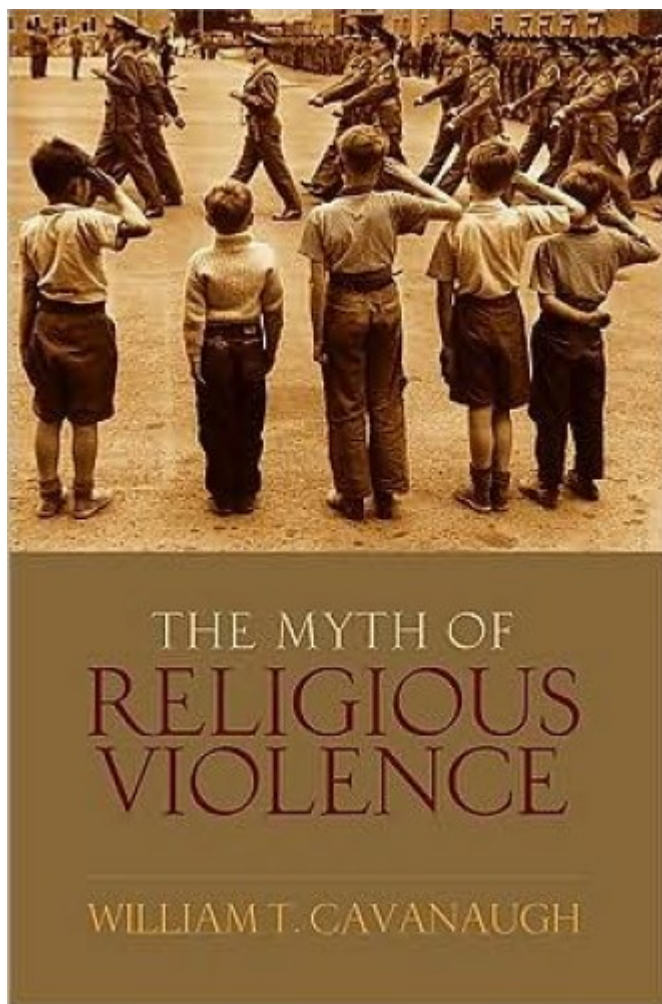


# The myth about religion

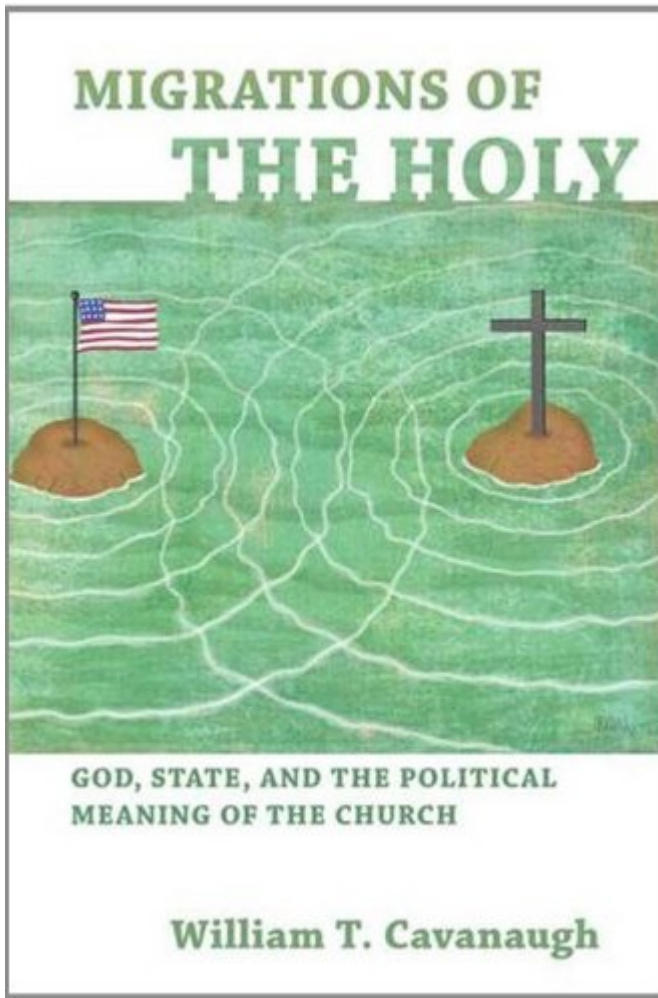
by [Walter Brueggemann](#) in the [August 23, 2011](#) issue

## In Review



## The Myth of Religious Violence

By William T. Cavanaugh  
Oxford University Press



## **Migrations of the Holy**

By William T. Cavanaugh  
Eerdmans

William Cavanaugh of DePaul University has written a pair of stunningly important books. On the basis of careful, detailed historical scholarship, he makes a clear and persuasive argument for overturning a founding myth of the modern Western state. In the title of his first book, he deliberately uses the term *myth* in a double sense: myth as a legitimating founding narrative for modern Western states and myth as a story that is manifestly false in light of careful study and thus a false founding narrative.

The myth that occupies Cavanaugh is the belief that religion is inherently sectarian, divisive and potentially violent and that a primary function of the modern Western state is to restrain and overcome such religious violence in the interest of a

peaceful, well-ordered civil society. Cavanaugh traces this myth from its beginnings in Spinoza, Hobbes and Locke, who wrote in the 17th century in the wake of the "religious wars" of that period, notably the Thirty Years' War, which culminated in the Treaty of Westphalia in 1648, a settlement that framed the shape of modern Europe in its sovereign secular states.

Spinoza argued that religion must be kept private and apart from political power. Hobbes judged that an absolute state was required in order to keep religious, sectarian violence in check. And Locke championed tolerance that would counter the intolerance he found in all religion. All of these thinkers countenanced the use of state coercion when necessary to restrain a propensity to religious violence, so that the state properly and legitimately could exercise a monopoly on violence.

Cavanaugh's analysis culminates in an exposure of the absurdity of the rants of the pseudomoralists Sam Harris and Christopher Hitchens, the current stars of antireligion, who, faithful to the myth, urge the killing of Muslims in the interest of civic well-being: "Some propositions are so dangerous that it may even be ethical to kill people for believing them" (Harris); "I think the enemies of civilization should be beaten and killed and defeated, and I don't make any apology for it" (Hitchens).

These silly statements are the pay-out of the dominant strand of Western thought that indicts religion generically for being intrinsically violent.

Between the work of the great philosophers of the 17th century and these recent atheistic rants, Cavanaugh shows how the assumption that religion is inherently violent has shaped policy. The same uncritical assumption is reflected in the work of careful and generous religious scholars such as Martin Marty and Mark Juergensmeyer. Marty, Cavanaugh says, proceeds with a vague notion of religion that "divides" and "can be violent," and Juergensmeyer allows for the peculiar intensity of potential religious violence. More important, this assumption has served as a basis for U.S. Supreme Court decisions, notably in opinions written by Justice Hugo Black.

The assumption that religion is intrinsically violent has given legitimacy to the state as a restraining power and has consistently justified state violence as a restraint against religious violence, because state violence is seen as unifying, context-specific and rational and religious violence as "absolute, divisive and irrational." As Cavanaugh explores this assumption, one can see how it sets the tone for right-wing

radio talk as well as U.S. war policy in Iraq and Afghanistan.

Cavanaugh not only exposes the myth for what it is, he provides details to show precisely how the myth is not grounded in reality. He offers a close analysis of European wars in the 16th and 17th centuries and demonstrates that they were not religious in the sense of pitting Protestants against Catholics. Rather, Protestants and Catholics were sometimes allies, and Protestants fought Protestants and Catholics fought Catholics, all of which makes clear that such wars were not religiously motivated but reflected and served a complex set of interests rooted in realpolitik. Indeed, the trigger for the Thirty Years' War, Cavanaugh avers, was the ambition of the (Catholic) Habsburgs and the response of various alliances, Protestant and Catholic, that sought to contain Habsburg hegemony.

His conclusion is that such modern states did not restrain religious violence. In fact, the aggression and ambition of modern states was the cause of the wars. Thus the myth is turned on its head. The states did not restrain but evoked the violence that has been credited to religion.

Beyond the historical political and military data Cavanaugh so carefully offers is his recognition that the ideology of the modern liberal state also conjured the modern generic notion of religion without any reference to the particulars of any faith tradition, as well as the counterreality of "Western civilization," which was constituted by the preferred order of the modern states. In some detail he shows that those who assume the myth is true are consistently unable to provide a definition of religion in order to distinguish religious violence from state violence. The result is that when a state (such as the U.S.) appeals to religious claims in its practice of violence, it can deny that it is religious violence. The violence of the state is presented as nonreligious and therefore not absolute; consequently the state receives a pass on its practice of violence.

Cavanaugh shows how the Supreme Court has painted itself into a corner, for example, in its judgment that the religion of the Unitarians is benign because it accommodates the liberal state, whereas the religion of the Jehovah's Witnesses is dangerous because it challenges the absolute claim of the state. The result is that the Court is unable to arrive at a workable and consistent notion of religion. There is religion and then there is religion.

It turns out, according to Cavanaugh, that every concentrated community of power, whether of religion or of the state, is likely to tilt toward violence under certain circumstances. Thus he proposes not that religion is incapable of violence, but that religion is no more prone to violence than civil society, which needs, perforce, to imagine that its violence is necessary, rational and innocent.

The big thought for Cavanaugh is that in the 17th century there was a migration of the holy from the old religious claims to the more recent claims of the newly formed states. That migration was accomplished by the workings of modern rationality with its refusal of old tradition. On the one hand, all religious claims were relativized and denied their absolute legitimacy (including their legitimacy in coercing people to use violence). On the other hand, the modern state was placed beyond criticism, including criticism of its systemic violence. Thus the religious community could now be criticized and exposed as penultimate, while the modern state was granted absolute authority, supported by its own deliberate appeal to the totems of religious symbol.

In his more recent book, *Migrations of the Holy*, Cavanaugh continues and extends his argument. He judges that the nation-state was formed at the turn of the modern era as a concentration of power for the conduct of war. In order to sustain itself in the violence business, he argues, the nation-state has taken to itself religious or quasi-religious claims that are shrouded so as not to be subject to the critique that it is a form of religion that is producing violence. In the end the nation-state—not least the United States in its pious, self-assured exceptionalism—has become the core idol in the modern world.

Cavanaugh ponders the public role of the church as a political player for truth-telling and truth-acting in opposition to the deception and self-deception of the nation-state. Cavanaugh's accent is on the visible church, which has plenty to repent of and does so in humility and vulnerability. In his defense of the visible church, Cavanaugh surprisingly proposes a Chalcedonian ecclesiology in which the church at its best avoids both the temptation to imagine itself wholly divine and the temptation to settle for being wholly human. I find his last pages difficult and not very convincing because they take on the tone of a term paper that adjudicates the claims of Stanley Hauerwas, Romand Coles and Jeffrey Stout. However, that does not detract from the compelling force of his overall argument. Every thoughtful U.S. Christian knows about the ideology of the state and about the summons to the church to show its public face with some nerve and resolve. Cavanaugh has set the current challenge

in historical perspective in a persuasive way.

In the U.S., the state enjoys the kind of absoluteness envisioned by Hobbes, only it uses totems of religious endorsement to sustain it that Hobbes could not have imagined or countenanced. It is an absoluteness that evokes on the one hand diatribes like Jeremiah Wright's against America (and we see how that went for him) and on the other hand the required sign-off "God bless America." We are witnesses to an assumed holiness of the state in its aggression that is rooted in a myth that continues to have wide and uncritical acceptance.