Liturgy as politics: An interview with William Cavanaugh

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In his reflections on theology and politics, Catholic theologian William T. Cavanaugh has focused attention on how Christian liturgical practices embody and inform—or should embody and inform—Christian political witness. His book *Torture and Eucharist: Theology, Politics and the Body of Christ* (Blackwell) is about the Roman Catholic Church's responses to the rule of Augusto Pinochet in Chile during the 1970s. Cavanaugh, who teaches at the University of St. Thomas in St. Paul, Minnesota, has also written *Theopolitical Imagination: Discovering the Liturgy as a Political Act in an Age of Global Consumerism* (T. & T. Clark) and coedited *The Blackwell Companion to Political Theology* (Blackwell). We spoke to him about liturgy, politics, the entertainment culture and Christian education.

You've suggested that Christians ought to draw on their own liturgical practices as they consider how to engage in politics. What do you have in mind?

> I recently was asked to give a talk on "the social meaning of the Eucharist," and the first thing I said was, "You have to promise that if I tell you what the social meaning of the Eucharist is, you won't stop going to mass." In other words, the liturgy cannot be reduced to a meaning. If it could be, why keep going to church once you've grasped the meaning? How many reminders do we need? Only those who are really thick would have to go every Sunday.
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> This is often our approach to liturgy and social life: we try to "read" the liturgy for symbols and meanings that we take out and apply in the "real world"—the offering means we should give of our wealth, the kiss of peace means we should seek peace in international relations, and so on. This is fine, but it doesn't address the liturgy as an action that forms a body, the

body of Christ.

Henri de Lubac says, “The Eucharist makes the church,” and the church is more than just a Moose Lodge for Christians. The church is a social space in its own right, an enactment of the politics of Jesus. This does not mean that the church should become a political party or interject party politics into the liturgy. It means the church should help create—in collaboration with non-Christians too—spaces of peace, charity and just economic exchange.

I think Voices in the Wilderness or the economic communities of the Focolare movement are good examples of the politics of Jesus. Far from being a sectarian or quietist withdrawal from the world, these movements are effective at producing change—more so than movements that ask the state for peace and justice.

One of the assumptions of modern secular politics is that the state must be secular and religion private, lest we return to the wars of religion that devastated Europe in the 16th century. Is there anything wrong with that assumption?

I don’t think there is any reason to want to restore the churches to political power, if by that one means coercive power. There is, however, good reason to question the myth of the secular state as peacemaker. The so-called wars of religion did not pit one religion against another, as in Catholics versus Protestants. They are more accurately described as wars between different theopolitical orders. This explains why, for example, Catholics killed Catholics. The second half of the Thirty Years’ War involved Habsburgs fighting Bourbons—two Catholic dynasties fighting each other.

Obviously, the church was not innocent of the bloodshed, entangled as it was with coercive power. But neither was the modern state an innocent bystander. The whole apparatus of the state arose to enable princes to wage war more effectively. As Charles Tilly has written, “War made the state, and the state made war.” The modern nation-state is founded on violence. If the church is going to resist violence, it has to emerge from its privatization and have a political voice, one that seeks not to regain state power but to speak truthfully about it. Christians can atone for their

complicity with violence in the past by refusing to be complicit with state violence now.

People who fear an alignment of religion and state often point to Taliban-style Muslim regimes as an example of the danger. Is that a legitimate worry?

Obviously, I'm not a fan of the Taliban. We should be concerned about any regime that abuses people. I worry, however, about the way that the great myth of religious violence serves to justify certain kinds of violence: "Those people over there are crazy religious fanatics; their violence is irrational, absolutist and divisive. We live in a democratic, secular state; our violence is rational, modest and unitive. They have not learned the lesson we learned: religion should be kept out of the public sphere. So we need to help them by bombing them into the higher rationality." This way of thinking is, I think, one of the subtexts of the Iraq war and of much of public discourse on terrorism. Both Republicans and Democrats assume it.

This myth helps us to think of ourselves as the most peace-loving nation on earth at the same time that our military budget exceeds those of all other nations combined. Our violence doesn't count as violence, because we are just trying to spread democracy, rationality and peace. Wars by U.S. forces or by proxies—resulting in the death of 50,000 Iraqi civilians, 2 million Vietnamese, 200,000 Guatemalan peasants—don't make a dent in our self-image as long as we make "religious violence" the bogeyman. I think we should denounce all kinds of violence, religious and secular.

You've studied church responses to the politically repressive regime of General Pinochet in Chile. Do you have any thoughts about whether churches should actively confront political power or work behind the scenes, as Chile's Catholic bishops largely decided to do?

It would be presumptuous of me to say what ought to have been done. In my book on Chile, I was trying to hold up examples of what was in fact done, both by the bishops and by the grassroots church, to break the hold of the state on people's imagination. People in the church came to realize—some quicker than others—that asking the state to do justice is

sometimes a futile exercise. The church cannot rely on the state to do justice. The church must take itself seriously as a kind of public body, the body of Christ, that creates spaces of justice and peace in the world. It often must do so in resistance to the nation-state. In Chile, some bishops excommunicated those responsible for torture, and the grassroots church aided victims of the regime and carried out acts of civil disobedience. Change did not come quietly, as it usually doesn't.

Torture was practiced by the government in Chile under Pinochet. Now torture is something the U.S. government seems to condone. Do churches in America have anything to learn from Chile's experience of the use of torture?

President Bush is threatening to veto a bill for the first time in his five years in office, and his target is Senator John McCain's amendment to ban torture by U.S. operatives. One thing we can learn from Chile is not to be too surprised at this. Chile was supposed to be exceptional: it had the longest tradition of democracy in Latin America, and everyone thought the military takeover would be brief and relatively benign. America too is supposed to be exceptional, a beacon of freedom to the world.

Exceptionalism works both ways: because America is regarded as exceptional, it is also regarded by many as above the law and able to employ exceptional measures. When a nation becomes an end in itself—America is the "indispensable nation," Madeleine Albright said—it will resort to whatever means are necessary to protect its vital interests, which are assumed to be the interests of all.

The other thing we can learn from Chile is that the church must do more than rely on the state to do justice. The churches must be clear that Christians should refuse to participate in unjust treatment of detainees. Furthermore, the churches must not defer to the president the decision on what constitutes a just war and what does not. If the church decides that a war is unjust, Christians should refuse to fight it. I think this is the most crucial issue facing the church in America today. If the just war theory is to mean anything at all, the church must not abdicate its just war decisions to the state.

You've written about Christian engagement with the entertainment industry, specifically with the Disney organization. Normally Christians' two options in this area are either to look for signs of the gospel in popular entertainment or to shun it because of its immorality. What's your approach?

I don't think we have to choose between embracing and shunning popular entertainment as a whole. I think we can discern what's good and what's bad in it.

My critique of Disney is not so much concerned with the content of its films and other media, though the content is certainly open to criticism. My interest in Disney concerns its sheer power. Disney is an example of the way a few enormous corporations have the power to influence patterns of consumption and homogenize culture, even though the market is free. Millions of parents are stuck buying whatever Disney coughs up, because every other kid at school has Lion King or whatever other kind of merchandise.

How do people end up feeling coerced in a free market? Theoretically, in a free market every individual is free to choose what he or she regards as good. But in a culture without a sense of what is objectively good, all that remains is power. The will is moved not by attraction to the good, but by the sheer power of marketing to move the will. The growing power of huge transnational corporations produces a truncated kind of freedom.

Another concern of yours is the identity of church-related colleges. Do you think such institutions can retain a robust commitment to their theological grounding and also succeed in the competitive market of higher education?

The great irony of American higher education is that in pursuing diversity, colleges and universities have come to look more or less alike. I'm very much in favor of pursuing racial, gender and class diversity within colleges. Pursuing a diversity of mission, however, produces schools that don't believe in anything in particular. Real diversity would mean diversity

not just within colleges but among them. If a college is Baptist or Catholic or Methodist, it should not regard that identity as a liability. We are all enriched by places that are distinctively Baptist or Catholic or Methodist. Church-related schools will prosper if they are distinctive, if they give students a reason to choose them over generic schools with no particular identity.

This doesn't mean that within church-based schools rigid standards of orthodoxy must be enforced on all. But there should be enough agreement among a significant proportion of administrators, faculty and students that a coherent conversation can go on. Many college students don't take their education seriously because we train them in irony. We offer them a salad bar of different intellectual methods, positions and worldviews and tell them just to choose what they want—it doesn't really matter. Many modern universities are so intellectually incoherent that they tend to breed cynicism, not intellectual vitality.

How would you begin to address this incoherence?

I think hiring is the most pressing concern. A lot of church-related schools have ended up with a large proportion of faculty and administrators who are indifferent to or suspicious of the church affiliation of their school. Every school needs some outsiders; if I were teaching at a Catholic university in the 1950s, I'd want a few good Marxists on the faculty to stir things up a bit. But the pendulum has swung the other way. Now I would be happy with just a few faculty in each department who could articulate some kind of Catholic view on psychology, say, or economics.

This is a big issue for students. They sense instinctively that their education should be integrated across disciplines. Students don't like it when they raise a question about Genesis in their biology class and the professor treats them as if they had just audibly broken wind. I don't mean that church-related schools should hire only creationists. I mean they should hire people who are sympathetic and informed about the different ways that Christians integrate belief in God with the findings of science.

In a pluralistic culture like ours, Christians are often led to ponder John 14:6, "I am the way, and the truth, and the life. No one comes to the

Father except through me.” How do you interpret it?

There is a lot that could be said about this verse. The first thing I think of is a quote from St. Catherine of Siena: “All the way to heaven is heaven, because he said ‘I am the way.’” Catherine talks about Christ as the bridge between heaven and earth, divinity and humanity. The bridge between heaven and earth is already heaven, because it is Christ.

I love this quote because it breaks down the dichotomy between means and ends. The Christian life is not a means to heaven. War is not a means to peace, freedom is not a prerequisite for following Christ. The Christian life is about practicing heaven now, on earth, even if it gets you killed. It’s not about making our way to Christ in some far-off eschaton; Christ is the way.

If you were asked to preach on any topic in the coming weeks, what text would you choose, and how would you explore it?

Since Advent is approaching, I think I would choose one of the great readings from Isaiah that are in the lectionary for the season. These are some of my favorite readings of the whole year. They put forward a beautiful vision of longing and expectation for a transformed reality. I would perhaps choose Isaiah 11:1-9.

Woody Allen says, “The lion will lie down with the lamb, but the lamb won’t get much sleep.” After pointing out that in fact the lamb gets together with the wolf in Isaiah, I would want to explore Allen’s comment as an example of what is called realism. Realism says, “Don’t be naive. In the real world, the lamb doesn’t stand a chance with the wolf. When God actually changes history, then we can relax. In the meantime, we have to carry a big stick.”

In the Christian reading of Isaiah, however, God has already acted to redeem history. The shoot from the stump of Jesse has already sprouted. The longing of Advent is fulfilled in Christmas. People sometimes misunderstand the “not yet” of the kingdom of God to mean that God is holding back on us. But God has held nothing back; God has given us the

Son, the Way. The “not yet” is because we are holding back. We carry on as if nothing has happened, waiting for God to realize the vision of Isaiah. But the good news is that God has acted. God has given us the Christ, in whom Isaiah’s vision of a transformed reality is fulfilled.