CAVANAUGH’S MYTH-APPROPRIATION OF IDEOLOGY
A Critical Review of *The Myth of Religious Violence*

by

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Abstract

In *The Myth of Religious Violence*, William Cavanaugh deconstructs the category of “religion” in an attempt to undermine the distinction between “religious” violence and “secular” violence, and to examine the way in which this construction manifests itself in the conceptual apparatus of contemporary Western society. This paper focuses on how Cavanaugh uses the categories “myth” and “ideology.” Cavanaugh’s given definition and employment of “myth” is sensitive to broader conceptions of the category in myth-studies. Unlike “myth,” Cavanaugh does not offer a definition “ideology,” but he employs the term in two ways: (1) as an all-encompassing category that seems to override definitional issues with “religion” and; (2) pejoratively to signal the falsity of putatively “secular ideology” that is responsible for the creation and maintenance of the “myth of religious violence.” In particular, Cavanaugh does not recognize the “mythic” dimension of his use of the concept of “ideology.” Cavanaugh’s use of “ideology” appears to replace the general argument that “religion causes violence” with the equally general argument that “ideology causes violence” without informing his reader what he means by “ideology.”
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Chapter 1
Introduction

A decade past the events of 9/11, it seems clichéd to mention the destruction of the World Trade Center in New York City at the beginning of a paper that addresses the topic of religion and violence.¹ The idea that religion causes violence is a common perception in Western popular thought and the events of 9/11 stand out as one of the most powerful and recent examples of allegedly “religious” violence. “Secular” violence is typically thought to be different from violence intertwined with “religious” beliefs.² But is this a valid distinction? If so, what makes violence “religious” and why is this distinction so prevalent in Western culture? How can the popular distinction between “religious” and “secular” violence be reconciled with the work of scholars like Wilfred Cantwell Smith, J.Z. Smith, and Timothy Fitzgerald who argue that the category “religion” is a construct of the scholars mind?³

American historian and theologian William Cavanaugh approaches these questions in his 2009 book The Myth of Religious Violence: Secular Ideology and the Roots of Modern Conflict. Cavanaugh argues that the distinction between the “religious” and “secular” is an unjustifiable Western invention that is used to legitimate “secular” practices and actors in the public sphere, while marginalizing “religious” practices and actors. As part of “secular ideology,” the “myth of religious violence” sanitizes and

legitimates “secular” violence that is deemed necessary in order to control polluting disordered and desperate “religious” violence: Our good violence counters their bad violence.⁴ For Cavanaugh, the “myth of religious violence” penetrates the field of religion and violence through the work of influential religion and violence theorists such as Mark Juergensmeyer, Charles Kimball, and Martin Marty.⁵ According to Cavanaugh, theorists who make general arguments that “religion causes violence” are unable to maintain the distinction between “religious” and “secular” phenomena, and therefore undermine their own arguments.⁶ Cavanaugh proposes that these studies could be more valuable if instead of claiming to investigate “religious” violence, they broadened their description to “ideological” causes of violence, surrendering the “religious-secular” dichotomy.⁷

Cavanaugh’s book has been generally well received in the disciplines of religious studies, theology, and political science. Theologian Matthew J.P. Tan calls The Myth of Religious Violence “invaluable” and a “great contribution” to the field of religion and violence.⁸ Cultural anthropologist Kevin Lewis O’Neil describes Cavanaugh’s work as “…a long awaited voice of reason.”⁹ Even Cavanaugh’s toughest critic, historian, and

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⁵ Ibid, 21, 26, 28.
⁶ Ibid, 17. “Religion causes violence” is Cavanaugh’s simplified shorthand for arguments that “…see religion as especially inclined to produce violence, or as an especially significant factor among others in the production or exacerbation of violence.”
⁷ Ibid, 226.
religion and violence theorist, R. Scott Appleby, sings Cavanaugh’s praises, hailing *The Myth of Religious Violence* as “…an important [book]… [that] deserves a fair and careful reading from anyone who seeks to speak credibly to the role of religion in contemporary affairs, and to the ways in which that role is constructed, interpreted, and distorted.”

In spite of the praise that these three critics give Cavanaugh, they also offer valuable criticism. Tan and Appleby take issue with Cavanaugh’s “negative programme.” Cavanaugh claims in his introduction that he does not have an alternative to the “religious-secular” distinction to present in his book. Instead, Cavanaugh states that the book’s purpose is to “…contribute to a dismantling of the myth of religious violence.” Tan thinks, “The only fault one can find [with the book] is that, as the negative analysis unfolds, one feels increasingly eager for a positive programme to be put forward.” As Appleby states:

... [Cavanaugh] offers no helpful alternative for those of us who continue to struggle with the undeniable cross-historical, cross-cultural phenomenon we typically call religion. Leaving the matter solely to case-by-case judgments based on “historical context” is unsatisfactory, for it reduces religion to a merely secular or worldly project, one in which the human “passion for the infinite” is no more

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13 Ibid, 14.
than a projection of psychological or emotional needs – the yearning to fill a “God-sized hole in the human heart.”¹⁵

Appleby offers further criticism, finding some of Cavanaugh’s reasoning problematic. Cavanaugh spends an entire chapter dedicated to undermining the “religious-secular” dichotomy in nine theorists’ work – one of whom is Appleby.¹⁶ In this section Cavanaugh establishes his distaste for broad definitions, which he perceives to be analytically useless. Appleby sees this as a problem: “… it seems inconsistent, at best, for one who appears to deny a clear distinction between religion and worldly ideologies that claim an absolute status to complain that substantivist definition of religion is “so broad that it serves no useful analytical function.””¹⁷ O’Neill also hints at terminological issues with Cavanaugh’s use of “myth:”

The language of myth and the trope of vision suggest that the kind of religion, violence, and secularism imagined as transhistorical and transcultural are illusionary – that life would be better (more peaceful) if we could all just peel back these falsities to see the bright light of reason. This interest in separating the real from the false, to rubbing one’s eyes clear of the fog, might just sneak in its own secular narrative of progress.¹⁸

Cavanaugh’s work may be valuable as a detailed account of the construction of the category of religion and how its legacy influences the conceptual apparatus of contemporary Western culture, but it is not without flaws. The reviewers cited above

¹⁵ Appleby, “Fire & Sword,” 15.
¹⁷ Ibid, 17.
allude to some issues with Cavanaugh’s work but ultimately the problem with Cavanaugh does not lie in his unsatisfying lack of an alternative to the “myth of religious violence” or in his apparent desire to promote his own “narrative of progress.” Appleby hints that Cavanaugh, who holds theorists responsible for their definition of “religion,” does not hold himself to the same standard when it comes to his own categories. Cavanaugh dismisses broad definitions of “religion,” yet seems to be interested in entirely dissolving the “religious-secular” dichotomy for an equally broad category of “ideological” violence. Of these reviewers, Appleby comes closest to exposing the most significant difficulty in Cavanaugh’s work. This obstacle is not the “language of myth” of Cavanaugh’s narrative, but Cavanaugh’s lack of attention to the “mythic” dimension of his category “ideology.”

The categories “myth,” and “ideology” will be the focus of this paper. Both terms are featured prominently in The Myth of Religious Violence, but it becomes apparent through the following discussions that although Cavanaugh seems to pay careful attention to the category of “myth,” he fails to do the same with “ideology.”

“Myth” will be the focus of the second chapter, which discusses Cavanaugh’s use of the term in The Myth of Religious Violence. This chapter describes how Cavanaugh believes “myth” functions. To contextualize Cavanaugh’s conception of “myth,” I provide a brief overview of some academic approaches to “myth” and describe the analytical framework of Canadian scholar Colin Grant. Grant describes three treatments of the category “myth,” – journalistic, scholarly, and living. Using this context, I

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demonstrate how Cavanaugh reflects these approaches to “myth,” but that the “living myth” approach is the most meaningful to the book’s central thesis. Cavanaugh’s sensitivity to the category of “myth” is contrasted by his treatment of “ideology.”

“Ideology,” a category that goes unnoted by Cavanaugh’s reviewers, will be the focus of the third chapter. Since Cavanaugh does not provide an explicit definition, I examine his use of the term throughout the work. To contextualize Cavanaugh’s conception of “ideology,” I provide a brief genealogy of the term. From this understanding of “ideology,” I identify problems with Cavanaugh’s use of “category.”

In the fourth and concluding chapter, I consider why Cavanaugh did not include a definition of “ideology” and why he may have avoided giving a definition. I also consider whether or not Cavanaugh has solved any problems with “religion causes violence” arguments or if he has simply replaced one problem of definition with another. Finally, I suggest where to continue from Cavanaugh’s open-ended conclusions and implied alternative programme.

As the discussion unfolds, the reader will note that I continuously use scare quotes throughout this text when I use the terms such as “religion,” “religious,” “secular,” “myth,” and “ideology.” Regardless of stylistic concerns, I find that using scare quotes reminds the reader repeatedly of the contested nature of such terminology. Cavanaugh, on the other hand, although he recognizes that terms like these should often be surrounded by scare quotes states that he has “…nevertheless tried to keep the use of scare quotes to a minimum to avoid cluttering the text.” I find that this fails to fully appreciate the difficulties in expressing the non-essentialist approach to challenging categories without
relying on essentialist definitions. For this reason, I have made the conscious decision to punctuate with scare quotes throughout even though I recognize that this does not exonerate me from using terms like “religion” in their “mythic” ways.
Chapter 2

The Meaning of Cavanaugh’s “Myth”

This chapter describes how Cavanaugh uses the category “myth” throughout *The Myth of Religious Violence* and considers how this usage fits into broader myth-studies. This discussion demonstrates that Cavanaugh’s conception of the “myth of religious violence” fits comfortably into a nuanced approach to “myth” that acknowledges that these powerful, society-shaping narratives still play a role within contemporary society.

2.1 Cavanaugh’s Use of the Term “Myth”

Cavanaugh describes the “myth of religious violence” as the idea that “…religion is a transhistorical and transcultural feature of human life, essentially distinct from “secular” features such as politics and economics, which has a peculiarly dangerous inclination to promote violence.”\(^{19}\) This particular “myth” relies on the idea that religion exists across all history and cultures as something expressly different from secular features of culture. It is out of this categorical distinction that religion is deemed particularly prone to violence.

Cavanaugh describes what he means by the term “myth” in his introduction:

I use the term “myth” to describe this claim, not merely to indicate that it is false, but to give a sense of the power of the claim in Western society. A story takes on the status of myth when it becomes unquestioned. It becomes very difficult to think outside the paradigm that the myth establishes and reflects because myth
and reality become mutually reinforcing. Society is structured to conform to the apparent truths that the myth reveals, and what is taken as real increasingly takes on the color of the myth… the myth itself becomes more unquestioned in such a way as to make the categories through which the myth operates seem given and inevitable.20

Cavanaugh cites Linda Zerilli’s conception of “mythology” to support his understanding of the category:

A 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 a groundless belief. …A mythology is utterly groundless, hence stable. What characterizes a mythology is not so much its crude or naïve character – mythologies can be extremely complex and sophisticated – but, rather, its capacity to elude our practices of verification and refutation.21

“Myth” for Cavanaugh, therefore, indicates falsity, but more importantly it is a “story” that has become unexamined, unquestioned truth; and since society takes it as truth, it organizes itself accordingly.

Cavanaugh further considers the social functions of the “myth of religious violence” in his closing chapter “The Uses of the Myth.” Cavanaugh states that the “myth of religious violence is simply part of the general conceptual apparatus of Western

20 Ibid, 6.
society.” This not only signals that “myth” is a normal part of contemporary Western society, but that its function is to provide a lens through which society is envisioned by its members – what may be described as a “belief system.”

“The Uses of the Myth” considers a variety of ways in which the “myth of religious violence” functions within contemporary American culture. Domestically, the “myth” serves to marginalize certain practices labeled “religious” and “...[promote] the idea that the unity of the nation-state saves us from the divisiveness of religion.” Cavanaugh cites several twentieth century court cases that involve conflicts between religion and state where the “myth of religious violence" was invoked in favour of the state. For instance, Cavanaugh describes the “first significant Supreme court case” to employ the “myth of religious violence” as Minersville School District v. Gobitis in 1940. Justice Felix Frankfurter referred to the wars of religion in denying the religious freedom of Jehovah’s Witnesses to dissent from pledging allegiance to the U.S. flag, among other patriotic rituals:

Centuries of strife over the erection of particular dogmas as exclusive or all-comprehending faiths led to the inclusion of a guarantee for religious freedom in the Bill of Rights. The First Amendment, and the Fourteenth through its absorption of the First, sought to guard against repetition of those bitter religious struggles by

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23 Ibid, 183.
24 Ibid, 184.
prohibiting the establishment of a state religion and by securing to every sect the free exercise of its faith.\textsuperscript{25}

Cavanaugh points out that this “free exercise” does not apply to the Jehovah’s Witnesses right to dissent, as it threatens national cohesion.\textsuperscript{26} Even though three years later in another case the Court reversed its decision to uphold “the right to inculcate patriotism over the right to free exercise of religion,” Cavanaugh maintains the importance of this case.\textsuperscript{27} “Frankfurter has succeeded in introducing the idea that First Amendment decisions could be made against a backdrop of some unspecified history of “bitter religious struggles,” the antidote to which is the enforcement of national unity.”\textsuperscript{28} In this case and the others that are cited, Cavanaugh points to the marginalization of voices that are thought to be “religious,” and the promotion of the “secular.”

In terms of foreign policy, the “myth of religious violence” “… reinforce[s] and justif[ies] Western attitudes and policies toward the non-Western world, especially Muslims, whose primary point of difference with the West is their stubborn refusal to tame religious passions in the public sphere.”\textsuperscript{29} Looking at the work of Bernard Lewis, Mark Juergensmeyer, and Andrew Sullivan, Cavanaugh gives examples of how the “myth of religious violence” is used to reinforce the dichotomy between the “West and the Rest.”\textsuperscript{30} The West is characterized as peace-loving and rational, countering an

\textsuperscript{26} Cavanaugh, The Myth of Religious Violence, 185.
\textsuperscript{27} Ibid, 185.
\textsuperscript{28} Ibid, 185.
\textsuperscript{29} Ibid, 183.
\textsuperscript{30} Ibid, 194.
irrational and violent Other. In “The Roots of Muslim Rage,” Bernard Lewis invokes the wars of religion as a lesson for Western society that now knows to separate religion and politics. For Lewis, because Muslims did not experience their own version of the wars of religion, they “…never learned to assimilate the blessing of secularism.”31 The result is the current so-called “clash of civilizations” between the secular West and the Muslim world that rejects secularism.32

Bernard Lewis is of particular interest in terms of the pervasive nature of the “myth of religious violence” since he is one of the most influential scholars of Islamic-Western relations. Lewis has been cited as “perhaps the most significant intellectual influence behind the invasion of Iraq.”33 His article “The Roots of Muslim Rage,” was acknowledged by former American Vice President Dick Cheney as “…anticipating the acts of terror that followed it.”34 Cavanaugh uses this example and others to demonstrate how pervasive the “myth of religious violence” has become and how it shapes the way in which those in Western society view “the Rest.”

The “Uses of the Myth,” shows how society conforms to the apparent realities of the “myth of religious violence.” The uses of the “myth” that Cavanaugh cites are not rooted in empirical evidence, but in an unexamined and constructed narrative.35 “Myth” here signifies falsehood, but Cavanaugh recognizes the difficulty in exposing it as such. It

is clear from this chapter that the “myth of religious violence” for Cavanaugh is not static, but “…is pervasive and helps to structure domestic and foreign policy in ways that are often unconscious.”

2.2 Contextualizing Cavanaugh’s Approach

In *Myths We Live By*, Canadian religious studies scholar Colin Grant offers three categories of typical approaches to “myth” – journalistic, scholarly, and living. “Journalistic myth” applies to popular connotations of “myth.” To use “myth” in the journalistic sense is to deem the narrative at hand a falsehood: “Something is identified as “myth” expressly for the purpose of dismissing it.” Once something is exposed as “myth,” it is no longer taken seriously, and therefore is no longer operating as “myth” for those who dismiss it. The exposé believes complete rejection is possible and eventually all will identify “myth” as such. This approach is referred to as journalistic to capture the notion that journalism and mass media are in the “information business,” a business that relies on reporting information as quickly and accurately as possible, presenting falsehood as the enemy. Journalists that expose “myths” stand on evidence, considered irrefutable truth. Another essential part of journalistic myth is its “…association with other people, or at most, with the journalist’s own past,” but maintains the exposé’s irrefutable claim to truth.

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35 Ibid., 194.
36 Ibid., 183.
38 Ibid., 4.
39 Ibid., 5.
Grant refers to the study of “myth” in an academic environment as “scholarly myth” – the study of mythology of ancient cultures, like the tales of the gods and goddesses of Greece and Rome. While in the journalistic sense, to expose “myth” is to dismiss it, in the scholarly sense it is taken more seriously as a relic that can be studied and analyzed to reveal information about these past cultures. Even though according to Grant, “myth” is taken more seriously in academia, scholarly myth still resembles the journalistic approach as, “myths are from the past and, in a fundamental sense, belong to other people.”

Although scholars may have respect for the ancient civilization they study, the belief that they are able to explain or rationalize these “myths” offers the air of superiority over the “mythmakers.” Just as in the journalistic sense, in the academic study of mythology, “…we look at myth from the superior vantage point of our own enlightenment.”

While the journalistic and scholarly approaches to “myth” describe two typical ways in which the category is used in the contemporary Western imagination, Grant presents a more novel treatment of “myth” with the “living myth” approach:

As humanity has moved from that immediacy of story, through philosophical reflection, to the quest of scientific accuracy, the nature of myth itself has changed… The modern scientific era operates with a vision of reality and of our own place and significance in it just as surely as any metaphysical or mythical vision. In this sense, myth has been transformed rather than transcended.

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40 Grant, *Myths We Live By*, 6.
41 Ibid., 7.
42 Ibid., 13.
Instead of making “myth” analogous to falsehood or transplanting the stories of ancient civilizations to the modern world, living myth “refers to perspectives we look through, rather than at.”\(^{43}\) By looking \textit{at} our own perspectives instead of \textit{through} them, we examine previously unexamined systems of reference that appear ordinary.\(^{44}\)

French philosophers Jacques Ellul and Roland Barthes, along with Canadian religious studies scholars Russell McCutcheon are representatives of Grant’s distinct approach to “myth” that overrides the popular assumptions that “myth” implies falsity and is no longer a part of society. Contemporary society does not just transplant the “myths” of ancient societies to the present, but has many of its own. As Ellul puts it, “S’il est vrai que cette image exprime des pulsion permanentes de l’homme et la parole fondatrice de civilisation, en meme temps que justificatrice de la société, se peut-il qu’aujourd’hui il n’y en ait point?”\(^{45}\)

For Barthes, “myth” can be found in everything. The discourse that surrounds a glass of wine is “myth” but it is not limited to storytelling: “Everything, then, can be a myth? Yes, I believe this.”\(^{46}\) Ellul, a critic of Barthes, is more particular in his approach to the term “myth,” believing that for an “anonymous discourse” to be “myth” it ought to be global in scale.\(^{47}\) Ellul identifies the current foundational global “myths” of history

\(^{43}\) Ibid., 13.
\(^{44}\) Ibid., 13.
and science. He describes them as “myth” not to imply their falsity but to emphasize the way in which these discourses are taken for granted.48

Typical uses of “myth” – what Grant describes as journalistic and scholarly – imply a value judgment. McCutcheon (who closely follows Barthes) makes a similar point:

Although it is usually used as a simple classificatory term to set off one kind of discourse from another, it turns out that the category is often intellectually committed to an a priori clean distinction between fact and fiction, truth and falsehood, fabulous delusion and scientific lucidity, us and them, just as it is rhetorically wielded to reinforce these oppositions by coordinating them with a scale of moral, social, and political values.49

To call something a “myth,” implying that it is false, is to make truth claims and value judgments. Deeming something a “myth” presents a dichotomy that does not only organize information and stories, but the people, societies, and cultures from which these stories originate. As McCutcheon puts it, to use the label “myth” asks if people are “gullible or intelligent,” if societies are “uncivilized or civilized,” and if cultures are “primitive or advanced,” leaving the term “myth” loaded with social significance.50

By approaching such completely taken-for-granted concepts such as science, consumerism, sex, values, society, science, history, religion, and wine as “myth,” for Grant, Barthes, Ellul, and McCutcheon “myth” becomes a way of expressing values that

48 Ellul, Les nouveaux possédés, 127.
49 McCutcheon, “Myth,” 192.
50 Ibid., 192.
go-without-saying. Grant describes the living approach as looking at the glasses we normally cannot see without.\textsuperscript{51} Grant adds that although living myth may be identified, “…we are always looking out from some perspective and vantage point.”\textsuperscript{52}

To trace the history of the study of “myth” is far beyond the scope of this paper, however, it is worth noting a few academic approaches that have been taken since the eighteenth century. It was common in both the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries for theorists to treat “myth” as premodern explanations of natural phenomenon.\textsuperscript{53} The treatment of “myth” as a scientific precursor was common in the Intellectualist tradition associated with Max Müller, Edward B. Tylor, and James. G. Frazer. Christian Gottlob Heyne and Herbert Spencer studied “myth” as memorialized history of past event.\textsuperscript{54} Later, Sigmund Freud categorized “myth” as social dreaming, “…disguised expressions of anti-social but completely natural desires and wishes.”\textsuperscript{55} Following Carl Jung, other psychologists saw “myth” as an expression of the collective unconscious, “…symbolic messages projected from ourselves and directed to ourselves.”\textsuperscript{56} Structuralists like Claude Lévi-Strauss look for coherent order and logic encoded in “myth,” as it is encoded in language.\textsuperscript{57}

It is evident, even from the brief survey above, that the category "myth" has been construed in various ways from the eighteenth century, a fraction of the term’s long

\textsuperscript{51} Grant, \textit{Myths We Live By}, 13.
\textsuperscript{52} Ibid., 15.
\textsuperscript{53} Segal, \textit{Myth}, 13.
\textsuperscript{54} McCutcheon, “Myth,” 194.
\textsuperscript{55} Ibid., 195.
\textsuperscript{56} Ibid., 196.
\textsuperscript{57} Ibid., 197.
history. The category "myth," therefore, is as much a construction as the category “religion.” “Myth” is yet another broad, uncertain, and flexible category, but one that Cavanaugh uses effectively.

2.3 Cavanaugh’s Living “Myth”

In the following discussion I will show how Cavanaugh appeals to all three categories of Grant’s myth-framework. Although Cavanaugh uses “myth” journalistically and possibly scholarly, his primary goal in using the term is to communicate how embedded and influential the “myth of religious violence” is within Western culture. This demonstrates that Cavanaugh’s “myth of religious violence” fits comfortably into broader myth-studies, within Grant’s living myth approach along with Barthes, Ellul, and McCutcheon.

In the journalistic sense, Cavanaugh deems the argument that “religion causes violence” a falsehood by referring to it as a “myth.” Cavanaugh’s intent is to disprove this “myth” through an appeal to historical evidence as well as the growing scholarship on the construction of the categories “religion” and “secular.” Cavanaugh argues that since “…there is no transhistorical and transcultural essence of religion, …essentialist attempts to separate religious violence from secular violence are incoherent.”

Just as journalists stand on evidence designated as irrefutable truth to prove that something is “myth,” Cavanaugh pursues a similar course. In the chapter “The Anatomy of Myth,” Cavanaugh examines the arguments of a variety of scholars who rely on the

distinction between “religious” violence and “secular” violence in their arguments. Cavanaugh challenges their assumptions about the category of “religion,” establishing evidence for the existence of the “myth of religious violence.”

In the chapter “The Invention of Religion” Cavanaugh appeals to history to build evidence on how the category of “religion” is in fact an invention of modernity and is therefore a problematic category. First Cavanaugh offers a history of ancient and medieval religio, followed by a history of the concept of religion in the modern West. Finally, Cavanaugh looks at how the term religion is not a transcultural concept, but was used as a means to control the colonized by Western powers. Cavanaugh uses “invention” in this chapter to mean “made up” and therefore “not real,” interchangeable with his use of “constructed” and even “myth.”

Finally, in the third chapter “The Creation Myth of the Wars of Religion,” Cavanaugh continues to build his case against the “myth of religious violence,” again appealing to history. This chapter is meant to expose what Cavanaugh believes is the origin or “creation myth” of the “myth of religious violence,” the so-called Wars of Religion of the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries. Cavanaugh appeals to historical records, the early modern writers of seventeenth century political theory, and a variety of contemporary political theorists and historical experts to build his case.

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59 Ibid., 3-4.
60 Ibid., 17.
61 Ibid., 62-85.
63 Ibid., 123-180.
Cavanaugh’s use of “creation myth” in this chapter’s title is noteworthy. “Creation myth” here is consistent with a journalistic approach, meaning the point in time the “myth of religious violence” was “made up.” The wars of religion provide the basis for Cavanaugh’s “myth of religious violence.” Cavanaugh also explains that the “story” of the “wars of religion” “…is more than just a prominent example of the myth of religious violence. It has a foundational importance for the secular West, because it explains the origin of its way of life and its system of governance.” Cavanaugh implies that not only are the “wars of religion” a “creation myth” for the “myth of religious violence,” but also for the secular West: “It is a creation myth for modernity. Like the ancient Hebrew Genesis or the Babylonian Enuma Elish, it tells a story of the overcoming of primordial chaos by the forces of order.”

Also in the journalistic sense, Cavanaugh suggests that the “myth of religious violence” can be disabled. Cavanaugh maintains that the scholars he criticizes who rely on essentialist definitions of religion are overall valuable studies and are redeemable. In the closing pages of the book, Cavanaugh lists five potential benefits of abandoning the “myth”, which “…has had a significant negative impact.”

- First, it would “free the valuable empirical work on violence … from being hobbled by the religious-secular distinction.”

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64 Ibid., 123.
65 Ibid., 56.
66 Ibid., 226.
67 Ibid., 226.
• Second, it would also “…help us see that Western-style secularism is a contingent and local set of social arrangements and not the universal solution to the universal problem of religion.”

• Third, it would free the West of stereotypical images of non-Western Others, eliminating “…one significant obstacle to understanding the non-Western, especially Muslim, world.”

• Fourth, it “…would help to eliminate one of the justifications for military action against religious actors. If the unreasonableness of an opponent were not determined a priori, the resort to violence might be forestalled long enough to permit a more peaceable outcome.”

• Finally it would help Americans better understand that the “…well of resentment from which anti-American militancy draws is much deeper and broader than [insane people out there who hate freedom] and the solution to it is unlikely to be military.”

By insisting that it is time to retire the damaging “myth of religious violence,” Cavanaugh assumes that conscious retiring of “myth” is possible.

Cavanaugh also possibly approaches “myth” in the scholarly sense. Since he dedicates his entire book to exposing the “myth of religious violence” as false, Cavanaugh finds this “myth” interesting in itself. Although journalistically the “myth of religious violence” has been dismissed, Cavanaugh catalogues and studies every inch of its anatomy. Cavanaugh has made the distinction between the participants in the dialogue
who have problematized the category of “religion” and those who remain committed to its essentialist counterpart. The “myth of religious violence” belongs to an Other, in the journalistic and scholarly senses. Unlike Grant’s title, *Myths We Live By*, Cavanaugh does not live by the “myth” he discusses. Cavanaugh wants to eradicate the contemporary use of the “myth religious violence,” making it a relic of the past. By contributing to the dialogue about this “myth,” Cavanaugh looks at the “myth” from the “superior vantage point of [his] own enlightenment.”69 Like a classical scholar studying *The Iliad*, Cavanaugh takes the “myth of religious violence” very seriously and believes as a part of history, it is worth studying, but it is ultimately false and belongs to someone else.

Although it is apparent that Cavanaugh uses “myth” journalistically and scholarly, he makes a coherent case for a living approach in his introduction. This is apparent from Cavanaugh’s given definition of “myth,” and his use of Zerilli discussed above (pp.7-8). Cavanaugh’s recognition that this “myth” functions within contemporary society as part of an unchallenged conceptual apparatus shows that he employs a living myth approach. Also covered above, in the final chapter of the book, Cavanaugh looks at how the “myth of religious violence” has affected American Supreme Court decisions and American foreign policy (pp.9-12). This reflects the active processes that are key to Grant’s living myth. What separates Cavanaugh’s conception of “myth” from other scholars who take the living approach like Ellul, Barthes, and McCutcheon, is his certainty that “myth” is ultimately false and belongs to an Other. The “myth of religious violence” is a living myth not solely because it is a widespread misconception, but because it is made up of

68 Ibid., 228.
unquestioned values that inform significant views of putatively “religious” and “secular” actors, practices, and institutions.

Cavanaugh also uses the living myth approach in his reluctance to offer an explicit alternative to the “religious-secular” dichotomy at the root the “myth of religious violence.” So, even though Cavanaugh lists five benefits of “abandoning” the “myth of religious violence,” he is unwilling to tell his audience how to dissolve the “myth.” As with other living myths described above, the “myth of religious violence” is not easily dismissed. Cavanaugh understands that he cannot dismantle the “myth of religious violence” on his own, even if he exposes it. Cavanaugh’s unwillingness or inability to offer an alternative to the “myth of religious violence” appreciates the magnitude of the living myth, though likely subconsciously.

In spite of Cavanaugh’s journalistic, scholarly, and occasionally confusing uses of “myth,” it is the living approach that is most significant in The Myth of Religious Violence. Cavanaugh successfully uses the concept of “myth” to communicate how embedded and influential this narrative is within contemporary Western culture. Although he ultimately communicates that the “myth” is an untrue narrative, Cavanaugh’s unwillingness to offer an alternative programme implicitly shows how the “myth of religious violence” functions as a “living myth.”

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69 Grant, Myths We Live By, 7.
Chapter 3

Cavanaugh’s Idea of “Ideology”

This chapter addresses Cavanaugh’s use of the term “ideology” in The Myth of Religious Violence. From this discussion it will become evident that Cavanaugh is not as careful with “ideology” as he is with “myth.” By using “ideology” without providing an explicit definition, and by maintaining a distinction between “secular” and “religious” ideologies, Cavanaugh fails to recognize that he has replaced one definitional problem with another, substituting “religion” for “ideology.”

3.1 Cavanaugh’s Use of the Term “Ideology”

In this section I examine where and how Cavanaugh uses the term “ideology” in The Myth of Religious Violence. Five points should be emphasized:

- First and most importantly, Cavanaugh does not provide a definition, which suggests that he thinks the definition is self-evident.
- Second, at times Cavanaugh treats “ideology” as an all-encompassing term that allows him to question what he considers the unjustifiable distinction between what is labeled “religious” and what is labeled “secular.” Some of what he refers to as “ideologies” include Christianity, Islam, Hinduism, nationalism, Marxism, capitalism, and liberalism.
- Third, Cavanaugh is inconsistent and unclear with his distinction between “ideologies,” “practices,” and “institutions,” suggesting that they are
interchangeable. At other times he uses terms like “groups” and “phenomena” instead of “ideology.”

- Fourth, although Cavanaugh designates groups typically labeled “religions” as “ideologies,” primarily in the text, “ideology” is used to signify those perspectives thought to be “secular.”

- Fifth, Cavanaugh seems to use “ideology” neutrally at points, while at other times, when “ideology” is associated with the term “secular” it is recognized as that legitimating structure which authorizes the untrue narrative, the “myth of religious violence.”

The first time Cavanaugh uses “ideology” is in his book’s subtitle, *Secular Ideology and the Roots of Modern Conflict.* From this, it is apparent that an “ideology” can be putatively “secular” or otherwise. Since “ideology” is featured in Cavanaugh’s subtitle, this term is presumed to be important to his arguments.

In the actual text, Cavanaugh first refers to “ideology” in his introduction: “In this book, I challenge [the myth of religious violence] not simply by arguing that ideologies and institutions labeled “secular” can be just as violent as those labeled “religious,” but by examining how the twin categories of religious and secular are constructed in the first place.”70 “Ideologies” are “labeled” as “secular” or “religious” but Cavanaugh believes that these “labels” are unjustified. This position agrees with Cavanaugh’s central argument that distinction between “religious” and “secular” acts of violence is spurious. Cavanaugh reiterates this at the end of the first chapter: “We must conclude that there is
no coherent way to isolate religious ideologies with a peculiar tendency toward violence from their tamer secular counterparts.”\textsuperscript{71} In further detail he explains,

I have no doubt that ideologies and practices of all kinds – including, for example, Islam and Christianity – can and do promote violence under certain conditions. What I challenge as incoherent is the argument that there is something called religion – a genus of which Christianity, Islam, Hinduism, and so on are species – which is necessarily more inclined towards violence than are ideologies and institutions that are identified as secular.\textsuperscript{72}

Islam and Christianity, which would typically be categorized as “religions,” according to Cavanaugh can be categorized as “ideologies” or “practices” or both. Later Cavanaugh lists a number of “secular ideologies and institutions” that include nationalism, Marxism, capitalism, and liberalism.\textsuperscript{73} It is unclear whether nationalism, Marxism, capitalism, and liberalism are actually “ideologies” or “institutions” or both. Either way, “ideology” is a category like “religion,” but one that encompasses the distinction between the “religious” and the “secular.”

From these brief quotations and from the lack of explanation of the term “ideology,” it seems that Cavanaugh believes that the definition of “ideology” is self-evident. However, Cavanaugh consciously separates “ideology” from the terms “practices” and “institutions.” In the first chapter “The Anatomy of the Myth,” Cavanaugh maintains the distinction between “ideologies,” “practices,” and

\textsuperscript{70} Cavanaugh, \textit{The Myth of Religious Violence}, 3.
\textsuperscript{71} Ibid., 56.
\textsuperscript{72} Ibid., 5. Another example of this approach can also be seen on page 226.
“institutions.” “We are presented with a range of ideologies, practices, and institutions – Islam, Marxism, capitalism, Christianity, nationalism, Confucianism, Americanism, Judaism, the nation-state, liberalism, Shinto, secularism, Hinduism, and so on- all of which have been known to support violence under certain conditions.” Here, “ideology” for Cavanaugh is distinct from the “practices” and “institutions” that are a part of the broad titles of Christianity and Islam or other “-isms” that may be recognized as “secular.” This distinction however is inconsistent. At times Cavanaugh lists “ideologies” and “practices,” at other points “ideologies” and “institutions,” and sometimes he lists all three terms. At other times, Cavanaugh only refers to “secular ideologies” and “religious ideologies,” and the terms “institutions” and “practices” fall by the wayside. Cavanaugh seems to treat these terms interchangeably. Overall, “ideology” is a more valuable term to Cavanaugh as an alternative to the unjustifiable designations “religious,” and “secular.” That being said, at times Cavanaugh also uses terms like “groups” and “phenomena” instead of “ideology.”

Cavanaugh also briefly discusses how “ideology” functions:

The idea that religion has a peculiar tendency toward violence must be investigated as part of the ideological legitimation of the Western nation-state. In the West, the religious-secular distinction has been used to marginalize certain practices as inherently nonrational and potentially violent, and thus to be privatized, in order to

73 Ibid., 6.
74 Ibid., 16.
75 Ibid., 24, 55, 56
76 Ibid., 59, 118
clear the way for more “rational” and peace-making pursuits of the state and the market.\textsuperscript{77}

Parts of the conceptual apparatus of the “Western nation state,” in this case what Cavanaugh calls the “myth of religious violence,” is legitimated through a presumably “secular” “ideology.” This “secular ideology” is necessary for the continued acceptance of the “myth of religious violence.” This is presumably the “secular ideology” that Cavanaugh names in his subtitle. This quote also hints at a pejorative use of “ideology.”

As noted above, on occasion Cavanaugh’s use of the term comes across negatively: “My concern is with general arguments about religion and violence because of the way they distort empirical data and lend themselves to ideological use.”\textsuperscript{78} Here, Cavanaugh seems suspicious of “ideology” as he is suspicious of the “myth of religious violence.” An “ideology” makes use of manipulated empirical data, providing the basis and reinforcement for the “myth of religious violence.” In this instance “ideology” is likened to Cavanaugh’s conception of “myth.” A distinction is made between “ideological” misrepresentation and an objective truth. “Ideologies” make use of “myths,” in this case the “myth of religious violence.”

As established in the previous chapter of this essay, “myth” for Cavanaugh is a powerful though ultimately untrue narrative that has serious ramifications for the society that upholds it. Since “ideologies” make use of these ultimately untrue narratives, by extension “ideologies” are also ultimately untrue. This line of thinking continues in Cavanaugh’s second chapter “The Invention of Religion:”

\textsuperscript{77} Ibid., 10.

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As I stated earlier, “the West,” “modernity,” “liberalism,” and so on are not simply monolithic realities, but are ideals or projects that are always contestable. Part of the function of ideology, however, is to present these projects as based on essential realities that are simply there, part of the way things are. As we saw in Locke’s writings, the religious-secular distinction is presented as embedded in the immutable nature of things. In fact, however, this distinction was born with a new configuration of power and authority in the West and was subsequently exported to parts of the world colonized by Europeans.79

“Ideologies” make “myths” such as the “myth of religious violence” appear inevitable, but as Cavanaugh established with his approach to “myth,” reality is misrepresented. Cavanaugh elaborates later in his final chapter that “…the myth of religious violence is not simply based on empirical fact but is an ideological construction that authorizes certain uses of power.”80 The “myth of religious violence” not only makes “myth” appear true, but is in essence constructed or “made up” by what Cavanaugh calls “secular ideology.”

3.2 Thinking About “Ideology”

According to political scientist Michael Freeden, “There has rarely been a word in political language that has attracted such misunderstanding and opprobrium [as

78 Ibid., 18.
79 Ibid., 120.
80 Ibid., 182.
Even notable religious studies scholar Ninian Smart is known to have confused the term “ideology” with other terms that denote meaning like “cosmology,” “world-view,” and “mythology – treating these four complex terms interchangeably.”

“Ideology” is a complex and often ambiguous category – just like “myth” and “religion.” Literary theorist Terry Eagleton in his introductory book on “ideology” lists some current definitions to portray the term’s variety of meaning:

(a) the process of production of meanings, signs and values in social life;

(b) a body of ideas, characteristic of a particular social group or class;

(c) ideas which help to legitimate a dominant political power;

(d) false ideas which help legitimate a dominant political power;

(e) systematically distorted communication;

(f) that which offers a position for a subject;

(g) forms of thought motivated by social interests;

(h) identity thinking;

(i) socially necessary illusion;

(j) the conjuncture of discourse and power;

(k) the medium in which conscious social actors make sense of their world;

(l) action-oriented sets of beliefs;

(m) the confusion of linguistic and phenomenal reality;

(n) semiotic closure;

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(o) the indispensible medium in which individuals live out their relations to a social structure;

(p) the process whereby social life is converted to a natural reality

Eagleton notes three points about this list of definitions that emphasize the ambiguity of the category. First, these definitions are not entirely compatible with one another. Second, some are pejorative, others seem vaguely pejorative, and others completely neutral. Finally, some of these definitions are concerned with human knowledge of the world, while others are not at all. The term “ideology” is used in a wide variety of ways making its definition anything but self-evident.

Unlike the term “myth,” the roots of the term “ideology” cannot be traced back to Western antiquity. “Ideology” comes out of the aftermath of the French Revolution, and as such is a modern category. Originally coined by Antoine Destutt de Tracy, “ideology” was an intended label for a “science of ideas.” Napoleon later disqualified the Ideologists as “metaphysicians and fanatics” in an attempt to discredit their anti-theological and liberal teachings. This first use of “ideology” as a term of derision is still found in use today, as evident in Eagleton’s list noted above. Marx and Engels would

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84 Ibid., 2.
86 Ibid., 438.
later adopt the term “ideology.” In *The German Ideology* Marx and Engels describe “ideology” using a “camera obscura” metaphor:

Men are the producers of their conceptions, ideas, etc. – real active men, as they are conditioned by a definite development of their productive forces and of the intercourse corresponding to these, up to its furthest forms. Consciousness can never be anything else than conscious existence of men in their actual life process. If in all ideology men and their circumstances appear upside-down as in a camera obscura, this phenomenon arises just as much from their historical life-process as the inversion of objects on the retina does from their physical life-process.  

For Marx and Engels, “ideology” distorts or inverts how we see the social world, “…essentially stopping us from developing a real or adequate understanding of the ‘circumstances’ in which we find ourselves.”  

These “circumstances” that Marx and Engels discuss are the dehumanizing social relations under capitalism. “Ideology” superimposes the ideas of the ruling class over the workers and as Freeden describes, “…smooths over … contradictions, making them appear necessary, normal, and congruous… [so that] social unity [can] be maintained and enhanced.” A major mission of Marxism was to expose the deceptive nature of “ideology.”

82 Ibid., 5.
83 Ibid., 7.
After the Marx and Engels treatment, three influential thinkers approached “ideology,” and continued to shape its meaning. Karl Mannheim, Antonio Gramsci, and Louis Althusser helped the concept along to become a fixture of political theory and “…opened the way to removing some of its pejorative connotations.”

Sociologist and social philosopher Mannheim recognized the value in “ideology’s” original intention but retained some important pieces of Marx and Engels’ interpretation. “Ideology” for Mannheim remains reflective of all historical and social environments, but since societies are pluralistic environments, they produce multiple ideologies. Going against the Marxist interpretation, Mannheim recognized “ideology” not simply as a tool of the elite to control the working class, but as a worthwhile object of study like Destutt de Tracy before him. As Freedon observes, “…[Mannheim] emphasized the unconscious presuppositions that guided human thinking, as well as the irrational foundations of knowledge.”

Italian philosopher Gramsci recognized the cohesive power of “ideology” even more than Mannheim. He understood that “ideology” contributes to “…achieving unity within a …cohesive social group… and held out hope for a total and homogeneous ideology that would attain social truth.” At the same time, retaining a Marxist approach, Gramsci urged that current instances of “ideology” be taken seriously.

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94 Ibid., 12.
96 Ibid., 13.
98 Ibid., 24.
Like Mannheim and Gramsci, French Marxist philosopher Althusser did not completely set aside the Marxist conception of “ideology.” Although Althusser agrees with Marx and Engels that a “ruling ideology” is used to suppress the working class, he expands his understanding of “ideology” to include an inescapable reality in each person. \(^9^9\) “Ideology” occurs within each of us and we are not fully conscious of the effects. \(^1^0^0\)

According to religious studies scholar Gary Lease, German sociologist Niklas Luhmann has made one of the most recent attempts to reconceptualize “ideology.” Lease says that Luhmann “…sees ideology as the value system by which members of a society determine which consequences of their actions are acceptable and which are not… Ideology is primarily …comprehensible as a function of human society, not as a separate and autonomous thought.” \(^1^0^1\)

Lease himself offers a valuable precise understanding of “ideology.” Whether the notion of “ideology” is thought to represent reality or misrepresent it, “…ideologies are precisely systems of ideas that are organized to produce meaning for human action." \(^1^0^2\) For Lease, representing a religious studies approach, “…religions are exactly such constructions.” \(^1^0^3\) Freeden, writing from a political studies perspective is not so sure.

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\(^1^0^0\) Ibid., 30.


\(^1^0^2\) Ibid., 442.

\(^1^0^3\) Ibid., 442.
Freeden perceives “ideology” to be a term for the study of politics, and thus defines “political ideology” functionally:

A political ideology is a set of ideas, beliefs, opinions, and values that:

1. exhibit a recurring pattern
2. are held by significant groups
3. compete over providing and controlling plans for public policy
4. do so with the aim of justifying, contesting or changing the social and political arrangements and processes of a political community.\textsuperscript{104}

Freeden sees that “religious” groups may become ideological “…when they compete over the control of public policy and attempt to influence the social arrangements of the entire political community.”\textsuperscript{105} However, for Freeden, “religions” are not \textit{ipso facto} “ideologies.” This is a debated point, but of course, it all depends on how “ideology” is defined. Freeden would like the category to be reserved for the political sciences, but as can be seen from the list of definitions provided by Eagleton, it is too late for that. Freeden argues that “ideologies” are political devices and, “When ideology is used in other senses – such as the ideology of the impressionists or of Jane Austen – the word is borrowed or generalized to indicate the much vaguer notion of cultural ideas guiding the field or steering the practitioner in question.”\textsuperscript{106}

\textsuperscript{104} Freeden, \textit{Ideology}, 32.
\textsuperscript{105} Ibid., 101.
\textsuperscript{106} Ibid., 4.
3.3 Understanding Cavanaugh

For Freeden, part of the problem with the ambiguity of “ideology” is that “…too many of its users have shied away from injecting it with a reasonably precise, useful, and illuminating meaning.”\(^{107}\) Because Cavanaugh fails to provide his readers with such a definition, or any definition at all, he contributes to the dubious nature of the term. That being said, based on how Cavanaugh uses “ideology,” two definitions are likely. First, when Cavanaugh uses the term neutrally to refer to both “secular” and “religious” “ideologies,” it may be assumed that he understands “ideology” as Lease would define it, “…systems of ideas that are organized to produce meaning for human action.”\(^{108}\) This definition may be vague, but is broad enough to include the wide variety of “phenomena” that Cavanaugh lists as “ideologies” from Confucianism to nationalism. Taking this approach, Cavanaugh could define “ideology” as plainly and vaguely as a “system of belief.”

This definition does not remedy Cavanaugh’s pejorative use of “ideology” when speaking specifically about “secular ideology” and its role in the birth and maintenance of the “myth of religious violence.” As noted above, Cavanaugh likens an “ideological construction” to his idea of “myth” – a powerful but ultimately untrue narrative. If “myth” is a tool of “ideology” that for Cavanaugh must be unmasked, than “ideology” is also a problem. “Ideology” is the root of the conceptual apparatus or belief system that makes populations of Western society believe the “myth of religious violence.” In this

\(^{107}\) Ibid., 4.
\(^{108}\) Lease, “Ideology,” 442.
employment, Cavanaugh’s understanding of “ideology” takes more of a Marxist approach. The “myth of religious violence” is part of what Freeden calls a “political ideology.” As Cavanaugh aims to expose the “myth” which is used to identify and marginalize Others who are perceived to threaten social order, it is ultimately a “secular ideology” that enables the uses of the “myth,” and therefore needs to be exposed.109

The contemporary popular use of “ideology” inherits its negative connotation from Napoleon’s employment of “Ideologues” as an insult and from the Marxist understanding that an “ideology” controls the masses. Like “myth,” “ideology” is a value judgment in popular culture. To call something an “ideology” is to not merely imply that it is false. As Eagleton explains,

To claim in ordinary conversation that someone is speaking ideologically is surely to hold that they are judging a particular issue through some rigid framework of preconceived ideas which distorts their understanding. I view things as they really are; you squint at them through a tunnel vision imposed by some extraneous system of doctrine.110

I suspect that, like “myth,” when Cavanaugh uses “ideology” pejoratively, he means to imply this popular connotation. To employ Eagleton’s description cited above: Cavanaugh, sitting on historical evidence sees “things as they really are” while those of us still under the spell of the “myth of religious violence,” can only “…squint at them through a tunnel vision imposed by…” a “secular ideology.” This popular use is also an example of the identification of an Other – those enlightened individuals who expose the

“ideology” for what it is, and those who cannot stop “squinting.” Cavanaugh writes about how the category of “religion” is a modern invention that history shows “… what counts as religion and what does not in any given context depends on different configurations of power and authority.” Unlike the term, “religion,” modern thinkers did not use the term “ideology” as a discursive tool to marginalize the practices of colonized populations, but it has been and still is used as a value judgment. Just as Cavanaugh uses “myth” as a value judgment of the argument “religion causes violence,” “ideology” has also been used to undermine his opponents’ arguments. On one hand, Cavanaugh provides a wide variety of what he considers to be “ideologies.” On the other hand, he uses “ideology” as a value judgment to undermine the “myth of religious violence.”

110 Eagleton, Ideology, 3.  
Chapter 4

Conclusions

The Myth of Religious Violence successfully illustrates how arguments suggesting that “religion causes violence” have a “mythic” quality. Cavanaugh’s book should be appreciated as a case study of the work of scholars such as Wilfred Cantwell Smith, J.Z. Smith, and Timothy Fitzgerald who problematize the category of “religion” and argue that it is a modern construction. Cavanaugh applies this scholarship in his work by showing how “religion” functions within contemporary American society. It is not surprising that Cavanaugh’s strongest chapters describe the process by which the category “religion” was “invented” and how this process shapes the conceptual apparatus of contemporary Western society. That said, although Cavanaugh has pointed out the “mythic” dimensions of “religion” he has not recognized the “mythic” dimensions of a different category: “ideology.”

Cavanaugh does not provide a definition for “ideology,” despite using the term frequently and even prominently featuring it in the book’s subtitle. This seems contradictory to the goal and rigour of the work since he defines other terms in his introduction, and spends much time criticizing scholars who “…give no definition of religion.” 112 It appears that Cavanaugh assumes a self-evident definition, but as the discussion above shows, that assumption runs contrary to most literature on the term (pp. 112 Ibid., 16.)
This is also problematic because Cavanaugh is writing about the definitional issues with the categories “religion” and “secular” but is inconsistent with the use of his own terminology. Cavanaugh dedicates part of his introduction to explain what he means by “myth,” “violence,” and “Western” and while these short explanations may be unsatisfying, they are more satisfying than no explanation at all. This begs the question, why does Cavanaugh not offer a definition of “ideology,” or rather, why does he avoid it?

Based on how Cavanaugh uses “ideology” throughout his work, he is not ignorant of its meaning. Cavanaugh could have provided a definition like Lease’s or even Freeden’s. It could be that Cavanaugh is well aware of the ambiguity of “ideology” and did not want to define it, but if that were the case, he should have avoided using the term altogether.

Cavanaugh’s work suggests that he would likely be against using a broad functional definition of “ideology,” such as describing it simply as “a system of belief.” This approach would have eliminated the “…distinction between secular and religious violence [that is] unhelpful, misleading, and mystifying.” Violence would simply become “ideological” rather than “religious” or “secular.” If, however, Cavanaugh takes a broad functional definition of “ideology,” how could he criticize functional definitions of “religion?” Cavanaugh makes it known when critiquing John Hick that he does not find functional definitions of “religion” particularly helpful:

On the one hand, Hick rightly sees the flaws in trying to isolate an essence of religion, and thereby opens the door for seeing that there is no single meaningful
category under which to group such widely varying phenomena as Christianity and Confucianism without including so many other institutions and ideologies – Marxism, nationalism, football fanaticism – as to render the category pointless.\textsuperscript{114}

If a functional definition of “religion” is too broad because it includes Confucianism, Christianity, and Marxism, what saves “ideology” from also becoming a “pointless” category? “Ideology” is as confused a category as “religion” and is also a modern invention. Cavanaugh may have avoided a definition of “ideology” because he felt as if he would be implying that “ideology” was as ubiquitous to humanity as the “transcultural and transhistorical” understanding of “religion” that he is writing against.

Cavanaugh undermines arguments that “religion causes violence” by outlining inconsistencies in the division between what does and does not count as “religion.” In the chapter “The Anatomy of Myth,” Cavanaugh looks at nine authors who rely on the “religious-secular” dichotomy for their general arguments that “religion causes violence.” He organizes these authors based on three characteristics of their arguments; religion is (1) absolutist, (2) divisive, and (3) not rational.\textsuperscript{115}

John Hick, Charles Kimball, and Richard Wentz argue that “religion causes violence” because “religion” is “absolute” in nature, or as Paul Tillich describes, “religion” is of “ultimate concern.”\textsuperscript{116} Cavanaugh takes issue with the vagueness of the term “absolute” but sees that “…in religion-and-violence arguments, it appears to

\textsuperscript{113} Ibid., 9.
\textsuperscript{114} Ibid., 20.
\textsuperscript{115} Ibid., 17.
\textsuperscript{116} Ibid., 27.
indicate the tendency to take something so seriously that violence results. An empirically testable definition of absolute, then, might be “that for which one is willing to kill.”"¹¹⁷ Martin Marty, Mark Juergesmeyer, and David C. Rapoport’s “religion causes violence” arguments are based in the divisiveness of “religion.” As Cavanaugh sees it, the divisiveness of “religion” “…is based on religion’s tendency to form strong identities exclusive of others and thus divide people into us and them.”¹¹⁸ Finally, Bhiku Parekh, R. Scott Appleby, and Charles Selengut make “religion causes violence” arguments relying on the proposal that “religion” is not rational. According to Cavanaugh, this argument sees that “…religion is especially prone to violence because it produces a particular intensity of non-rational or irrational passion that is not subject to the firm control of reason.”¹¹⁹

Besides a brief discussion regarding the empirical untestability of absolutism, Cavanaugh does not fully disagree with these arguments other than with their use of terminology.¹²⁰ Cavanaugh’s goal is not to weaken the arguments that absolutism, divisiveness, and irrationality cause violence. Rather, Cavanaugh wants to show that these arguments can apply to “secular” violence as well as to “religious” violence. For instance, at the end of “The Anatomy of the Myth” Cavanaugh suggests that since many volunteer to serve and die in the United States military, secular nationalism can obviously

¹¹⁸ Ibid., 26.
¹¹⁹ Ibid., 42.
¹²⁰ Ibid., 56.
generate as much absolutist fervour as a “religion.” 121 Thus, according to Cavanaugh, something causes violence but it is not “religion.”

This suggests that Cavanaugh merely solves the terminological issues with “religion” by replacing it with “ideology,” thus overcoming the problematic “religious-secular” dichotomy. “Ideology” for Cavanaugh can be defined as broadly and vaguely as “a system of belief” that includes such varying “systems” as Confucianism, Islam, Christianity, nationalism, and Marxism in spite of his dissatisfaction for broad definitions of “religion.” By failing to provide a definition of “ideology,” Cavanaugh takes part in the very definitional issue he criticizes.

Although Cavanaugh seems to use “ideology” to replace the problematic category “religion,” he does not explicitly discuss the proneness of “ideologies” to violence. In particular, Cavanaugh fails to answer, or even pose, two important questions: (1) Are “ideologies” still identifiable as “religious” or “secular?” and (2) Does “ideology” cause violence? All “ideologies,” both “religious” and “secular,” may possess an inclination towards violence when they demonstrate absolute, divisive and irrational characteristics. Cavanaugh does not draw this implication out of his own work. In fact, the only “ideology” that he implies is violent is the “secular ideology” that he challenges throughout the book. Cavanaugh believes that more Christian-identified Americans are more willing to kill for their country than for their “religion,” making the nation-state “…subject to far more absolutist fervor.” In terms of divisiveness, Cavanaugh recognizes that “secular ideology” marginalizes and others putatively “religious” actors, practices,

121 Ibid., 56.
and institutions. As discussed above, in the chapter “The Invention of Religion,” Cavanaugh shows how the “myth of religious violence,” a part of “secular ideology,” is not rational as it is a modern construction (pp.16-18). Cavanaugh implies that “ideology causes violence” but refrains from explicitly suggesting that this is an alternative to the argument that “religion causes violence.”

By examining the use of “myth” and “ideology” throughout Cavanaugh’s work, it is apparent that while the “mythic” qualities of “religion” are investigated thoroughly, “ideology” is not held to the same scrutiny. A valuable continuation of Cavanaugh’s work should research further the category “ideology” and its relationship to violence. This paper shows that Cavanaugh’s analysis of religion and violence essentially points towards “religious” violence being a sub-category of “ideological” violence. Since “ideology” is a complex term with a rich history and enjoys continued employment in a wide variety of disciplines, future research could question whether we should grant the idea that “ideology” is the operative level for discussing the origins of collective violence. This paper’s analysis also suggests that Cavanaugh does not see a difference between “religious” and “non-religious” “ideologies.” As such, is there any value in discussing distinctions between “religious” and “non-religious” “ideologies,” particularly as they relate to violence? Are some “ideologies” more prone to violence than others? Cavanaugh’s reviewers were right to point out his unsatisfying “negative programme.” As it turns out, “ideology” may be the alternative programme that Cavanaugh’s reviewers were asking for. Nevertheless, the “mythic” dimensions of this broader, and even more ambiguous category ought not be ignored.
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