in fact, very few things could then be called 'secular'.

As a matter of fact, Juergensmeyer did respond to the theologian's critique by specifying that he doesn't believe that religion causes conflict and therefore violence, but only that religion exacerbates already existing conflicts – in his words, that religion isn't the "problem" but is instead "problematic":

The grand narratives of religious scenarios and the absolutism of authoritarian claims buttressed by the religious images of cosmic war are – if not the problem – problematic.²²

For Cavanaugh, however, it doesn't make any difference; as he explains in the article in which he addresses the critiques, although Juergensmeyer undermines the religious/secular distinction, he continues to view religion as something that would by its very nature increase the violence, contribute to it – even when not its direct cause. Therefore, there is still an indictment of the religious: saying that religion has an inherent tendency to contribute to violence or increase it is a statement that still falls into the "myth" of religious violence for the theologian.

But Cavanaugh's support for his thesis is not only negative – i.e., not just based on the inconsistencies of other authors –, and in the second chapter of *The Myth of Religious Violence*, he proceeds to explain positively why he doesn't believe there is an essential difference between

²⁰ In Richard E. WENTZ, *Why People do Bad Things in the Name of Religion*, Macon, GA, Mercer University Press, 1993.

²¹ William T. CAVANAUGH, « Religious Violence as Modern Myth », *Political Theology*, *op. cit.*, p. 488.

²² As quoted by Cavanaugh in his article « Religious Violence as Modern Myth », *Political Theology*, *op. cit.*, p. 491. It originally comes from a letter to the editor of the *Harvard Divination Bulletin*, in which Juergensmeyer respond to Cavanaugh's critique of his own work. Unfortunately, the link provided by the author to check the letter is broken, and I wasn't able to find to original piece anywhere.

the religious and secular realms: he has a constructivist view on the matter. This means that he understands the divide between religious and secular as a modern Western construction that arose as a consequence of the triumph of civil authority over ecclesiastical authorities with the rise of the modern state in Europe, but that in another context, it could have been constructed differently²³. This doesn't mean, however, that the author claims "religion" as such or religious violence don't exist, as Hector Avalos reproaches Cavanaugh in "Explaining Religious Violence: Retrospects and Prospects"²⁴; he's simply fleshing out his thesis on the absence of structural differences between what we call secular and religious institutions. Avalos also criticizes Cavanaugh for saying that religious violence and secular violence are the same for they have the same results. His argument is that, just like murder and accidents are different although they both end up in death, there is a big difference between violence perpetrated in the name of God and in the name of a nation, for nations are empirically verifiable entities whereas God is not verifiable to both religious and non-religious parties. Here again, Cavanaugh answered in his later article, first by arguing that this verifiable/non-verifiable distinction isn't so neatly made:

National borders are empirically verifiable in the same way that churches are; one can see border stations and armed guards in the same way that one can see cathedrals and priests. Nations, however, are no more or less verifiable than God. Nations cannot be seen; nations are contingent products of the collective imagination of citizens, not simply part of nature.²⁵

But, for the sake of the argument, he adds that even if based on this distinction one was able to construct in turn a neat religious/secular distinction, it wouldn't have any impact on the question of their violence; for a difference in content of the belief – God or nations, in this case – neither creates a structural difference between the two realms nor justifies that one of them would be more prone to violence.

²³ For example, before the rise of the modern European state, the difference between religious and secular was an ecclesiastical difference between two kinds of priests. Moreover, a certain amount of what we, according to our western secular/religious distinction, call Asian "religions" – Hinduism, Shintoism and Confucianism for example – do protest and resist this label.

²⁴ Hector AVALOS, « Explaining Religious Violence: Retrospects and Prospects », in Andrew R. MURPHY (ed.), *The Blackwell Companion to Religion and Violence*, Malden, MA and Oxford, Wiley-Blackwell, 2011, p. 143.

²⁵ William T. CAVANAUGH, « Religious Violence as Modern Myth », *Political Theology*, *op. cit.*, p. 492.

Finally, in his article "The Splendid Idolatry of Nationalism"²⁶, in which he discusses the question of the disenchantment of the world from Weber's and Durkheim's points of view, the author also elaborates on the structural similarities between religion and the form of secular ideology that is nationalism, and in doing so further supports his thesis that "there is no essential difference between religious and secular". In this way, he remarks that Durkheim "makes it clear that the sentiments and rituals that bind the nation together are a modern species of religion"²⁷, showing once again the continuity existing between so-called religious and secular: for Durkheim, since he has a functionalist approach of religion, the distinction isn't made between religious and secular, but instead between the sacred and the profane.

When discussing Weber's perspective, the author emphasizes on what Weber's analyses as the competition taking place between religion and the nation-state. Yet, for the nation-state and religion to be in competition, they need to be similar enough for it to even be relevant to talk about competition. As Cavanaugh summarizes:

Religion and the modern nation state are only in direct competition with one another because of the similarities between them. Both are the products of a long process of rationalisation that, in different ways, issues from the same source: the human search for meaning. And both address that search for meaning, in remarkably similar ways: by gathering people into loving communion, consecrating life in this world to a sacred cause, offering the sacrifice of that life unto death, and solving the problem of the meaning of death.²⁸

With this statement, we understand how structurally similar religion and a certain kind of secular ideology can be, sustaining in doing so the idea that there is no essential difference between the two realms. As we mentioned earlier, the implications of this are that secular institutions shouldn't be able to use this storytelling to legitimate or justify their violence, but more importantly that their violence should be subject to the same scrutiny and blame as religious violence is.

²⁶ William T. CAVANAUGH, « The Splendid Idolatry of Nationalism », *PRO PUBLICO BONO – Public Administration*, n° 2, 2021.

²⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 5.

²⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 14.

3. The unresolved problem: violence

From this presentation and analysis of Cavanaugh's argument, it becomes clear that religion as such is not intrinsically linked to violence; it does not cause nor increase it simply by virtue of its religious nature. This conclusion is an important step forward in the process of understanding – or more accurately in avoiding misunderstanding – what we call religious violence. And yet, there's something that feels deeply unsatisfactory about his book; not what is actually said, but rather what stands out as unthought by Cavanaugh: the reason for the violence. Indeed, what is so polemical about the title of the theologian's book, *The Myth of Religious Violence*, and more broadly about his stance, is precisely that for who doesn't take the time to try and understand it, it can sound like Cavanaugh is denying the very existence of this violence – a violence that is nonetheless undeniable. And even though we came to learn that it's not what he means, the author still doesn't provide explanation for it – or not a satisfactory one.

As a matter of fact, criticism regarding his treatment of the "violence" component in "religious violence" has been formulated before, both on the lack of examination of the term itself and on the lack of alternative explanation given for the violence – since the religious component isn't sustainable anymore. Cavanaugh has addressed it in his complementary article: he explains on the one hand that questions regarding the very nature of what violence is or if there is ever any justified use of it are already normative questions; he avoided addressing them for he has theological convictions which inform his view on those normative questions, and he wanted his argument to be heard by a secularist audience. This is why:

The book's contribution to this discernment is simply to clear away one distorting myth that makes lucid thinking about violence difficult or impossible.²⁹

Indeed, if he'd have tackled these questions regardless, non-believers could have rejected his arguments on the basis of them being theologically grounded. In avoiding doing so, the author was able to show that "secularist arguments about religion and violence fail on their own terms"³⁰. On the other hand, he does acknowledge there is a theological theme covertly running through the book, which is idolatry:

²⁹ William T. Cavanaugh, « Religious Violence as Modern Myth », *Political Theology*, *op. cit.*, p. 493.

³⁰ *Ibid.*

Put simply, the argument of the book is that people kill for all sorts of things, things like money and flags and oil and freedom that function as gods in people's lives.³¹

Therefore, it seems that idolatry could be an explanation for the violence; however, he doesn't expand on this theme here. The aim of this section will thus be, for us, to try to fill in this gap by laying out different leads on what can explain the violence that takes place in religious context or in the name of religion.

1. Idolatry

One can observe that in the sentence just quoted, Cavanaugh doesn't list God as a 'thing' that functions as a god in people's lives. We believe this can be interpreted two ways: the simplest one would be that it is implied, since God can't function as something else than a god in people's lives. The second one would be that Cavanaugh doesn't think religion – as in the faith in the 'true' God – can be subject to idolatry; indeed, in his article on nationalism, the theologian defines idolatry as: "*Religio* directed to a false god"³². Therefore, speaking of idolatry when talking (from a theological point of view) about the true God would be antithetical.

And yet, I would like to argue the opposite – or more accurately, to nuance this. Indeed, it seems that religious violence can be understood through the lens of idolatry in two ways. The first one, which appears to be the most obvious one, is due to the ban of idolatry in the Scriptures; in this situation, violence would raise from the monotheistic intolerance against a group of people, either internal or external, who proceed to worship a 'false' god, i.e., someone or something that isn't the God they worship. However, the theologian does regularly affirm his opinion on the posture religion – or at least Christianity – should hold vis-à-vis violence; he talks about the "church's aversion to violence"³³, the fact that "a theology of peace needs to be articulated [...] in which God requires reconciliation, not blood"³⁴ and in his article on nationalism, he writes:

³¹ *Ibid.*, p. 494.

³² William T. Cavanaugh, « The Splendid Idolatry of Nationalism », *PRO PUBLICO BONO – Public Administration*, op. cit., p. 20.

³³ William T. Cavanaugh, « Religious Violence as Modern Myth », *Political Theology*, op. cit., p. 500.

³⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 494.

Precisely because 'the decisive means for politics is violence', religion must withdraw from politics, to preserve the purity of its devotion to an ethic of universal love from compromise with the world.³⁵

If we are to take this conviction to be true, which I believe is, my claim is therefore that any religion that uses violence, even 'against' idolatry, is being idolatric itself – even when assuming that the object of their worship is the true God. My reasoning is as follows (this is going to be, I believe, a theological Christian argument): as finite beings, humans are imperfect. Therefore, there is no possible mean for us to grasp what is perfect – God or his ways – due to our very essence. The Scriptures can give us leads or ideas, but they are subject to interpretation and no one can know for sure God's will; the only person able to would be a prophet, yet we don't live in a time where a prophet has been recognized and we haven't for a very long time. Therefore, anyone or any institution that claims they're using violence "in the name of God" or according to God's will is essentially idolatrous; not only to the extent that they don't know God's actual will – which would only make of them liars –, but to the extent that if they are attributing any humanly comprehensible characteristics or sense of justice to God, they are necessarily wrong. Indeed, anything that we can understand can't fit God since we are finite and therefore incapable of comprehending/thematizing perfection. Thus, in doing so, one is worshipping a God that has other characteristics than God's 'true' ones, that is to say, one is worshipping a God that isn't the true God³⁶: they're being idolatric. Therefore, idolatry can also be found at the origins of religious violence since the people who claim to use violence in the name of God are actually worshipping, under the name of the true God, a false one – moreover, one can assume, without even realizing it.

2. When religion wields political power

Another lead when it comes to explaining why violence takes place in religious settings would be politics. On this matter, Max Weber is helpful to understand how the political breeds violence: he explains that violence has always been essential for protecting the polity³⁷, and

³⁵ William T. CAVANAUGH, « The Splendid Idolatry of Nationalism », *PRO PUBLICO BONO – Public Administration*, op. cit., p. 14.

³⁶ My argument here is grounded in Augustine's understanding of the truth as exposed in his *Confessions*: the liar is not the one who renounces the truth, but the one who *modifies* the truth, making of it an idol that would correspond to what they love and worship.

³⁷ My comprehension of Weber's thought is drawn from Cavanaugh's account of it in William T. CAVANAUGH, « The Splendid Idolatry of Nationalism », *PRO PUBLICO BONO – Public Administration*, op. cit., and his original source, Max WEBER, *From Max Weber: Essays in Sociology*, New York, Oxford University Press, 1946, trad. H. H. GERTH, C. Wright MILLS.

points out that, in his opinion, this use of violence has only been called into question with the rise of rationalised salvation religions, such as Christianity, which worship a God of universal love and thus reject violence. Indeed, the political is *in fine* governed by an ethic of ultimate ends rather than an ethic of responsibility, and that is why "the decisive means for politics is violence"³⁸: not only is in politics the State legitimate to employ violence in order to both do justice within its borders and protect itself from outside threats and attacks, but it seems that "force and the threat of force unavoidably breed more force"³⁹. The unavoidable increase in violence and threat of violence is due either to its spiral effect – as violence is used, the targets of said violence are more likely to respond to it with violence as well – or to the weakening of the legitimacy of political authority through its use, if not a complete breakdown of the social contract – when the state uses violence, there is the possibility that its citizens will question or even revoke their support.

This argument can also be completed by Carl Schmitt, who goes further in this direction as he affirms that violence is a reality *inherent* to the political: for him, the political is grounded on the core distinction between two kinds of groups – friends and enemies – and characterized by fundamental conflicts between groups who mutually perceive themselves as potential enemies⁴⁰. Violence then results from these conflicts – as we said, structural in politics and therefore unavoidable – when they reach a critical point, or, when other mechanisms like negotiation or compromise have failed, violence is used as a mean to solve said conflicts.

Therefore, anywhere religion pretends to wield political power, it seems unavoidable that it will eventually make use of violence; it is precisely why Cavanaugh states he believes the church must withdraw from politics. In this way, anywhere where religion and state aren't separated – for example, in a certain number of Middle East countries, against which the myth of religious violence is often used – political violence can be categorized as religious violence, since the distinction between friend and enemy can be made on the basis of religious claims.

3. The intolerant structure proper to monotheism

At last, the third lead we can consider so as to explain religious violence is the very structure of monotheism. In the first chapter of *The Myth of Religious Violence*, Cavanaugh faces a certain

³⁸ Max WEBER, « Politics as a Vocation », in *From Max Weber, op. cit.*, p. 121.

³⁹ Max WEBER, « Religious Rejections of the World and their Directions », in *From Max Weber, op. cit.*, p. 334.

⁴⁰ Carl SCHMITT, *Der Begriff des Politischen. Text von 1932 mit einem Vorwort und Drei Corollarien*, Duncker & Humblot, 2015.

number of arguments stating that religion is absolutist, divisive, and irrational – and he doesn't even try to deny it, for it appears that it often is. This can be explained by the very structure of monotheism, according to Jan Assmann. Indeed, Assmann distinguishes between two kinds of religions: on the one hand, "primary" religions are polytheistic and characterized by their tolerance for diverse gods and beliefs, allowing for peaceful coexistence among different religious traditions. On the other hand, "secondary" religions – such as Judaism, Christianity and Islam – have evolved from these primary religions into monotheistic – or monolatric – forms. They are characterized by the belief in a unique or superior God, in addition to an exclusive claim to truth. According to Assmann, their advent is what introduced the potential for religious violence: because there is a belief in the sole legitimacy of their divine figure, they have a tendency to reject other deities and religious practices, which can lead to conflicts at best, and to religiously motivated violence, persecution and religious wars at worse. Moreover, the Egyptologist thematises in his book *Moses the Egyptian* what he calls the "Mosaic distinction". He explains there that the biblical figure of Moses – which is claimed by all three of the religions of the book – has a role of establishing a religious identity that separates the chosen people from others, with the idea that the chosen people is a distinct and superior religious community; an idea that has contributed to the justification of violence against outsiders⁴¹. To sum it up in Assmann's words:

Jede Religion, die auf einem starken Wahrheitsbegriff beruht, muss intolerant sein, insofern sie einen Begriff davon haben muss, was mit ihrer Wahrheit unvereinbar ist.⁴²

It is precisely this intolerance, built in the very structure of monotheism, that appears to be responsible for religious violence. Here, we understand that it isn't the religious component itself, i.e., the object of the belief (God), that leads to violence *per se*, but rather the way people relate to this object of belief and to other faiths, in addition to the narratives around it. It is also important to stress that if monotheisms have potential to foster religious intolerance and violence due to their structure – and did on several occasions –, it doesn't mean that, if rightly handled, they necessarily will in the future.

⁴¹ In Jan ASSMANN, *Moses the Egyptian: The Memory of Egypt in Western Monotheism*, Harvard University Press, 1998.

⁴² Jan ASSMANN, « Religion zwischen Gewalt und Dialog », in Clemens MAAß (ed.), *Diesseits des Schweigens. Heute von Gott sprechen (Quaestiones Disputatae 240)*, Freiburg, 2011, p. 48.

4. The limits to Cavanaugh's argument

After having reviewed the arguments of Cavanaugh, it is interesting to see what is possible to oppose to them. We did already include the criticisms to which he responded while explaining his thought, to the exception of one. This criticism is formulated by the theologian Ephraim Radner in his book *A Brutal Unity*, and can be summed up as such: Cavanaugh's argument is a defense of religion from the charge of violence, since it shifts the responsibility of violence from religion onto something else⁴³. He breaks it down in two points, saying the author does so by 1) saying that the medieval Religious Wars weren't in fact religious but political, thus painting a very disenchanted world and that 2) because of his constructivist position, Cavanaugh not only denies that 'religion' existed at the time "outside of a culturally integrated social existence in which faith is bound up but not capable of distillation"⁴⁴ but also that therefore, there was no 'religious violence' that the state could have saved people from. Cavanaugh disavows both claims in his complementary article: his claim is never that religion wasn't a driving force in the Religious Wars, but rather that the very concepts of religion and secularism as we know them were in the process of being distinguished, and that it's anachronical to call them so for one, and for two that we shouldn't underestimate the role of what we view nowadays as 'politic' in them. Furthermore, nowhere in the overall work of Cavanaugh does one find the idea of a "disenchanted world", as he argues in his book exactly for the opposite – "the state was increasingly *sacralized* in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries"⁴⁵ – and maintains the same idea for nowadays situation, as he writes in his article on nationalism that our secularized world is not disenchanted, but the holy simply *migrated* from 'religious' objects to 'secular' ones. And about what Radner says about denying religious violence in itself, it is a misunderstanding of the whole point of Cavanaugh's book; that is, not a denying of it, because it does exist, but a disproof of its specificity in regard to secular violence. Although the critique formulated by Radner doesn't hold, what is interesting is that Cavanaugh still recognizes one virtue to it: acknowledging the need for the church to repent and take responsibility for the violence they took part in.

⁴³ Ephraim RADNER, *A Brutal Unity: The Spiritual Politics of the Christian Church*, Waco, TX, Baylor University Press, 2012.

⁴⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 24.

⁴⁵ William T. Cavanaugh, *The Myth of Religious Violence: Secular Ideology and the Roots of Modern Conflict.*, *op. cit.*, p. 174., italics in the original.

However, although his reframing of religious and secular violence as needing to be seen as violence first and not religious or secular is, in my opinion, extremely pertinent, it does raise certain problems. What he wants to do is to point out that secular violence is *as* blameable as religious violence – but is it? Isn't secular violence, in certain circumstances, more legitimate?

We could indeed oppose him writers like Schmitt or Weber – especially given the fact that Cavanaugh has written about Weber and is thus very familiar with his thought, including his views on politics and violence⁴⁶. Schmitt, for one part, not only thinks that violence is an inherent reality of politics, but he also believes that it can be legitimately used. In addition to thinking that violence can be required, and therefore legitimate, to solve specific conflicts, he sees sovereignty as closely tied to the legitimization of political violence, for the sovereign holds the power to decide on the state of exception and thus to suspend normal rules in order to deal with an existential threat to the state. In this scenario, the sovereign decision justifies the use of violence. Moreover, he articulates a criticism of 'weak' political systems, such as liberal democratic systems, on the basis of their aversion to violence: he believes that it makes them vulnerable to certain – violent – enemies, against whom the use of violence would be legitimate. We have to acknowledge that his thought was massively criticized precisely on this point of the legitimization of the violence, since it opens up the way for the abuse of political violence. But without agreeing with the justification of said violence, it is difficult to see how politics could possibly avoid using violence – even merely as a defense when confronted with violence itself.

Weber, for his part, believes that ethics and politics are two different realms and that ethics thus can't be applied to politics. This means that the very idea of blame becomes irrelevant, since the concepts of 'right' and 'wrong' are ethical:

"Reasons of state" thus follow their own external and internal laws. The very success of force, or of the threat of force, depends ultimately upon power relations and not on ethical "right," even were one to believe it possible to discover objective criteria for such "right".⁴⁷

This is why the modern state is, for Weber, the entity that holds a monopoly on legitimate violence within its borders. However, this doesn't mean that the modern state is always justified

⁴⁶ See William T. CAVANAUGH, « The Splendid Idolatry of Nationalism », *PRO PUBLICO BONO – Public Administration*, *op. cit.*

⁴⁷ Max WEBER, « Religious Rejections of the World and their Directions », in *From Max Weber: Essays in Sociology*, *op. cit.*, p. 334.

in using violence – in order for it to be legitimate, it needs to be regulated. To this end, the sociologist introduces the concept of “restrained violence”: not only does it need, in order to be legitimate, to be exclusively used as a last resort – meaning that the state needs to exhaust all possible pacific options before resorting to violence –, but it also has to be proportionate to the circumstances, must not be used excessively and must be exercised in accordance with the law and established procedures. With a view to reducing its misuse as much as possible, control institutions and procedures are also to be set up⁴⁸. Therefore, it appears that secular violence *can* be legitimate, when performed under these conditions.

Of course, there is violence perpetrated in secular contexts or in the name of secular values that doesn't rely on politics *per se*, and thus our counter-argument on politics only concerns a certain category of secular violence. Nevertheless, Cavanaugh doesn't nuance his stance by saying that particular forms of secular violence are more acceptable; on the contrary, a core feature of his position is that secular violence is no different than religious violence and should be “subject to the same scrutiny”⁴⁹. Moreover, from my reading of his work, I got the impression that he was mostly referring to the Western nation-state or Western political institutions when using the adjective “secular” – impression reinforced by the genealogy of the concept he does, where the distinction between religious and secular coincides with the rise of the European modern state, and then confirmed by the theologian himself when he wrote:

But my attempt to draw attention to the violence of the nation-state—especially, in the fourth chapter of my book, the United States—is an attempt to draw attention to what Christians actually kill for.⁵⁰

This is what allows us to jump from “secular” to “political” and “state”.

And so we see that the author doesn't really take into account the fact that the nation-state cannot use violence as it pleases, and that when it does use violence in a way that appears disproportionate, there are many that question or even condemn it. As Christopher Insole puts it in an article about the overall work of Cavanaugh:

The account of the monolithic liberal state that we find in Cavanaugh's thought, absolutist and nationalist, simply cannot account for the fact that, for instance, the independent media, the house of lords, the house of commons and the high courts

⁴⁸ As found in Max WEBER, « Politics as a Vocation », in *From Max Weber: Essays in Sociology*, *op. cit.*

⁴⁹ William T. CAVANAUGH, *The Myth of Religious Violence: Secular Ideology and the Roots of Modern Conflict*, *op. cit.*, p. 230.

⁵⁰ William T. CAVANAUGH, « Religious Violence as Modern Myth », *Political Theology*, *op. cit.*, p. 498.

have been—before, during and after the war—constantly occupied with legal challenges brought against the government concerning the legality of the war, the trustworthiness of the government and human rights atrocities carried out during the occupation (with the British government losing some immensely significant cases in the high courts).⁵¹

Ultimately, however, Cavanaugh is a theologian, and has acknowledged in his complementary paper that for this very reason he avoided addressing normative questions such as:

Is there never any justified use of “violence” or “force”? Must anyone who accepts my argument be committed to pacifism? [...]

There certainly remains plenty of need for moral discernment about when, if ever, war, for example, is justifiable.⁵²

So not only is he aware of the problems that follow from holding such a stance, but he is no politician, nor pretends to be one; as a theologian, I don't believe we can hold against him that he has, at best, idealistic aspirations, or at worst, unrealistic expectations when it comes to the policy to adopt on the issue of violence.

5. Conclusion

At the close of this work, we understand that the “myth of religious violence” Cavanaugh attempts to disprove is not the very existence of religious violence, but rather the prejudice that there is an intrinsic correlation between religion and violence – the former supposedly breeding, by its very nature, the latter. For him, this myth is grounded in the distinction between two spheres, one religious and the other secular, and cannot hold without this distinction. Because the theologian is convinced that this distinction does not reflect reality – he has indeed a constructivist point of view on the matter –, the core of his argument is thus to show how there is in fact no essential difference between what we call ‘religious’ and ‘secular’. In doing so, he also gives an explanation as of why, if the distinction doesn't hold, the indictment of religion

⁵¹ Christopher INSOLE, « Discerning the Theopolitical: A Response to Cavanaugh's Reimagining of Political Space », *Political Theology*, vol. 7, n° 3, 2006, p. 324-325. The war Insole is talking about here is the invasion of Iraq.

⁵² William T. CAVANAUGH, « Religious Violence as Modern Myth », *Political Theology*, *op. cit.*, p. 493.

persists: it creates a contrast with the so-called secular, and therefore participates to legitimate violence when perpetrated by secular institutions or in the name of secular values.

Unfortunately, even after successfully disproving that the religious is a cause of violence *per se*, Cavanaugh doesn't provide any alternative narrative so as to explain where the violence originates or what is likely to breed it; that is why I attempted, in a second moment, to provide leads that could potentially explain the emergence of violence in religious context or the use of violence in the name of religion. There are three of them: idolatry – whether from 'inside' or 'outside' –; when religious institutions wield political power; and the very structure of monotheisms, which appear to be prone to intolerance. Those leads are not to be taken as excuses for religious violence, nor as a way to clear religion from violent behaviours, but rather as a further attempt to understand the dynamics of violence, particularly when it is claimed or labelled as religious.

When it comes to the limits of his argument, we found that on the specific question we tackled in this study – the "myth of religious violence" – there is not much to oppose; the only criticism that seems to hold is that there is a legitimacy of a very specific kind of violence, that Cavanaugh doesn't seem to recognize. I would argue that this is rooted in the author's opinion of the contemporary nation-state, for he believes that:

[...] the problem with the contemporary nation-state is that it is neither sufficiently democratic nor pluralistic. The mythos of the nation and the reach of the state have created a unitary and homogenized space that is not truly pluralistic, and democracy has been reduced to a caricature.⁵³

This vision, in my opinion, could be criticized to a greater extent than his clear-cut opinion on the legitimacy of any forms of violence – and this is precisely what Christopher Insole, whilst being grateful to the theologian's work, does in "Discerning the Theopolitical"⁵⁴ –, but it is irrelevant to his refutation of the myth of religious violence, refutation whose relevance many have praised. The only other thing we could reproach Cavanaugh is that, after disproving said myth, he didn't provide his readers with an alternative narrative so as to explain religious violence; but then again, he addressed this criticism by explaining that he chose not to for he

⁵³ *Ibid.*, p. 500.

⁵⁴ Christopher INSOLE, « Discerning the Theopolitical: A Response to Cavanaugh's Reimagining of Political Space », *Political Theology*, *op. cit.*



would have had to take into account his theological convictions on these normative questions and he wanted his argument to be received by a secular audience.

To conclude, Cavanaugh's deconstruction of the "myth of religious violence", i.e., the idea that religion is intrinsically violent, is not just very solid, but also of great value – as is his call for vigilance regarding the grounds on which we justify violence.

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