WILLIAM CAVANAUGH SEEKS "to help us in the West see into a significant blind spot that we have created for ourselves." He succeeds so well that many readers might wish he had left them to their impaired vision. The blind spot Cavanaugh illuminates is the conviction--widespread among liberals and conservatives, religious believers and unbelievers alike--that religion is particularly and inherently prone to divisiveness and violence. Its pervasive corollary is that religion--in contrast to secular, ideologically neutral liberalism--must be vigilantly contained in its public expressions at home just as it must be suppressed in its dangerous militancy abroad by the peace-loving, democratic state.

Considering the consequences of the aggressive renewal of Wilsonian foreign policy during the Bush administration, all Americans should read Cavanaugh's book, although few will find it comforting. And Americans prize few things more highly than feeling good about themselves and their country. Cavanaugh's clear-sighted analysis sheds subversive light on the self-justifying, self-exempting legitimation of violence perpetrated by modern Western states--above all, in the early twenty-first century, by the United States. The Myth of Religious Violence is a tour de force.

The "Myth" of religious violence? Is the head of this ivory tower academic (Cavanaugh teaches theology at the University of St. Thomas in St. Paul, Minnesota) buried in the sand? Cavanaugh has no interest in denying the obvious, that human beings are sometimes motivated by religion to act in violent ways. Nor does he seek to differentiate between "genuine" and "so-called" religion in an effort to keep the sincere and the devout free from the taint of violence.

Exposing the myth of religious violence means something else: the careful demolition of the variously argued idea that in ostensible contrast to rational, modern, secular ideologies, there is something distinctively disruptive, divisive, and dangerous about religion that makes it, across historical epochs and cultures and peoples, inherently prone to irrational, intractable violence. Because of this, the argument goes, religion must be resolutely corralled and controlled by the benign secularism of the liberal state, if necessary by justifiable, pacifying violence of the state's own.

Cavanaugh rightly sees that, for this argument to work, there must be something identifiable about "religion" that makes it susceptible to violence and sets it apart from secular ideologies and commitments. But those who make this argument have offered no account of religion that can sustain the argument. Ignoring much scholarship about the historical and cultural variability of the concept of religion itself, they argue as if the differences are apparent. Hence they offer, in the guise of description and analysis, the myth of religious violence: the powerful and pervasive perpetuation of the false notion that because it is especially liable to violence, religion merits special attention by a secular state whose legitimacy is reaffirmed every time it performs its policing function, thereby reinforcing the myth and deflecting attention away from its own violence.

The Myth of Religious Violence begins with the arguments of nine leading scholars--including John Hick, Martin Marty, and Charles Kimball--who argue in their respective ways that religion tends
especially to violence because it is absolutist, divisive, and/or not rational. Cavanaugh demonstrates that all such arguments founder: If they define religion in substantive terms, he shows with abundant evidence that "there is no reason to suppose that so-called secular ideologies such as nationalism, patriotism, capitalism, Marxism, and liberalism are any less prone to be absolutist, divisive, and irrational than belief in, for example, the biblical God," and if they employ a functionalist definition of religion, they dissolve the analytical distinction between religious and secular, because "the term religion comes to cover virtually anything humans do that gives their lives order and meaning."

He then undertakes a genealogical analysis of "religion" that explains why these arguments fail: The scholars who proffer the myth of religious violence think that "religion" refers to something transhistorically and transculturally shared and separable from politics, social relationships, and economic exchanges, unaware that the secular / religious distinction employed is itself an invention of Western modernity, an ideological corollary of the construction of the liberal nation-state and modern Western colonialism. To construe religion as essentially interior, subjective, and private is not to discover through careful empirical investigation or scholarly reflection the timeless essence of religion; it is to mistake a highly contingent, protestantizing, modern view of religion for a range of ideas, practices, and ways of life that simply do not fit the definition forced on them.

Small wonder, then, that one finds religion being mixed up with politics and society everywhere: The concept dictates what one will "discover." The critique of religion in the myth of religious violence ignores the history through which the concept itself came into being: how power was exercised in the creation of the modern nation-state, and the assumptions of the seventeenth- and eighteenth-century theorists who sought to separate private from public, religion from politics, and church from state.

But didn't the "wars of religion" in the Reformation era show beyond any doubt that religion is absolutist, divisive, and irrational and therefore prone to violence? And, as a result, wasn't the modern liberal state created and construed as a secular, privatizing, and individualizing religion in order to tame it?

This "creation myth of the wars of religion" Cavanaugh dismantles thoroughly. He rightly directs his analysis especially against contemporary liberal political theorists and legal scholars who construe the creation of the secular state as the creation of a peacemaking savior from the religious unrest of early modern Europe. The contemporary liberals' story simply echoes the story's self-serving creators, from Hobbes and Spinoza through Voltaire and Rousseau.

Against this narrative Cavanaugh marshals a wide range of evidence from historians of the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries that hopelessly complicates any construal of major European conflicts from the Schmalkaldic War (1546-1547) through the Thirty Years War (1618-1648) as "wars of religion." More fundamentally, he correctly notes the inseparability of religion from politics and society in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries. Hence, one cannot, for example, say that a Catholic Eucharistic procession was religious rather than political or social--unless one applies, anachronistically, a conception of religion that itself arose only as a rejection of the human realities it sought to refashion.

Cavanaugh argues that the consolidating and centralizing violence that accompanied the early formation of what would become modern states preceded the Reformation and thus cannot be disentangled from the "religious" violence of the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries. What happened in early modern Europe was not a separation of dangerously irrational religion from commendably rational and secular politics, but rather "the substitution of the religion of the state for
the religion of the church" and thus (in historian John Bossy's phrase) "a migration of the holy from church to state in the establishment of the ideal of dying and killing for one's country." Dulce et decorum est pro patria mori.

Despite its conceptual incoherence and reliance on a self-serving creation myth, "the myth of religious violence has proven to be an extraordinarily pervasive story in Western culture" precisely because, as Cavanaugh says, "it is so useful." Cavanaugh concludes his book by considering three of the myth's recent and continuing principal uses: the justification of Supreme Court decisions since the 1940s that promote secular individualism and suppress public expressions of religion; the construction of sharp distinctions between "the West and the rest" in a "dash of civilizations" that eschews historical analysis of Western-Muslim relations in favor of blanket allegations of Islamic religious fanaticism; and the distinction between objectionable, irrational, "religious" violence and rational, justifiable, "secular" violence by the United States. In the case of the last, what is considered legitimate violence evades the scrutiny applied to "religious" violence. As Cavanaugh describes it: "We must share the blessings of secularism with them. If they are not sufficiently rational to be open to persuasion, we must regrettably bomb them into the higher rationality."

In place of the myth of religious violence, Cavanaugh suggests leveling the playing field: Both secularist liberalism and religious traditions should be placed within the same analytical framework when it comes to answering without prejudice a straightforwardly functionalist question: "Do certain ideologies and practices have more of a tendency to produce violence than others?" In this endeavor, "the distinction between secular and religious violence is unhelpful, misleading, and mystifying, and it should be avoided altogether."

The real issue concerns that for which people demonstrate, by their behavior, their willingness to kill. Understanding this requires the sort of careful, precise, empirical work and attention to specific contexts that The Myth of Religious Violence exemplifies. The book should become a classic—but very possibly will not, because, for that to happen, it will have to open the eyes of those most likely to find disconcerting the the blind spot it reveals. In short, it would have to succeed in effecting the conversion that it prompts through the myth that it destroys.

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