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William T. Cavanaugh and Charles Taylor On Western Secularism: A Critical Comparative Analysis

Guillaume St-Laurent, *Brown University*

Abstract: The objective of this paper is to bring the work of theologian William T. Cavanaugh into conversation with the philosophy of Charles Taylor on the topic of Western secularism. Both criticize what Cavanaugh calls the "myth of religious violence," that is, the idea that the modern liberal nation-state emerged as an indispensable bulwark against religious war and violence. Under this general agreement, however, there are profound rifts when it comes to their understanding of modernity and secularization. The paper is divided in four sections, retracing step by step the argument deployed in the four chapters of Cavanaugh's influential book *The Myth of Religious Violence: Secular Ideology and the Roots of Modern Conflict* (2009). The respective themes of these chapters are (1) the distinction between religious and secular violence, (2) the underlying dichotomy between religion and the secular, (3) the European wars of religion, and (4) the ideological function of the myth of religious violence, which raises the deeper question of the modern secular state's legitimacy. On all counts, the challenge is to sort through the authors' agreements and rifts so as to allow the most significant points of contention to be properly focused.

Keywords: Religious violence; Secularization; Secularism; Political Liberalism; State Neutrality.

The objective of this paper is to bring the work of theologian William T. Cavanaugh into conversation with the philosophy of Charles Taylor on the topic of Western secularism. Notwithstanding passing remarks on Cavanaugh's side,[1] such dialogue is to this day absent from the authors' works. Yet, there is enough affinity and distance between their positions on this topic to make a critical comparative analysis prove fertile and illuminating. They both criticize what Cavanaugh calls the "myth of religious violence," that is, the idea that the modern liberal nation-state emerged as an indispensable bulwark against religious war and violence. This myth is based on a false anthropological dichotomy between religious and secular violence, obfuscating the deeper (i.e., transversal) sources of human conflict. But, under this general agreement, there are profound rifts when it comes to their understanding of modernity and secularization. Divisions run deep between Cavanaugh's hermeneutics of suspicion and Taylor's hermeneutics of "sense-restoration," to use Paul Ricoeur's celebrated distinction,[2] as well as between Cavanaugh's "post-liberal" theology and Taylor's political liberalism. The essay is divided into four sections. These retrace step by step the argument deployed in the four chapters of Cavanaugh's book *The Myth of Religious Violence: Secular Ideology and the Roots of Modern Conflict* (2009).[3] One reason for this methodological choice is that this book is without a doubt his most widely praised and debated outside of strictly theological circles. Another reason is that most of Cavanaugh and Taylor's "theopolitical" disagreements regarding the relationship between the Church and Western modern-

1. William T. Cavanaugh, *Migrations of the Holy: God, State, and the Political Meaning of the Church* (Grand Rapids, MI: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 2011), 1–2.
2. Paul Ricœur, *De l'interprétation: essai sur Freud* (Paris: Seuil, 1966), 29–44.
3. William T. Cavanaugh, *The Myth of Religious Violence: Secular Ideology and The Roots of Modern Conflict* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2009).

ity have already been covered in an excellent paper by Randall S. Rosenberg.[4] The four themes discussed here are as follows: (1) the distinction between religious and secular violence, (2) the underlying dichotomy between religion and the secular, (3) the European wars of religion, and (4) the ideological function of the myth of religious violence, which raises the deeper question of the modern secular state's legitimacy. On all counts, the challenge is to sort through the authors' agreements and rifts so as to allow the most significant points of contention to be properly focused.

Religious Violence

In his effort to dismantle the "myth of religious violence," Cavanaugh does not mean to deny that religiously motivated violence exists, no more than he wants to argue that religious motives should be considered epiphenomenal, as if the causes of human conflicts were really always "secular" (socioeconomic, political, sociobiological, etc.).[5] Nor does he simply want to point out the trivial fact that secular worldviews such as nationalism, Marxism, capitalism, and liberalism can also cause violence, or that it should be given equal attention. It should already be clear enough to any honest and lucid thinker that religion does not "necessarily always produces violence,"[6] and that most of the horrible massacres of the last century were not caused by religious fanaticism and intolerance, but rather were, as José Casanova rightly notes, "products of modern secular ideologies."[7]

The myth would rather reside in two distinct but closely intertwined claims, which Cavanaugh sees as "part of the conventional wisdom of Western societies," underlying "many of our institutions and policies, from limits on the public role of churches to efforts to promote liberal democracy in the Middle East."[8] First is the idea that "religion causes violence," which is Cavanaugh's simplified shorthand to say that religion is "an especially significant factor among others in the production or exacerbation of violence,"[9] or, alternatively put, that "religion has a *greater* propensity to promote violence than what is not religion."[10] Second, not only does religion have a "lamentable tendency to produce violence," but its violence also *differs intrinsically* from non-religious violence: it is "fanatical and uncontrolled" whereas secular violence is much more reasonable and controlled, peace-making indeed, and "often regrettably necessary to contain the first."[11] Both of these widespread convictions are grounded in assumptions concerning the essential nature – "tranhistorical and transcultural," "timeless, universal, and natural" – of

4. Randall S. Rosenberg, "The Catholic Imagination and Modernity: William Cavanaugh's Theopolitical Imagination and Charles Taylor's Modern Social Imagination," *The Heythrop Journal* 28, no. 6 (November 2007): 911–31, https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1468-2265.2007.00349.x.

5. Cavanaugh, *The Myth of Religious Violence*, 5–6. See also William T. Cavanaugh, "Religion, Violence, Nonsense, and Power," in *The Cambridge Companion to Religion and Terrorism*, ed. James R. Lewis (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2017), 23.

6. Cavanaugh, *The Myth of Religious Violence*, 17.

7. José Casanova, "The Secular, Secularizations, Secularisms," in *Rethinking Secularism*, ed. Craig Calhoun, Mark Juergensmeyer, and Jonathan VanAntwerpen (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2011), 70.

8. Cavanaugh, *The Myth of Religious Violence*, 3. As he clarifies, "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 societies" (Cavanaugh, *The Myth of Religious Violence*, 6). And, moreover, "although the myth authorizes certain uses of power, I do not think that there exists a conscious conspiracy on the part of certain powerful people to construct the myth as deliberate propaganda. The myth of religious violence is simply part of the general conceptual apparatus of Western society. It is one of the ways that the legitimacy of liberal social orders is continually reinforced, from official government actions to the common assumptions of the citizen on the street" (Cavanaugh, *The Myth of Religious Violence*, 183).

9. Cavanaugh, *The Myth of Religious Violence*, 17.

10. Cavanaugh, "Religion, Violence, Nonsense, and Power," 23–24.

11. Cavanaugh, *The Myth of Religious Violence*, 17.

religion as such, namely, that it is more "absolutist," "divisive," and/or "irrational" than purely mundane affairs.[12] The separation of religion and state could then appear as the *only* conceivable solution to religious violence, "corresponding to a universal and timeless truth about the inherent dangers of religion."[13] It is only natural that the secular nation-state should have the monopoly on legitimate political violence – "on its citizen's willingness to sacrifice and kill"[14] – insofar as its essential mission is to act as a bulwark against the absolutist, divisive, and irrational violence of religion.

The first chapter of his book, "The Anatomy of the Myth," aims to radically undermine the myth by demonstrating that "ideologies and institutions labeled secular can be just as absolutist, divisive, and irrational as those labeled religious."[15] Through a close evaluation of the work of nine prominent scholars including Charles Kimball, John Hick, Martin Marty, David Rapoport, Mark Juergensmeyer, and Scott Appleby, he endeavors to show that none of these three criteria (absolutism, divisiveness, and irrationality) succeeds in marking off the religious from the secular as two separate domains of human pursuit.[16] Each criterion – "religion is absolutist," "religion is divisive," "religion is not rational" – amounts to a prospective definition of which is either too general or plainly circular. More to the point: inconsistencies in what does and does not count as "religion" prove *significant enough* in each case to undermine the arguments that religion causes violence.[17] The derivative distinction between religious violence and secular violence is thus shown to be utterly without foundation ("false," "incoherent," "unsustainable," "unhelpful, misleading, and mystifying").

In his "Notes on the Sources of Violence: Perennial and Modern" (2004), Charles Taylor develops some general thoughts with regard to religion and violence that bear close affinity to Cavanaugh's position. First, they both leave aside some aspects of human violence ("like domestic violence, criminal violence, and the like") in order to focus on what Taylor calls "categorical violence," that is, violence "exercised against whole categories of others, peoples therefore one may never have known or been in any contact with."[18] There is no doubt that the various ideological "uses" of the myth of religious violence against forms of life that are labeled religious are themselves instances of categorical violence, structured by precisely a categorical contrast between religion and secular. Second, they both concur that the causes or "sources" of categorical violence are to be found at a deeper level than the religious-secular dichotomy and are thus *transversal* to both domains. Even though religion and violence have been "closely interwoven" since the beginning of human culture, as Taylor clarifies, the great mechanism of violence "can easily survive the rejection of religion, and recurs in ideological-political forms which are resolutely lay, even atheist."[19] The "religious/secular violence" dichotomy is thus unsustainable. This is not to say, however, that these deeper causes pertain to a more reductive explanation of human violence, in neurochemical, sociobiological, or

12. Cavanaugh, *The Myth of Religious Violence*, 3–8.
13. Cavanaugh, *The Myth of Religious Violence*, 3.
14. Cavanaugh, *The Myth of Religious Violence*, 4.
15. Cavanaugh, *The Myth of Religious Violence*, 6.
16. "We must conclude that there is no coherent way to isolate religious ideologies with a peculiar tendency toward violence from their tamer secular counterparts" (Cavanaugh, *The Myth of Religious Violence*, 56).
17. Cavanaugh's deconstructive argument is not primarily conceptual. It is not about proving these candidate definitions extensionally inadequate, or that the implicit definitions of religion used by some scholars are "vague and fuzzy around the edges" but rather about demonstrating that secular ideologies and institutions can be *just as* absolutist, divisive, and irrational (Cavanaugh, *The Myth of Religious Violence*, 59). The goal is empirical: to make us sufficiently aware of the realities of modern secular violence as to repudiate the idea that religion is *especially* inclined to produce violence.
18. Charles Taylor, "Notes on the Sources of Violence: Perennial and Modern," in *Dilemmas and Connections: Selected Essays* (Cambridge, MA: The Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 2011), 188.
19. Taylor, "Notes on the Sources of Violence," 211–12.

"innatist"[20] terms. On the contrary, Cavanaugh and Taylor also share a "metabiological" approach to violence, to use the latter's phrase, an approach which goes beyond purely biological factors.[21]

This metabiological approach entails taking seriously the social, ethical, and often metaphysical contrasts – "strong evaluations," or frameworks of "qualitative discriminations" between forms of life[22] – at the heart of categorical violence, which are indispensable to explain human behavior in general, as Taylor has argued extensively in prior works.[23] So third, both Cavanaugh and Taylor indulge in "hermeneutics" as they attempt to articulate and clarify the agents' own reasons for belief and action, or "matrices of self-understanding." The very idea of a "myth" as a pervasive and largely unconscious constructed narrative evidently belongs to such a metabiological approach. Fourth and finally, their analyses are congruent in affirming that the problematic dichotomy between religious and secular violence should be replaced with the idea that absolutist, divisive, and irrational "ideologies" are the deeper causes of categorical violence: "Violence feeds on the need for enemies, the need to separate *us* from *them.* Such binary ways of dividing the world make the world understandable for us, but they also make the world unlivable for many."[24] In other words, we should be wary of fanatical ideologies, not "religion." Taylor similarly speaks of "self-affirming contrasts" between order and chaos, civilization and barbarism, religion and heresy, victims and victimizers, etc., contrasts which empower sacrifices and wars in order to shore up a sense of unity, that is, to purify or expel evil.[25] The central paradox of categorical violence is that the more we struggle to build and defend a vision of order to live up to the very goodness of the goal that defines us, the more tempting it is to demonize those who do not share this goal and treat them as pure enemies.[26] Any ethics or ideology thus has the ineradicable potential for categorical violence, as the highest spiritual ideals and aspirations also are "the most potentially destructive"[27] – put differently, we might always end up fighting evil with more evil.

In addition to these points of convergence on the relation of violence and religion, Taylor would also agree that the myth of religious violence is unfortunately part of the conventional wisdom of Western liberal democracies. As he writes, "[t]he fixation on religion as the problem is not just a historical relic. Much of our thought and some of our major thinkers remain stuck in the old rut. They want to make a special thing of religion, but not always for very flattering reasons."[28] And he rightly emphasizes that, today, the "return of religion" thesis – i.e., the revenge of religion for its previous marginalization in Western liberal democracies – is also largely a consequence of this myth.[29] However, a risk inherent to Cavanaugh's

20. For a decisive critique of "innatist" theories of violence and war, see R. Brian Ferguson, "Ten Points On War," *Social Analysis* 52, no. 2 (summer 2008): 33–36, https://www.jstor.org/stable/23182396.
21. Taylor, "Notes on the Sources of Violence," 188–89.
22. See Charles Taylor, *Sources of the Self: The Making of the Modern Identity* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1989), 21–25.
23. See Charles Taylor, "What Is Human Agency?," in *Human Agency and Language: Philosophical Papers 1* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1985), 15–44, and "Interpretation and the Sciences of Man," in *Philosophy and the Human Sciences: Philosophical Papers 2* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1985), 15–57.
24. Cavanaugh, *The Myth of Religious Violence*, 230.
25. Taylor, "Notes on the Sources of Violence," 194–97.
26. "The higher the morality, the more vicious the hatred and hence destruction we can, indeed, must, wreak" (Taylor, "Notes on the Sources of Violence," 210).
27. Taylor, *Sources of the Self*, 520.
28. Charles Taylor, "What Does Secularism Mean?," in *Dilemmas and Connections: Selected Essays* (Cambridge, MA: The Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 2011), 319.
29. Charles Taylor, "Religious Mobilizations," in *Dilemmas and Connections: Selected Essays* (Cambridge, MA: The Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 2011), 146.

deconstructive project is losing sight of the "polysemy of the secular" [30] – that is to say, losing sight of the fact that political secularism itself is far from being a monolithic reality. Secularism comes in varieties, and, like all ideas and practices, these do not emerge and change place "as solid blocks," but rather are "modified, reinterpreted, given new meanings, in each transfer."[31]

To follow the shifts in the political secularization of the West and understand them, one has to be wary of one-dimensional narratives, and discriminate at the very least between variants of political secularism where religion is still considered "a necessary condition of good order," and variants where the separation of church and state amounts to a separation of religion and politics. On the one hand, the early eighteenth century "Deist" versions intended to protect the emerging secular order – a society "formed of and by individuals in order to meet their needs for security and the means to life" – from religious "superstition," "fanaticism," and "enthusiasm."[32] The "good" or tolerable religion was auxiliary to secular state power and willfully accepted its own relegation to the private sphere, where it cannot interfere with political life. On the other hand, the "post-Deist" phases inaugurated by the French Revolution and the Third Republic are predicated without ambiguity on "the ideas of the self-sufficiency of the secular and the exclusion of religion."[33] Both are crucially distinct from "paleo-Durkheimian" dispensations, where "the ontic dependence of the state on God and higher times is still alive." These two modes of secularism thus fall under what Taylor describes as "neo-Durkheimian" and "post-Durkheimian" social forms, respectively.[34]

As for today, Cavanaugh readily admits that "arguments about religion and violence are not necessarily antireligion, but are anti-public religion."[35] Taylor concurs, but refrains from claiming that "our present day is unambiguously post-Durkheimian, as say medieval France was unquestionably paleo-Durkheimian, and say, the nineteenth-century U.S.A. was neo-Durkheimian."[36] The hold of the myth of religious violence on the political life of Western societies therefore might not be as imperious as Cavanaugh suggests: in our "age of authenticity" where the sacred (religious or not) "has become uncoupled from our political allegiance," Taylor claims there is an unresolved struggle going on between neo-Durkheimian and post-Durkheimian modes of secularism, and that "we should not be too sanguine in believing that the change [to a post-Durkheimian mode of secularism] is irreversible even in the core North Atlantic societies."[37] More importantly, Cavanaugh's own efforts to question the liberal political arrangements of the West[38] fit neatly within this contemporary struggle. Because the Western paleo-Durkheimian "backdrop of all legitimacy" that was the relation of Kingdom and Church has dissolved with the rise of the modern nation-state, it becomes clearer and clearer "that whatever political, social, and ecc-

30. Charles Taylor, "The Polysemy of the Secular," *Social Research* 76, no. 4 (Winter 2009): 1143–50, https://www.jstor.org/stable/40972206.
31. Taylor, "The Polysemy of the Secular," 1143. See also Taylor, "What Does Secularism Mean?," 303.
32. Taylor, "What Does Secularism Mean?," 305.
33. Taylor, "What Does Secularism Mean?," 306.
34. Charles Taylor, *A Secular Age* (Cambridge, MA: The Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 2007), 455. See also: Charles Taylor, "The Future of the Religious Past," in *Dilemmas and Connections: Selected Essays* (Cambridge, MA: The Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 2011), 214–86.
35. Cavanaugh, *The Myth of Religious Violence*, 12. "Secularism need not be antireligion. It is rather against the undue influence of religion on public life" (Cavanaugh, *The Myth of Religious Violence*, 121).
36. Taylor, *A Secular Age*, 488.
37. Taylor, *A Secular Age*, 487.
38. See William T. Cavanaugh: *Torture and Eucharist: Theology, Politics, and the Body of Christ* (Malden, MA: Blackwell Publishers, 1998); *Theopolitical Imagination: Discovering the Liturgy as a Political Act in an Age of Global Consumerism* (London: T&T Clark, 2002); *Migrations of the Holy*.

lesial structures we desire must be mobilized into existence."[39] Hence, the religious mobilizations promoted by Christian "post-liberal theology" (Stanley Hauerwas, Hans Wilhelm Frei, Georges Lindbeck, John Milbank) – and to which Cavanaugh's theopolitical works belong – are just as constitutive of our secular age as "anti-public religion" secularism.

This is not to suggest that the neo- and post-Durkheimian dispensations exhaust our present possibilities in Taylor's view. On the contrary, Taylor himself endeavors to work out a third way between "civil religion" and "antireligion," where something analogous to "political theology" could be salvaged from within the framework of political secularism. His revisionary brand of secularism would reject the demand that religion be isolated from state and public life while maintaining the separation of church and state, in a "good-faith attempt" to "maximise the basic goals of liberty and equality between basic beliefs."[40] Religious mobilizations would then be conceived as legitimate attempts, in contemporary democratic societies, to build religious "overlapping consensus" going beyond the basic liberal agreement on human rights, equality and non-discrimination, and democracy.[41]

Religion and the Secular

The second chapter of Cavanaugh's book, "The Invention of Religion," draws on the works of influential scholars in religious studies such as Wilfred Cantwell Smith and Talal Asad to show why all the arguments to define religion as especially violent are not only unsustainable, but doomed in advance to fail. This would be because there is simply no "transhistorical or transcultural" concept of religion. The cardinal assumption of Western secularism – that "religion" in the abstract, universally separable from secular ideals and institutions, is more absolutist, divisive, and/or irrational than purely mundane affairs – is itself based on the sociopolitical "invention" of the religious/secular dichotomy as such.[42] Religion is not "a neutral descriptor of a thing out there in the world," like many other phenomena indisputably are,[43] but a "constructed category" imposed for specific ideological purposes: "The idea that religion has a peculiar tendency toward violence must be investigated as part of the ideological legitimation of the Western nation-state."[44] In other words, the "myth of religious violence" is itself nested within the myth of religion *tout court*, that is, within the unarticulated background belief that religion is "simply *there*, part of the way things are."[45]

Evidence for this claim is first given by insisting on the absence of a clear-cut distinction between religion and the secular in ancient and medieval understandings of *religio*. The latter was *not* seen as: (1) "a universal genus of which the various religions are species," (2) a "system of propositions or beliefs," (3)

39. Taylor, "Religious Mobilizations," 147.
40. Taylor, "What Does Secularism Mean?," 310–11, 325. See also Jocelyn Maclure and Charles Taylor, *Laïcité et liberté de conscience* (Montréal: Boréal, 2010), 39–47.
41. Taylor, "What Does Secularism Mean?," 318–19.
42. This is why Cavanaugh's point in examining and criticizing the myth of religious violence is *not* to invert the groundless claim that "religion causes violence" by replacing it by the equally groundless claim that "secular ideology (or nationalism) causes violence." For such a misreading, see, for instance, Brad Littlejohn, "Demythologizing Violence: A Rejoinder to Bill Cavanaugh," *Political Theology Network*, July 10, 2013, https://politicaltheology.com/demythologizing-violence-a-rejoinder-to-bill-cavanaugh/. With that duly noted, one might add that Cavanaugh himself does not always abide to this warning, as when he explains, for example, that the myth "causes us to turn a blind eye to secular forms of imperialism and violence" (Cavanaugh, *The Myth of Religious Violence*, 14).
43. "I am not merely making a nominalist contention that every individual thing is different from everything else and no two things can share a common essence" (Cavanaugh, *The Myth of Religious Violence*, 81–82).
44. Cavanaugh, *The Myth of Religious Violence*, 60.
45. Cavanaugh, *The Myth of Religious Violence*, 120.

an "essentially interior, private impulse," or (4) an "institutional force" distinct from secular pursuits. Rather, ancient and medieval understandings of *religio* referred to: "the one true worship," an embodied "virtue" produced by "highly specific disciplines of body and soul," a form of moral excellence interwoven with all the other institutions and activities.[46] The point is not simply that our understanding of religion has changed over time, or that we came to separate premodern *religio* from "secular" spheres of human activity (economic, political, cultural, educational, professional, recreational) where it used to permeate everything else: "To say this would be to persist in maintaining that there is something lurking underneath the changes that identifies all of the various manifestations as religion."[47] It is, rather, that the ancient and medieval *religio* is radically incommensurate to modern religion: "There is no reason to suppose that there is a one-to-one correspondence between the two."[48] Cavanaugh thus expressly rejects "essentialist" approaches to religion ("substantivist" and "functionalist"), instead adopting a "constructivist" stance closely related to the kind of post-Marxist/feminist critique of ideology that has become a defining feature of cultural studies in general, including religious studies.[49] What was formerly considered part of the inflexible order of things is now shown to be historically contingent, and thus under the purview of political critique and knowledge. In the case at hand, the overriding goal is to make sure that the "commonalities and continuities" between *religio* and religion do not obfuscate the fact that they belong to different configurations of power or "regimes of truth," to use Michel Foucault's celebrated term. As Cavanaugh puts it, "[t]he deeper problem is that essentialist accounts of religion occlude the way that power is involved in the shifting uses of concepts such as religion."[50]

Now all this would seem to dovetail perfectly with Taylor's critique of "subtraction" accounts of modernity and secularization, which have shaped current discussions of Western secularism to a remarkable extent. This critique runs through both his colossal *magna opera*, *Sources of the Self* (1989) and *A Secular Age* (2007). To explain the "move from a society where belief in God is unchallenged and indeed, unproblematic, to one in which it is understood to be one option among others, and frequently not the easiest to embrace,"[51] one cannot simply invoke the gradual removal of the "blinkers" that prevented our ancestors from recognizing the real human "epistemic predicament."[52] Just like modern unbelief did not inevitably arise from science and education, our present "reflective uncertainty" with regard to the truth of religion(s) did not arise because of "reason, science, humanism, and progress," to cite the subtitle of Steven Pinker's recent bestseller, *Enlightenment Now* (2018). What is crucial is rather the complex emergence of non-theistic alternatives from within Latin Christendom, not only as logically conceivable positions but as "live options." But in order to understand this, one has to grasp precisely Cavanaugh's point: that the religious-secular dichotomy is "one of the inventions (for better or worse) of Latin Christendom."[53] Secularization is

46. Cavanaugh, *The Myth of Religious Violence*, 65–69.
47. Cavanaugh, *The Myth of Religious Violence*, 65.
48. Cavanaugh, *The Myth of Religious Violence*, 81.
49. Cavanaugh, *The Myth of Religious Violence*, 102–18. "If I could revise the book now, I would make it clearer in Chapter 2 that I do not embrace a functionalist view of religion. Several reviewers already have missed my disavowals in the conclusion of that chapter. I think the battles between substantivists and functionalists over whether, for example, Confucianism and nationalism are *really* religions miss the point. I would call myself a constructivist; the really interesting question is under what circumstances and why some are convinced that Confucianism, for example, is a religion, and others are vehement that it is not" (William T. Cavanaugh and Craig Martin, "On the Myth of Religious Violence: An Interview with William T. Cavanaugh," *Religion Bulletin* (blog) *Bulletin for the Study of Religion*, July 23, 2012, http://bulletin.equinoxpub.com/2012/07/on-the-myth-of-religious-violence-an-interview-with-william-t-cavanaugh/).
50. Cavanaugh, *The Myth of Religious Violence*, 82.
51. Taylor, *A Secular Age*, 3.
52. Taylor, *Sources of the Self*, 312.
53. Taylor, "What Does Secularism Mean?," 305.

not the fruit of "reason alone," but of "newly constructed self-understandings and related practices, and can't be explained in terms of perennial features of human life."[54] Subtraction stories conceal the "invention of religion," and therefore commit crude "anachronisms" and "ethnocentrisms" in taking as universal what has become part of our way of seeing things in the West only as the result of extensive constructive efforts – labelled by Taylor as the "long march."[55]

The common Foucauldian move of our two authors thus consists in illuminating how the religious-secular divide gradually settled into the phenomenological status of unquestioned fact, as part of the particular configuration of power-knowledge that is Western secularity. This is especially clear when Taylor describes modern "inwardness" and "disenchantment" – or the "buffered self" – as interrelated aspects of the disciplinary revolution of the sixteenth and eighteenth centuries,[56] and more precisely of the broad "neo-Stoic" movement among political and military elites "towards a wider and more rigorous application of new forms of discipline in hosts of fields."[57] However, as Peter van der Veer first pointed out,[58] Taylor's genealogy remains largely disengaged with regard to European colonization, as it leaves aside the fact that "[t]he process by which Latin Christendom got to be secular was in large part the same as the process by which it got to be colonial."[59] By contrast, the "ideological functions" of the religious-secular divide is Cavanaugh's focal point. At the level of domestic politics, he argues that it facilitated the arbitrary marginalization of forms of life labeled religious as well as the transfer of the public loyalty "from Christendom to the emergent nation-state."[60] At the level of foreign politics, it helped justify Western colonialism and legitimize the correlative marginalization of non-Western cultures.[61] The religion-secular dichotomy is thus primarily "domination" masquerading as mere description, in Cavanaugh's view. Its precise ideological function is to deflect moral scrutiny from "secular" state violence in both its coercive and imperialist aspects.

Contra Cavanaugh's constructivist stance, Taylor thinks that "substantive" definitions of religion are indispensable to understand the inventive insights and constructive efforts that lead to the contemporary situation, where the secular can be taken as "a system understandable purely in its own terms."[62] What has to be explained is not how the "secular realm" arose into existence in modernity, but rather the ambiguous *transition* from an "internal" religious-secular dyad, in the sense that each term was impossible without the other ("like right and left or up and down"), to an "external" dyad where "secular and religious are opposed as true and false or necessary and superfluous," so that one term can be understood without reference to the

54. Taylor, *A Secular Age*, 22.
55. Charles Taylor, *Modern Social Imaginaries* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2004), 49–67; Taylor, *A Secular Age*, 151–58.
56. See Taylor, *A Secular Age*, Chapter 2 ("The Rise of the Disciplinary Society").
57. Taylor, *Sources of the Self*, 159. "I refer to the experience on the part of élites of success in imposing the order they sought on themselves and on society" (Taylor, *A Secular Age*, 228).
58. Peter van der Veer, *Imperial Encounters: Religion and Modernity in India and Britain* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2001). See also Taylor, *A Secular Age*, 781n21.
59. Michel Warner, Jonathan VanAntwerpen, and Craig Calhoun, "Editor's Introduction," in *Varieties of Secularisms in a Secular Age,* ed. Michel Warner, Jonathan VanAntwerpen, and Craig Calhoun (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2010), 27.
60. Cavanaugh, *The Myth of Religious Violence*, 120.
61. Cavanaugh, *The Myth of Religious Violence*, 120–21.
62. Charles Taylor, "Western Secularity," in *Rethinking Secularism*, ed. Craig Calhoun, Mark Juergensmeyer, and Jonathan VanAntwerpen (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2011), 33.

other.[63] Taylor's thesis is that the dyad as such seems to "exist universally,"[64] whereas the external dyad, which involves "a clear separation of an immanent from a transcendent order," was peculiar to Western secularity when it first came about. Consequently, his account of the secularization process does involve a substantive distinction between religion and the secular, with respect to which ancient and medieval understandings of *religio* and modern religion are only variations. What is more, the emergence of the external dyad (or the "immanent frame") can only be explained, according to Taylor, with reference to what have been called the "Axial" revolutions.[65] Again, this latter issue involves a substantive definition of religion – specifically, "post-Axial religion" – which is neither transhistorical nor transcultural but nevertheless encompasses both *religio* and modern religion. It is, before all, the sense that "there is some good higher than, beyond human flourishing."[66] Without such a concept, the whole history of motives and long unresolved dilemmas that gave rise to the external religious-secular dyad drops out of sight. This is the story explored by *A Secular Age*.

These substantive concepts of religion, as indispensable as they may be in Taylor's estimation, do not belong to an "essentialist" approach to religion. In fact, the alternative presented by Cavanaugh between essentialist and constructivist approaches to religion can only appear as a false dilemma from the standpoint of Taylor's hermeneutic realism (or "plural realism"). On the one hand, human beings have no essential features other "than the basic structures of being-in-world," that is, other than the "inescapable frameworks" (or "transcendental conditions") of human agency.[67] These frameworks remain entirely independent from any given view as to the point of human life or *Weltanschauung*, religious and non-religious. On the other hand is Taylor's "best account principle." Except if one could prove that we are facing a genuine situation of incomparability across the changes of history, the concepts that are indispensable to the best account of our experience we can give at any given time are *as real or objective as it gets*. The historical contingency of our reasons and concepts does not impugn their truth, which can only be challenged by showing that they can be replaced with "more clairvoyant substitutes."[68]

This being said, Cavanaugh's claim is that we do indeed face a situation of incomparability between premodern *religio* and modern religion, as well as between Western and non-Western forms of life, thus implying that Taylor's universalist language is only a function of its unduly restricted focus on the "North Atlantic world." But the claim still needs justification. For instance, in his vigorous critique of Cavanaugh's

63. Taylor, "What Does Secularism Mean?," 305. See also Charles Taylor: "Western Secularity," 32–35; "Religion is Not the Problem," *Commonweal Magazine*, February 18, 2011, https://www.commonwealmagazine.org/religion-not-problem/.
64. "What does seem, indeed, to exist universally is some distinction between higher beings (spirits) and realms, and the everyday world we see immediately around us" (Taylor, "What Does Secularism Mean?," 305).
65. "Any view about the long-term history of religion turns on an interpretation of the axial age" (Charles Taylor, "What Was the Axial Revolution?," in *Dilemmas and Connections: Selected Essays* [Cambridge, MA: The Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 2011], 367). The idea derives from Karl Jaspers, *Vom Ursprung und Ziel der Geschichte* (Zürich: Artemis Verlag, 1949). Plainly, the Axial revolution is the historical matrix of what Taylor describes in *Sources of the Self* as the inescapable conditions of practical rationality, that is, the phenomena of "hypergoods" and "transvaluations" (Taylor, *Sources of the Self*, 62–75). Hubert Dreyfus and Charles Taylor, *Retrieving Realism* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2015), 166–67.
66. Taylor, *A Secular Age*, 20.
67. Dreyfus and Taylor, *Retrieving Realism*, 160–62, 164–66.
68. Taylor, *Sources of the Self*, 58. "What better measures of reality do we have in human affairs than those terms which on critical reflection and after correction of the errors we can detect make the best sense of our lives?" (Taylor, *Sources of the Self*, 57). "What is real is what you have to deal with, what won't go away just because it doesn't fit with your prejudices. By this token, what you can't help having recourse to in life is real, or as near to reality as you can get a grasp of at present" (Taylor, *Sources of the Self*, 59). For a detailed account of the nature and scope of Taylor's transcendental arguments, see Guillaume St-Laurent, "La solution implicite de Charles Taylor au problème de l'historicisme transcendental," *Symposium* 21, no. 2 (2017): 179–207, doi:10.5840/symposium201721226.

essay entitled "'A Fire Strong enough to Consume the House': The Wars of Religion and the Rise of the State" (1995), Paul Miller argues that Cavanaugh's contrast between premodern *religio* and modern religion "assumes a uniformity that simply did not exist": "The separation of powers between Church (the "religion") and State (the "civil") and the struggle between them as to who has dominance over what – this is a struggle as old as Christianity itself."[69] Likewise, Michael Kessler points out that Cavanaugh's trenchant claim to the effect that *religio* was not an institutional force distinct from secular pursuits "ignores the larger implications of Augustine's central doctrine of the two cities of God and of humankind."[70] Thus to insist that "religion *has a history*"[71] is not enough, and begs the question: can we *actually* replace "religion" in our best account of secularization with some other term (or terms) that make better sense of our historical predicament?

Secularist Communities

Chapter 3, "The Creation Myth of the Wars of Religion," departs from the religious-secular divide on which the myth of religious violence is built, and comes back to the latter in order to explore its foundational narrative, usually told "by liberal political theorists and others who make use of it" to support the idea that the secular nation-state "saved" the West from the otherwise insoluble religious conflicts between Catholics and Protestants, in the aftermaths of the Protestant Reformation. This "creation myth for modernity," Cavanaugh argues, is simply "false." Far from having solved the problem of religious violence by separating religion out of politics and assigning legitimate coercive authority to the state alone, the upheavals and violence were themselves *caused*, he claims, by the decline of the church's authority and the transfer of power from the church to the state. This is not to say that these wars were not really about religion, that the church was innocent, or that the causes were really "secular."[72] The goal rather is to "question the triumphalist view of the liberal state," much like Michel Foucault's *Discipline and Punish* (1975) questioned the "triumphalist narrative that Western modernity prefers to tell about itself, in which barbarism is progressively conquered by rationality and freedom."[73]

Now the obvious question: to what extent are Cavanaugh's conclusions overdetermined here by his prior rejection of the religious-secular divide as such? Indeed, if it already settled that there is no way to analytically isolate religion from other human pursuits such as politics and economics, then it is necessarily the case that "the creation of the modern state was not simply the solution to the violence of the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, but was itself implicated in the violence,"[74] just like it is necessarily the case that "there is no way to isolate religion as the source of the conflict from the whole fabric of the *status publicus*."[75] Accordingly, the problem is not so much that "the myth of the wars of religion cannot stand up

69. Paul Miller, "Cavanaugh's Aversion to the Modern State, a Response," *Global Conversations* 1, no. 1 (November 2013), 69, http://gc.uofn.edu.
70. Michael Kessler, "Book Reviews: The Myth of Religious Violence," *Journal of the American Academy of Religion* 80, no. 1 (September 2012), 815, https://doi.org/10.1093/jaarel/lfs048.
71. Cavanaugh, *The Myth of Religious Violence*, 83.
72. Cavanaugh, *The Myth of Religious Violence*, 124. "The church was, of course, deeply implicated in the violence of the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries. The point is that the rise of the modern state was not the solution to the violence of religion. The absorption of church into state that began well before the Reformation was a crucial component of the rise of the state and the turmoil of the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries" (Cavanaugh, *The Myth of Religious Violence*, 166).
73. Cavanaugh, *The Myth of Religious Violence*, 160.
74. Cavanaugh, *The Myth of Religious Violence*, 124.
75. Cavanaugh, *The Myth of Religious Violence*, 160.

to historical fact,"[76] but rather that the underlying religious-secular dichotomy can't withstand historical scrutiny. Alternatively put, it cannot possibly be true on Cavanaugh's premises that the root-cause of these wars was "religion." Whatever the empirical merits of this heavily noted chapter are – there are 311 endnotes in all – the dice are loaded.

Moreover, one might think that Cavanaugh blurs the line here between liberalism and antireligious or "post-Durkheimian" variants of Western secularism. After all, the liberal "modern moral order," as Taylor labels it – i.e., the post-Grotian understanding of society as an instrument made up by individuals for their mutual benefit[77] – must be analytically separable from antireligious secularism in order to distinguish the latter from neo-Durkheimian forms, not to speak of the revisionary "open secularism" to which Taylor subscribes. As we saw above, this "polysemy of the secular" tends to get lost in the one-dimensional narrative that is the "myth of religious violence," and this is just as true for Cavanaugh's treatment of the wars of religion. Once properly distinguished from antireligious secularism, the liberal tradition appears less preoccupied with religious violence in particular as it was with overcoming the "state of nature," or with taming human violence and conflicts in general.

The differences between modes of secularism are very significant. In fact, taking them into account undercuts most of Cavanaugh's claims concerning how the myth of the wars of religion have been used by liberal theorists to legitimate the idea of a secular state. John Locke, for instance, is presented as a thinker of the separation between religion and the civil order.[78] But he precisely did not isolate or separate out religion from politics; on the contrary, he excluded from toleration "not only Catholics, but also atheists."[79] This is because the "Deist" or neo-Durkheimian forms of secularism in which Locke's theory fits arose in a context where Christianity still was essentially felt as inescapable, and ubiquitous. These forms *preceded* what Taylor calls the "anthropocentric shift," that is, the emergence from within Latin Christendom of "exclusive humanism" as a live option.[80] This latter shift was the deeper ethico-spiritual phenomenon that gave birth to post-Deist variants of secularism, or the political "declaration of independence" of the immanent, and not the other way round.

Likewise, Cavanaugh argues that for John Rawls, the problem of political liberalism was to bring forth a political solution to a theological problem: "The problem is that people believe in incommensurable theological doctrines and are willing and eager to kill each other for them. Liberalism solves the problem. […] [The modern state] simply appears as the solution to the problem of religious violence."[81] It is true that, according to Rawls, political liberalism started as a *modus vivendi* between religious doctrines "not admitting of compromise" ("salvationist, creedal," and "expansionist") and irreconcilable latent conflict."[82] However, the defining problems of political liberalism are wider. They reside in the *legitimacy* and *stability* of liberal communities in the context of reasonable pluralism. The issue, then, is not that of solving religious conflicts, but rather that of "reconciliation by public reason": overcoming all conflicts deriving from citizen's comprehensives doctrines, their different social *loci* (status, class, occupation, ethnicity, gender, race), and the "burdens of judgment."[83] As a matter of fact, the later Rawls expressly distinguished public reason from "secular reason" (or "reasoning in terms of nonreligious doctrines"), because such conflation

76. Cavanaugh, *The Myth of Religious Violence*, 179.
77. Taylor, *Modern Social Imaginaries*, 3–22; Taylor, *A Secular Age*, 159–71.
78. Cavanaugh, *The Myth of Religious Violence*, 126–27.
79. Taylor, "What Does Secularism Mean?," 306.
80. Taylor, *A Secular Age*, Part II ("The Turning Point").
81. Cavanaugh, *The Myth of Religious Violence*, 134.
82. John Rawls, *Political Liberalism*, expanded edition (New York: Columbia University Press, 2005), xxvii.
83. Rawls, *Political Liberalism*, lviii.

would alienate citizens who hold religions views, or, alternatively put, would be inconsistent with the idea of equal respect for all free and equal citizens.[84] This is "open secularism" *avant la lettre*, and, as Taylor rightly notes, "where the argument has mainly gone today."[85]

In addition to distinguishing the varied forms of political secularism and the more general aspects of Western secularism, one could also discriminate with Taylor the two most important "founding contexts," American and French, in which political secularism first arose. In the United States, "the positions between which the state must be neutral were all religious," whereas in France, "laïcité came about in a struggle *against* a powerful church."[86] This goes to show that secular political regimes, and their particular institutional formulas, must be understood against the backdrop of the history of their coming to be. Liberal communities are always structured around the memory of the particular conflicts they had to face and overcome: "Functioning republics are like families in this crucial respect, that part of what binds people together is their common history. Family ties or old friendships are deep because of what we lived through together, and republics are bonded by time and climactic transitions."[87] It is worth noting, moreover, that the rejection of both the myth of religious violence and its auxiliary master narrative of the wars of religions does nothing to contradict this fact. Although religion is not especially prone to violence and the modern liberal state was also implicated in the great wars of the seventeenth century, insofar as Christian institutional domination and conflicts *do* exist, such "violence" could still be the point of origin of a strong citizen identification or patriotic allegiance to a particular historical community (a "sense of shared fate").[88] All too natural, then, is the kind of "post-revolutionary climate" found crystalized in the "myth of religious violence," which expresses an extreme "sensitivity to anything that smacks of the ancient régime and sees backsliding even in relatively innocent concessions to generalized human preferences."[89] From this standpoint, one can understand the tendency to "fetishize" some favored institutional arrangement as *the* "master formula" (e.g. the "Wall of Separation" or "les espaces de la République") within a secularist community, an attitude Taylor opposes with a more appropriate approach, one which is rooted in the principles of: (1) "protecting people in their belonging and/or practice or whatever outlook they choose or find themselves in;" (2) "treating people equally whatever their option;" (3) "giving them all a hearing" and revising the arrangements when we face new dilemmas (the "*lotta continua*").[90]

But Cavanaugh's deconstruction of the myth of the wars of religion does not only gloss over the varieties of political secularism and their respective founding contexts, but also over other related aspects of modernity which are integral to how the practice of Christian *religio* came to lose its central place in the social order of the West. *A Secular Age* thus distinguishes three "families of candidates" for Western secularity. The first sense is *political*: the constitution of a secular state above all religions, with its consubstantial "emptying of God" from public spaces (or privatization of faith). The second is *sociological*, and corresponds to the decline of religious belief, the turning away of people from God and the Church at both levels of belief and practice. The third family of candidate aims at the tectonic shift in our largely implicit and embodied "pre-understanding" of the world, our shared "conditions of belief." In other words,

84. Rawls, *Political Liberalism,* 452–54, 457–58.
85. Charles Taylor, "Democratic Exclusion (and Its Remedies?)," in *Dilemmas and Connections: Selected Essays* (Cambridge, MA: The Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 2011), 142.
86. Taylor, "What Does Secularism Mean?," 311–13.
87. Taylor, "Cross-Purposes: The Liberal-Communitarian Debate," in *Philosophical Arguments* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1995), 188.
88. Taylor, "Cross-Purposes," 192.
89. Charles Taylor, "A Catholic Modernity?," in *Dilemmas and Connections*: *Selected Essays* (Cambridge, MA: The Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 2011), 176.
90. Taylor, "What Does Secularism Mean?," 313–15.

the third candidate refers to the transition from an "age of faith" where belief in God was axiomatic, to our modern hermeneutical-existential situation where faith "is one human possibility among others." (Here, Cavanaugh would retort that Western secularity is no less an age of faith than previous eras).[91] This is secularity in the *philosophical* sense, having to do with the way the question of God – or the question of the *truth* of religion – is for us now, and is the main focus of the book.

Taylor clarifies that political secularism has been part of what helped to reinforce philosophical secularity in most western societies – despite the fact that it can exist uncorrelated with secularity in both second and third senses (India is a case in point), and even though philosophical secularism can very well be dissociated from sociological secularism (as it is largely true in the United States).[92] Now all this complexity risks getting lost along the way, when talking of a "creation myth of modernity." For instance, to explain how the philosophical transition occurred ("secularism 3"), Taylor articulates a detailed account of the emergence of exclusive humanism in the North Atlantic world which he calls the "Great Reform Master Narrative." From that wider perspective, the Protestant Reformation and the wars of religion that ensued have "no special place of privilege."[93] Bearing in mind these few objections and analytical clarifications, it would be difficult to blame Taylor for feeding in places on the alleged "myth," as when he speaks of the natural law theories of Grotius and Locke as being largely "a response to the domestic and international disorder wrought by the wars of religion."[94]

Open Secularism

Having tried to establish that the transfer of power from the church to the emergent liberal nation-state did not save Western societies from the violence of religion, but rather was a cause of the wars, Cavanaugh finally sets out to articulate the ideological functions of the myth of religious violence in the fourth and final chapter, "The Uses of the Myth":

> In domestic politics, it serves to marginalize certain types of discourse labeled religious, while promoting the idea that the unity of the nation-state saves us from the divisiveness of religion. In foreign policy, the myth of religious violence helps to reinforce and justify 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. We claim to have learned the sobering lessons of religious warfare, while they have not. The myth of religious violence reinforces a reassuring dichotomy between their violence—which is absolutist, divisive, and irrational—and our violence, which is modest, unitive, and rational.[95]

The more general point here is that the myth distracts from the political violence perpetrated against forms of life labeled religious, allowing liberal theorists and politicians to present this violence as peacemaking and praiseworthy, or at least as the only way to overcome religious violence. That said, Cavanaugh distinguishes the ideological functions of the myth of religious violence from the multiple "benefits" of removing the myth "from respectable discourse":

> It would free empirical studies of violence from the distorting categories of religious and secular. It would help us to see that the foundational possibilities for social orders, in the Islamic world and the West, are not limited to a

91. See Cavanaugh, *Migrations of the Holy*, 2.
92. Taylor, *A Secular Age*, 3–4.
93. Warner, VanAntwerpen, and Calhoun, "Editor's Introduction," 16.
94. Taylor, *Modern Social Imaginaries*, 3.
95. Cavanaugh, *The Myth of Religious Violence*, 183.

> stark choice between theocracy and secularism. It would help us to see past the stereotype of nonsecular Others as religious fanatics, and it would question one of the justifications for war against those Others. It would help Americans to eliminate one of the main obstacles to having a serious conversation about the question "Why do they hate us?"– a conversation that would not overlook the history of U.S. dealings with the Middle East in favor of pinning the cause on religious fanaticism.[96]

Furthermore, these important benefits could also be distinguished from the overarching goal of the book, which is to better understand and defuse violence in our world by leveling the playing field "so that violence of all kinds is subject to the same scrutiny." In other words, "types of violence and exclusion labeled secular have escaped full moral scrutiny," and we now have "to agree to call fouls committed by any and all participants and to penalize them equally."[97]

Cavanaugh is not suggesting that we should abandon liberalism, any more than political secularism. There is a significant gap "between criticizing a practice or an idea and withdrawing support from it," as Rajeev Bhargava notes,[98] and Cavanaugh does not wish "either to deny that the virtues of liberalism nor to excuse the vices of other kinds of social orders."[99] He recognizes, on the contrary, that "the separation of church and state is generally a good thing."[100] In that sense, when he claims that the "myth of religious violence" is foundational to the Western liberal nation-state, or a decisive part of its "legitimating mythology" or "ideological legitimation,"[101] he does not mean to imply that it is *essential*, and thus inseparable from political secularism. The separation of church and state could be distinguished from the separation of religion and politics, although the confusion between these two kinds of secular regime is itself part of "the conventional wisdom of Western societies." Cavanaugh and Taylor's positions thus converge in favor of a "radical redefinition of secularism," purged from its "odd fixation" on religion as something strange and threatening,[102] in a spirit close to the works of Ashish Nandy, Partha Chatterjee, Rajeev Bhargava, and many others. This revisionary "secularist" regime would be concerned not with religion specifically, but with the relation of the state to diversity more generally.

Yet it remains difficult to pinpoint Cavanaugh's exact position with respect to political liberalism. Despite his apparent acceptance of open secularism, he appears nonetheless reluctant to affirm the value and legitimacy of the secular state. He does not think that the church and nation-state are "mutually exclusive,"[103] nor does he think that his dismantling of the myth of religious violence is meant to illustrate that "the modern era as a whole is either more or less violent than what came before it" – "it is indeed not an exercise in 'modernity criticism' at all."[104] It is more like a corrective "module" which can fit into any

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96. Cavanaugh, *The Myth of Religious Violence*, 14. For a more detailed presentation of these points, see Cavanaugh, *The Myth of Religious Violence*, 226–28.
97. Cavanaugh, *The Myth of Religious Violence*, 230.
98. Rajeev Bhargava, "Rehabilitating Secularism," in *Rethinking Secularism*, ed. Craig Calhoun, Mark Juergensmeyer, and Jonathan VanAntwerpen (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2011), 91.
99. Cavanaugh, *The Myth of Religious Violence*, 14.
100. Cavanaugh, *The Myth of Religious Violence*, 14. "[T]he separation of church and state is, to my mind, important to uphold for several reasons, some of them theological" (Cavanaugh, *The Myth of Religious Violence*, 179).
101. Cavanaugh, *The Myth of Religious Violence*, 4, 10, 60, 120, 121, 122, 123, 183, 226.
102. Charles Taylor, "Why We Need A Radical Redefinition of Secularism," in *The Power of Religion in the Public Sphere*, ed. Eduardo Mendieta and Jonathan VanAntwerpen (New York: Columbia University Press, 2011), 34–59. See also Taylor, "What Does Secularism Mean?," 310–11.
103. William T. Cavanaugh, "On Being Thankful: A Rejoinder to Brad Littlejohn's Rejoinder," *Political Theology Network*, July 29, 2013, https://politicaltheology.com/on-being-thankful-a-rejoinder-to-brad-littlejohns-rejoinder/.
104. William T. Cavanaugh, "Puncturing Progressive Myths: Response to Brad Littlejohn," *Political Theology Network*, July 5, 2013, https://politicaltheology.com/puncturing-progressive-myths-response-to-brad-littlejohn/. "Nothing in the above analysis of the history of the term *religio* either disproves or proves the thesis that medieval Christendom was more

comprehensive view of modernity, to take a Rawlsian analogy. But all his deconstructive efforts are to show that the myth of religious violence "does not have the resources to solve the problem it identifies, which is the problem of violence."[105] Moreover, his ambition with regard to the "creation myth of the wars of religion" was precisely to demonstrate "how implausible is the idea that the nation-state saved us from violence."[106] This amounts to say that he would reject what Taylor calls the "Kant hypothesis," that is, the view that ordered liberal democracies "will become less violent; won't go to war with each other, and presumably won't suffer civil wars."[107] However, Taylor surely sees some truth to it: "[W]e have in the modern world highly peaceful societies, where the level of everyday violence is quite low. Indeed, in some of these societies, the level is very much lower than in earlier epochs."[108] What he described in *Sources of the Self* as one the three great "moral sources" (or "domains of moral exploration") of the modern Western identity, "the demands of universal benevolence and justice,"[109] has had some effect.

Cavanaugh recognizes that "there is an awful lot to be thankful for in the modern era": "There is much less chaos, and an Augustinian like me can appreciate that."[110] But he makes clear, nevertheless, that he does not condone what John Bossy describes as a "migration of the holy" from the church to state, that is, the transfer of power and coercive authority from one to the other: "The real question is, What do we do now? While acknowledging the gains in stability from which some of us benefits, it seems to me that the main problem we face in the era of NSA surveillance and drones raining death is decidedly *not* a lack of gratitude for the state's drive to create order."[111] So, even if the secular state really came to treat all types of violence evenly ("religious" or not), its legitimacy would remain profoundly problematic; the state would still be "little more than a violent thug," in Brad Littlejohn's apt rendition of Cavanaugh's view.[112] As a matter of fact, from the viewpoint of Cavanaugh's "post-liberal" political theology, the secularization of Latin Christendom is interpreted as a triumph of "idolatry," in which religious institutions were denied power and forcefully repressed, although it did nothing "to stanch the flow of blood."[113] His theology is one of radical "non-violence," mobilizing the Church as a force of resistance to violence of all types in our world and taking to heart "the penitential recognition that we are incapable of using violence justly."[114] Such is the main reason why he wants to retain the separation of church and state while at the same time challenge the very "legitimacy of the State's monopoly on coercive authority,"[115] referring to Max Weber's famous expression.

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violent than modern society" (Cavanaugh, *The Myth of Religious Violence*, 69). "There may be good reasons to prefer modern to medieval, or Western to Islamic, arrangements (though to pass wholesale judgment on entire eras or cultures is probably not the best way to proceed)" (Cavanaugh, *The Myth of Religious Violence*, 85).

105. Cavanaugh and Martin, "On the Myth of Religious Violence."
106. Cavanaugh, "Puncturing Progressive Myths."
107. Taylor, "What Does Secularism Mean?," 208.
108. Taylor, "What Does Secularism Mean?," 205.
109. Taylor, *Sources of the Self*, 503.
110. Cavanaugh, "On Being Thankful."
111. Cavanaugh, "On Being Thankful."
112. Brad Littlejohn, "One Thought on 'On Being Thankful: A Rejoinder to Brad Littlejohn's Rejoinder,'" July 29, 2013, https://politicaltheology.com/on-being-thankful-a-rejoinder-to-brad-littlejohns-rejoinder/.
113. William T. Cavanaugh, "'A Fire Strong Enough to Consume the House': The Wars of Religion and the Rise of the State," *Modern Theology* 11, no. 4 (October 1995), 414.
114. Cavanaugh, *Migrations of the Holy*, 5. See also Sylvain Brisson, "Un exercice d'imagination théologique. La théologie de la non-violence chez William T. Cavanaugh," *Revue d'éthique et de théologie morale* 4, no. 299 (2018): 50, https://doi.org/10.3917/retm.300.0047.
115. Cavanaugh, "A Fire Strong Enough," 414.

From the perspective of Taylor's political liberalism, however, utterly blurring the line between law – or coercive authority – and violence[116] amounts to adopting the view from Sirius on politics. For the central question of the Western liberal tradition is precisely that of the distinction between *power* and *violence*, that is, between legitimate and illegitimate use of force by the state to secure compliance with its rules. In echo to the "Kant hypothesis," let us call this the *Kant principle*: democratic polities of equal respect must be inclusive; it is crucial that the rules of political association at the very basis of the state be acceptable to all citizens. Therein resides the legitimating idea of liberalism. And because what makes for the inclusivity is that "it is the government of *all* the people," the state must also avoid favoring any of the more contentious underlying views of the good.[117] In fact, state neutrality must be part of any defensible program to overcome violence, since the exclusion of groups based on their basic beliefs is itself a kind of democratic *categorical violence*.

Conclusion

This essay's purpose was to sort through William T. Cavanaugh and Charles Taylor's agreements and disagreements on the topic of Western secularism so as to shed new light on this notoriously complex issue. Four points of contention stand out. Firstly, while our authors both reject the myth of religious violence, Cavanaugh risks committing crude ideological simplifications from Taylor's viewpoint by assimilating the rise of the secular nation-state to the rise of the myth of religious violence as such. Second, with regard to the underlying religion-secular divide, the problem for Taylor is not so much "religion" as an encompassing historical and cultural category, but the ideological reification of what he calls the "external" dyad in mainstream subtraction theories of modernity and secularization. Thirdly, despite Cavanaugh's forceful efforts to dismantle the European "creation myth" of the wars of religion, his argument glosses over key distinctions between: (1) liberalism and antireligious secularism, (2) "neo-Durkheimian" and "post-Durkheimian" varieties of political secularism with their respective foundational contexts, as well as "open secularism," and (3) the political, sociological and philosophical aspects of secularity in the West. Furthermore, Cavanaugh's questioning of the state's monopoly on legitimate violence, which underlies his ambivalent adhesion to open secularism, raises a fundamental question: is a commitment to liberal democracy the *only* way to care about justice? Is a "good-faith attempt" to protect and ensure equal respect for all basic positions via state neutrality the only game in town?

To conclude, a fifth significant point of contention could be mentioned, but its examination would require independent treatment. It has to do with the fact that Cavanaugh approaches Western antireligious secularism solely through the lens of *violence*, whereas Taylor distinguishes between a political ground, "religion as threat," and an epistemological one, "religion as a faulty mode of reason."[118] Taylor's point is that the tendency to conceive secularist regimes as bulwarks against religion is also based on a very widespread distinction between "reason alone" and faith, or "reason augmented by Revelation." This is not

116. "Violence is the origin of law, so the line between law and violence is blurred, and keeping violence within the rule of law is pointless. This explains why the attempt to remove all theology from politics can end up producing 'sacred' political orders which invite killing for the flag. If there is nothing beyond the political order, then the state becomes an end in itself, a mythological entity which requires sacrifice on its behalf" (William T. Cavanaugh, "The Blurred Line Between Law and Violence," *Political Theology Network*, February 20, 2015, https://politicaltheology.com/the-blurred-line-between-law-and-violence-william-t-cavanaugh/).

117. Taylor, "What Does Secularism Mean?," 311. See also Charles Taylor, "Democratic Exclusion," 124–45. On the distinction between violence and power, see John D. Carlson, "Religion and Violence: Coming to Terms with Terms," in *The Blackwell Companion to Religion and Violence*, ed. Andrew R. Murphy (Chichester: Wiley-Blackwell, 2011), 14–20.

118. Taylor, "What Does Secularism Mean?," 321.

the same as defining religion as "irrational" or "nonrational," and it might only suppose that religious thought is "more epistemologically fragile" than reasoning that is purely this-worldly. What is more, the history of the reason-faith divide does not map exactly that of the religious-secular dyad, although it is closely related to that of the "external" dyad. But as soon as the validity of such epistemological distinction is accepted in the moral-political domain, then a version of the Euthyphro dilemma applies: "religious reason either comes to the same conclusion as secular reasons, but then it is superfluous; or it comes to contrary conclusions, and then it is dangerous and disruptive. This is why it needs to be sidelined."[119]

It is therefore not enough, in Taylor's view, to dismantle the myth of religious violence. To overcome the secularist fixation on religion, one also has to debunk the "myth of the Enlightenment."[120] But can political secularism really be decoupled from the idea of reason alone?

119. Taylor, "What Does Secularism Mean?," 320.

120. Charles Taylor, "*Die Blosse Vernunft* ('Reason Alone')," in *Dilemmas and Connections: Selected Essays* (Cambridge, MA: The Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 2011), 326. For a detailed and critical exploration of this issue, see Guillaume St-Laurent, "La religion dans les limites de la raison herméneutique. Sur la question de la vérité de la religion chez Charles Taylor," in *Religion et vérité. La philosophie de la religion à l'âge séculier* ed. Garth Green and Jean Grondin (Strasbourg: Presses Universitaires de Strasbourg, 2017): 241–249.

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