N.B. For citation purposes please consult the official printed version in *Didaskalia* 25 (Fall 2015), 103-127.

# Politicizing Religion:

# Cavanaugh, Lévinas and Lonergan in Dialogue[1]

Michael Buttrey, Matthew Eaton, Nicholas Olkovich

Noted political theologian William Cavanaugh's work challenges the modern compartmentalization of religion and politics and advocates a greater role for the church in post-secular public life. Critics of his genealogical and ecclesiological agenda argue that Cavanaugh's work harbours an illiberal understanding of politics and a triumphalist view of the church. In this essay we collectively explore this tension by contrasting these two aspects of Cavanaugh's writings – the critical and the constructive – with the work of two different scholars: Lithuanian-French Jewish philosopher Emmanuel Lévinas, and Canadian Catholic philosopher and theologian Bernard Lonergan. Michael Buttrey summarizes Cavanaugh's critique of the modern concept of religion as a transhistorical and transcultural phenomenon in *The Myth of Religious Violence*, connecting Cavanaugh's critique to his efforts in *Migrations of the Holy* to free the church from captivity to the secular imagination of modernity. Drawing upon Lévinas' ethics and political philosophy, Matthew Eaton suggests that violence in the political order exists regardless of who holds power, as politics and ethics are fundamentally irreconcilable notions. While justice may be achieved in a limited sense, Lévinas questions whether it is possible to discuss politics under the heading of ethics. While appreciative of certain aspects of Cavanaugh's critique of modernity, Nicholas Olkovich argues that Cavanaugh's genealogical propensities

[1] This series of essays originated in a panel presentation concerning politics and religion at the Canadian Theological Society's annual meeting in Ottawa, June 2015.

lead, in the limit case, to anthropological and soteriological positions that are in tension with Catholic teaching on natural law and the universality of God's grace. Olkovich appeals to the transcultural dimensions of human knowing, choosing and religious experiencing that lie at the center of Lonergan's transposition of Aquinas' notions of nature and grace to offer an alternative reading of the relationship between the church and liberal democracy. Our extended discussion will close with a response by Buttrey to Eaton and Olkovich's critiques.

**1.1 William Cavanaugh's Critique of 'Religion'**

Cavanaugh's deconstruction of the typical Western concept of religion is made in the course of a critique of what he calls the myth of religious violence. In *The Myth of Religious Violence,* Cavanaugh advances a thesis that there is 'no transhistorical and transcultural essence of religion,' meaning there is no way to separate the violence caused by religion from the violence caused by supposedly secular ideologies like nationalism, Marxism, and capitalism.[2] Cavanaugh sees his book as an attempt to get beyond the confusion created by the myth and ensure secular violence does not receive a free pass simply because it is perceived as not religious.

Cavanaugh begins by examining the work of John Hick, who argues that Christianity's claims to absolute truth have 'sanctified' violence.[3] But according to Hick, the problem is not limited to Christianity: all religions are tempted to make their particular paths to truth absolute, and deny their shared concern with ultimate reality. Defining religion in terms of ultimate importance[4] allows Hick to include less obvious belief systems, such as Confucianism and

[2] William T. Cavanaugh, *The Myth of Religious Violence: Secular Ideology and the Roots of Modern Conflict* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2009), 3.

[3] John Hick, "The Non-Absoluteness of Christianity," in *The Myth of Christian Uniqueness: Toward a Pluralistic Theology of Religions*, ed. John Hick and Paul F. Knitter (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis, 1987), 18.

[4] Hick draws on Paul Tillich's concept of 'ultimate concern' to define religion. See John Hick, *An Interpretation of Religion: Human Responses to the Transcendent* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1989), 4.

Marxism, on his list of religions. As he explains, Marxism can be located 'as a fairly distant cousin of such movements as Christianity and Islam, sharing some of their characteristics (such as a comprehensive worldview, with Scriptures, eschatology, saints, and a total moral claim) whilst lacking others (such as belief in a transcendent define reality).'[5] In referring to Marxism as a cousin, Hick is drawing on Wittgenstein's metaphor of family resemblances.[6] Yet because the family resemblance metaphor risks including all sorts of non-religions, Hick insists Marxism is a distant cousin compared to more central religions, such as Christianity and Confucianism.

In contrast, Cavanaugh argues whether family members are central or distant depends on who is speaking. That is, Hick may see Confucianism as a more central member of the religion family, and Marxism as a distant cousin, but this is a product of his subjective location. A scholar from China would map the family differently. Therefore, Hick's use of Wittgenstein does not solve the problem of defining religion, and as Cavanaugh puts it, 'without a clear distinction between what is religious and what is not religious, any argument that religion per se does or does not cause violence becomes hopelessly arbitrary.'[7]

Of course, the problem of how to define religion is an established debate in the field of religious studies. Cavanaugh's position is that religion is not a *transhistorical* concept that describes the same essential phenomena in all times and places. Rather, religion as we now understand it is an invention of the modern West, an idea that has been exported to the rest of the world and projected back into the past. To make his claim, Cavanaugh adduces a variety of evidence from the history of language, philosophy, and colonialism.

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[5] Hick, *An Interpretation of Religion*, 5.

[6] Ibid., 4.

[7] Ibid., 21.

First, Cavanaugh looks at the roots of the English term 'religion' in the Latin *religio*. In ancient Rome, one's *religio* might include seemingly secular matters like civic oaths and family rituals as well as cultic observances at temples.[8] In *City of God,* Augustine uses *religio* for the action of praising God, but he emphasizes the word is ambiguous: *religio* 'is displayed in human relationships, in the family … and between friends.'[9] In other words, for Augustine and other ancient writers *religio* is not a separate sphere of activity but a general aspect of social relations.

Next, Cavanaugh examines the meaning of 'religion' in the Middle Ages. In medieval English, a *religion* was a monastic order, and members of an order were referred to as *religious*. Furthermore, for medieval Christians religion was not an institution separable from other spheres, like politics, for even matters of civil government were understood to be directed towards theological ends. As Cavanaugh puts it, 'medieval Christendom was a theopolitical whole … the end of *religio* was inseparable from the end of politics,' which was ordered by the ultimate end of human life: 'the enjoyment of God.'[10] Therefore, the medieval meaning of religion is as foreign to our modern understanding as the ancient *religio*.

Indeed, the modern concept of religion is so different from its ancient and medieval antecedents that Cavanaugh argues it was *invented* in the modern West. That is, the modern meaning appeared after changes in the distribution of authority and power in the middle ages that allowed religion to refer to a realm distinct from the secular.[11] Although there are etymological

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[8] Thus Roman intellectuals like Cicero could practice *religio* without believing in the gods. Cavanaugh here draws on Wilfred Cantwell Smith's *The Meaning and End of Religion*.

[9] Augustine, *Concerning the City of God Against the Pagans*, trans. Henry Bettenson (Harmondsworth, England: Penguin Books, 1972), X.I (373).

[10] Ibid., *The Myth of Religious Violence*, 68.

[11] Ibid., 82. In other words, Cavanaugh's work forms the needed counterpart to the recent genealogies of the secular offered by John Milbank and Charles Taylor. If 'once, there was no secular,' then it logically follows that there was once no religion either. (John Milbank, *Theology and Social Theory: Beyond Secular Reason* (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1990), 1.)

similarities between modern religion and ancient *religio*, or between religion in modern usage and in 15th century England, the similar terms disguise a radically altered configuration of power.

Cavanaugh highlights John Locke as a key innovator in the spread of this idea of religion. First, through the Reformation the meaning of religion began to shift from a bodily discipline practiced by *some* to an institution concerned with a universal interior impulse. In turn, this shift allowed Locke to argue that religion is primarily private, and should therefore be free from government regulation and enforcement. Yet although Locke thought he was simply stating the timeless meaning of religion, Cavanaugh claims he and other modern thinkers were helping popularize religion as something distinct from civil government and public society.[12] Second, Cavanaugh suggests this innovation was needed to justify the newfound authority of the nation-state. Previously, civil authority was – at least in theory – an arm of the church; now, the church would be subject to the state's authority in every area except religion, understood as a voluntary matter of individual belief. This novel arrangement has since become so normative that we deride medieval Christians and modern Muslims for failing to separate religion from politics, forgetting that we ourselves recently invented the distinction.

Cavanaugh goes on to trace the expansion of the Western concept of religion to non-Western cultures through European colonization. Hinduism, Buddhism, Shintoism, and Confucianism all become religions in the 19th century through a complex mix of pro- and anti-Western pressures, usually to the detriment of the native, non-Christian culture.[13] Cavanaugh then concludes that to understand religion we must ask who defines it, and for what purpose.[14]

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[12] Ibid., 83.

[13] Ibid., 86-99.

[14] Ibid., 119. This concern with context marks Cavanaugh as having a 'constructivist' view of religion, as he clarifies in his response to a review symposium on *Myth*. See William T. Cavanaugh, "Spaces of Recognition: A Reply to My Interlocutors," *Pro Ecclesia* 20, no. 4 (Fall 2011): 359–360.

That is, if the definition of religion in different contexts arises from different configurations of power, then how a society defines religion says more about the society than about religion in general.

Now, Cavanaugh's deconstruction of the myth of religious violence may initially appear distant from his work in ecclesiology, but it carries implications for the relationship between religion and politics. Typically, the violent potential of religion is used to justify state restrictions on religious practice, especially when it threatens national cohesion. Cavanaugh gives examples of such rhetoric in U.S. Supreme Court rulings. None of the cases offer an explicit definition of religion, but Cavanaugh sees repeated appeals to an implicit distinction between religion and patriotism that favours the latter, even when the word 'god' is invoked in patriotic ceremonies. This makes sense, Cavanaugh argues, because 'religion – or more precisely, religion in public – is what the liberal nation-state saves us from.'[15] Now, Cavanaugh does not want to dismantle the separation of church and state. Rather, he objects to the radical dichotomy between private religion and public patriotism, which encourages paranoia about religious engagement in public discourse while giving a free pass to the 'secular' religion of nationalism.

As we will see, Cavanaugh's foray into the popular and academic study of religion is consistent with his broader project of critiquing the modern social imagination that segregates the church and Christianity to a sphere of society labelled as religious. This does not mean Cavanaugh is being disingenuous in advertising his book as religion-neutral. Clearly Islam would also benefit from reduced Western paranoia about mixing religion and politics, and Cavanaugh appears to be sincere when he condemns the use of the myth of religious violence to justify violence against Muslims and Muslim countries. Nevertheless, it is difficult to ignore the

[15] Ibid., 192.

possible benefits of Cavanaugh's arguments for Christian witness and ecclesiology, and on this basis it is clear *The Myth of Religious Violence* implicitly advances a concern to enable increased participation in public life by the *church*, not just religion in general.[16]

**1.2 William Cavanaugh's Political Theology**

Increasing the participation of the church in public life is a key emphasis of Cavanaugh's work in political theology. In *Migrations of the Holy,* Cavanaugh critiques what he calls politically *indirect* ecclesiologies, against which he advocates politically *direct* ecclesiologies that reject the privatization of the church. In politically indirect ecclesiologies, the church's influence is indirect in two senses: the church influences the state only through the activities of Christian citizens, and its theology is understood to need translation into a 'more publicly accessible form of discourse' to influence society.[17] For Cavanaugh, indirect ecclesiologies like those offered by Jacques Maritain, John Courtney Murray, and Reinhold Niebuhr refuse to recognize the political nature of the church, accepting the modern myth that religion is inherently violent and best kept private, subservient to the properly public and unifying politics of the nation-state. Cavanaugh insists Christians cannot acquiesce to such an apolitical understanding of the church, for they understand salvation as 'a fully public event that unfolds in [history] before the watching eyes of the nations.'[18]

Therefore, Cavanaugh turns to the more direct political ecclesiologies of Oliver O'Donovan and Stanley Hauerwas. O'Donovan's generous account of Christendom may be

[16] The almost entirely critical force of his argument in *Myth* would be rather quixotic if Cavanaugh did not have *any* positive agenda for 'religion.' In his review of *Myth*, Vincent Lloyd argues that Cavanaugh's vocation as a theologian, his other works, and his affinities with Radical Orthodoxy suggest his unofficial purpose is to present a genealogy 'that serves to make plausible the Christian *mythos*.' (Vincent Lloyd, "Violence: Religious, Theological, Ontological," *Theory, Culture, and Society* 28, no. 5 (2011): 153.) Criticizing the myth of religious violence serves this goal by making the *mythos* of the nation-state seem arbitrary.

[17] William T. Cavanaugh, *Migrations of the Holy: God, State, and the Political Meaning of the Church* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2011), 132.

[18] Ibid., 124.

scandalous to modern sensibilities, but Cavanaugh appreciates how O'Donovan makes Christendom *explicable* by arguing fourth century Christians 'did not simply become drunk with power,' but believed God was bringing the earthly powers under his reign – as prophesied and anticipated in the Old Testament and fulfilled in Christ.[19] Like O'Donovan, Cavanaugh does not see Christendom as the fall of the church from its prior state of spiritual purity. Indeed, he suggests that it would have been irresponsible for bishops to abandon their flock amid the chaos that followed the collapse of the Roman Empire.

At the same time, Cavanaugh welcomes the freeing of the church from Christendom, and is cautious about O'Donovan's emphasis on 'biblical images of rule.'[20] Therefore, Cavanaugh highlights Stanley Hauerwas's view of the church as a contrast model to the state. According to Cavanaugh, in such a model the church embodies a different politics, one that is marked by weakness, not violence. Of course, critics of Hauerwas often complain his politics is sectarian, but Cavanaugh makes a telling point about this accusation of sectarianism: it assumes the state is catholic. Originally, a sect was a group of Christians who rejected the authority of the wider church; but in contemporary use, a sect is any 'group whose practices put it at odds with the dominant culture and political elites of the nation-state.'[21] Why is sectarianism a concern? Because the state is understood to be the truly universal body that carries the meaning of history. Therefore, the accusation of sectarianism reveals an implicit captivity to the dominant social imagination of modernity, where only the state is universal and the church, religion, and even God are reduced to subservient roles.

[19] Ibid., 128. His italics.

[20] Ibid., 138.

[21] Ibid., 139.

Cavanaugh's concern to overcome this enfeebling imagination continues in his constructive ecclesiology. First, he suggests we consider the state as a liturgy, or *performance*, in civil society. Cavanaugh acknowledges the idea of national liturgies sounds offensive to modern ears, but he wants to recover the original meaning of *leitourgia* as any corporate, public work, including shared national rituals. As examples, he highlights how Americans are taught a national catechesis that includes reciting a creed, the Pledge of Allegiance; celebrating feast days of Independence, Memorial, and Thanksgiving; singing hymns like the Star Spangled Banner at public events; and respecting the American Flag. The last is the most telling, for there are regular calls for an amendment against desecrating the flag, which implies that the flag is a sacred object.[22] As Cavanaugh explains, 'American civil religion can never acknowledge that it is in fact a religion: to do so would be to invite charges of idolatry.'[23] Still, in light of the willingness of most Americans, Christians included, to sacrifice their bodies for their country, the cognitive separation between civil religion and real religion is perhaps a distinction without a difference. National rituals are not innocuously secular, but the functional equivalent of a religion, one that demands adherents be ready to fight and kill for its sake, and remember the glorious dead for making the ultimate sacrifice on our behalf.

Next, Cavanaugh contrasts national liturgies with an explicitly dramatic analogy for the church. After presenting Augustine's two cities as two dramatic performances, Cavanaugh illustrates the analogy with Richard Strauss's opera *Ariadne auf Naxos.* In the opera, the scripted story of Ariadne collides with an improvised comedy when both are performed simultaneously

[22] Consider Chief Justice Rehnquist's strident dissent to *Texas v. Johnson*, 491 U.S. 397 (1989): 'The flag is not simply another "idea" or "point of view" competing for recognition in the marketplace of ideas. Millions and millions of Americans regard it with an almost mystical reverence regardless of what sort of social, political, or philosophical beliefs they may have.' (429)

[23] Cavanaugh, *Migrations of the Holy*, 119.

on the same stage. This alters the plot: instead of awaiting death after she is abandoned by her lover, Ariadne falls in love with the new character of Bacchus, changing the original tragic ending to a happy one. Similarly, Cavanaugh argues 'the earthly city and the city of God are two intermingled performances, one a tragedy, the other a comedy.'[24] Here also, both performances take place simultaneously on one stage – the world – and the church takes on the role of the improvisational comedy troupe interrupting the violent tragedy of the nation-state. The church is therefore not separate from the world, concerned only with private spiritual matters, but a practiced group that 'joins with others to perform the city of God.'[25] Likewise, the city of God is not restricted to the space of the church, but is made visible in the world for all to see.

This analogy of the church as performing (and improvising) the story of the city of God overcomes a primary impediment to the church's public witness: its conception as a space. As Cavanaugh acknowledges, it is difficult to avoid conceiving of the church and state without lapsing into spatial metaphors for their relationship. To modern Westerners, thinking of the church as one part of society fits with the inclination to view religion and/or spirituality as one part of human life. However, Cavanaugh's illustration of *Ariadne auf Naxos* changes the context of these parts from a spatial metaphor to a dramatic one. The church is not a part *of* society; rather, it has a part to play *in* society, and not as a bit character, but in a major role. Furthermore, this play is not directed by the forces of history, inexorably marching towards progress (or destruction), but has already been placed within the larger story of redemption in Christ. Therefore, the church is not limited to fighting with the state over how much space, or power, it needs or deserves. Instead, it is free to improvise a variety of responses to the story being told by the nation-state (and others).

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[24] Ibid., 64.

[25] Ibid., 66.

## 2.0 Cavanaugh and Lévinas in Dialogue

In response to Michael's Buttrey's assessment of William Cavanaugh's political theology, I question Cavanaugh's apparent Christian triumphalism, and offer an alternative political theology grounded in the philosophy of Emmanuel Lévinas.[26] My critique is aimed primarily at Cavanaugh's Augustinian ecclesiology and the political theology that follows. Cavanaugh suggests that the Church proclaims a counter-voice and an alternative politic to the state. In contrast to the inherent violence of a state liturgy rooted in power-over the other, the Church proclaims a liturgy characterized by weakness and vulnerability. As such, there exists a stark contrast between the goodness of the liturgy of Jesus, marked by the Eucharist, love, and weakness, and the liturgy of Mars, marked by the state's demands for allegiance, and peace-through-violence. Thus, the world appears for Cavanaugh to operate according to a certain reading of Augustinian thinking that juxtaposes the City of God with the earthly city.

### 2.1 Lévinas' Ethics as First Philosophy and Theology

A Lévinasian response to Cavanaugh's ecclesiology rests in his peculiar understanding of ethics as responsibility for the other, irreducible to any subjective horizon. Face-to-face, affective encounters with the corporeal frailty of another are for Lévinas the fundamental optics for all subsequent philosophical, theological, and juridical reflection. Such encounters bestow responsibility on the subject and occur within an-archic, affective time prior to cognitive representation and normative conceptualization.[27] The matrix of human reflection then is always already confronted with responsibility for another who is irreducible a subjective horizon. This

[26] Lévinas' principal works include *Totality and Infinity: An Essay on Exteriority* (Pittsburgh: Duquesne University Press, 1969), and *Otherwise than Being or Beyond Essence*, trans. Alphonso Lingis (Pittsburgh, PA: Duqusene University Press, 1998).

[27] On anarchy and temporality, see "Humanism and An-Archy" in *Collected Philosophical Papers*, trans. Alphonso Lingis (The Hague-Boston: Martinus Nijhoff, 1987), 127-139; "Diachrony and Representation" in *Time and the Other and Additional Essays*, trans. Richard A. Cohen (Pittsburgh, PA: Duquesne University Press, 1987), 97-120; *Otherwise than Being*, esp. 99-129.

Infinity of the other serves as a divine authority in making a subject responsible prior to any freedom of choice. Ethics then cannot equate to the calculation of one's interior processes, nor normalized into universals. Likewise, ethics cannot be translated into any institutionalized system, including political or religious ideologies. Ethics is rooted in particular relational encounters and takes the form of the unique responsibility demanded in face-to-face encounters. For Lévinas, this is the humanist basis of thinking and grounds philosophy, theology, and jurisprudence. While these types of reflections appeal to the Good encountered in the face-to-face, the concrete justice and goodness they offer is always ambiguous because it cannot account for the totality of corporeal frailty or absolutely eschew violence.[28]

The summons described by Lévinas comes to the subject with the height of Divine authority; "it is as if God spoke through the face."[29] The frailty of another is above the perceiving subject, positioned as the command of a corporeal existent that is inseparable from transcendent Divinity. The authority rests in a call to respect the exteriority of the other's speech concerning its own world so as to not reduce another's world to one's interiority. While such an event cannot be perfectly apprehended by a subject, it nonetheless witnesses a trace of Divinity within possibility of relationship, but still beyond comprehension, always overflowing what a subject might think concerning it.[30] It is not that the subject is ruled out as contributing to the encounter, but is prohibited from circumscribing the identity of another under the assumption that one's interior horizon is sufficient for understanding difference. The ethical emerges as the awakening

[28] While the ethical is a face-to-face summons to responsibility, the world is never simply you and I. There is always a third, a fourth, a fifth, etc. forcing the moral choices one makes to decide between a plurality of summons, and compare faces that are fundamentally incomparable. See e.g., *Totality and Infinity*, 212-215.

[29] Emmanuel Lévinas, Tamra Wright, Peter Hughes, and Alison Ainley, "The Paradox of Morality," in *The Provocation of Levinas: Rethinking the Other*, ed. Robert Bernasconi, and David Wood (London: Routledge, 1988), 169.

[30] Cf. René Descartes' "Third Meditation," in *Meditations on First Philosophy,* Trans. Donald A. Cress (Indianapolis, IN: Hackett Publishing, 1993), 24-35.

of a subject to responsibility without recourse to *a priori* principles and beyond one's power to contain the Good within a totality. In the affective, an-archic event of ethics, the other reveals an Infinity that refuses reductionism. This is the humanistic foundation for Lévinas' philosophy, and serves as the primordial event prior to and grounding all human thinking. The irreducible singularity of such encounters, manifest within an infinite plurality of forms, demands pluralist responses dependent on manifest needs. As such, no idealist system, political, religious or otherwise, is adequate to serve as a normative ethical matrix.

**2.2 Cavanaugh's Ecclesiology and Lévinas' Ethics**

Within this wider framework, I briefly explore some concerns with Cavanaugh's political theology, based on his ecclesiology, the apparent triumphalism of his positions, and the ethics outlined in the works of Lévinas. As seen above, Cavanaugh describes the Christian church as Augustine's City of God, a liturgy of goodness and light, whereas the non-Christian state contrasts as the earthly city, a liturgy of banality and violence. There is thus a radical juxtaposition of competing moral values in each city that have little, if anything, to add to one another, the City of God alone being good and the earthly city being morally bankrupt. Based on Lévinas' ethics, I am left questioning whether the Church and state truly exist in such a starkly contrasting relationship. Following Lévinas, I suggest a deeper nuancing of the relationship between the Church, other faith traditions, the state, and ethics.

It seems that morality is more complex than Cavanaugh's position allows and that the moral compass of both church and state could be shown to point in wildly different directions at various times and in various embodiments. While the nation-state cannot be seen as a paragon of moral virtue based on any reading of the Christian narrative, neither can it be seen, as morally bankrupt, as if grace, goodness, mercy, and compassion were the sole possession of Christianity.

What are we to make, e.g., when the cries of the citizens of a nation lead to state sponsored support of political change that appears just, and which is often met with varying responses from a church that is in no way politically unified. One option, found in Augustine's City of God, would be to suggest that the contrasting cities are not simply reduced to earthly institutions, and that the good and the banal are mixed together in both Church and state.[31] Institutions, lacking personhood, would be morally ambiguous and we might find the good and the bad within both, and as such goodness and banality enacted within both. Yet, such a reading still strictly associates morality with Christianity, maintaining the dualism of a holy Church and a banal world.

While supporting an opposition to the violence of the state, my fear is that this reading as a whole is either a caricature of the church and the world, or that Cavanaugh's judgment of tradition is restricted to his own interior experience of the singular framework that he associates with goodness. The apparent Christian triumphalism here, according to Lévinas, ignores the humanist foundation of ethics and reduces the other to the same, failing to dignify what is beyond the Christian tradition. Can the state be so easily reduced to the threat of an evil specter, judged apart from exteriority by an *a priori* interiority that disqualifies the other as capable of mercy, compassion, and justice? Similarly, how exactly is the Church the singular paragon of the good in the world, given its history? The church is hardly a purely power-oppositional system that embraces the weak, the poor, and the oppressed. And even if we follow Augustine and allow for a mixture of the good and the banal within Earth's institutions, is not the affirmation of the Church's superior goodness violence against the other by denying the humanist foundation of ethics? Cavanaugh's twin city imagery poses two—and only two—competing liturgies rather

[31] See e.g., *The City of God*, XVIII, 49; XIX, 17.

than a world full of different dynamic voices nuanced with complex particularities. Could not the Mosque and the Synagogue defiantly sing an alternate liturgy in contrast to the worship of Mars?

Following Lévinas, I would suggest that a politic of weakness as advocated above would assume a more humble approach to difference. In such a model, the voices of other subjects would open one up to being a part of a wider community that eschewed a dualist political and ethical normativity. It would instead allow for a greater degree of partnership amongst difference and not reduce shared convictions for the Good to the framework of one's own tradition. It would even refuse to judge those who embrace the state, or the state itself apart from an appeal to its own particularity, which is invariably more complex than presented above. The Christian voice would be one voice amongst the wider human community capable of a goodness expressed in an infinite plurality of forms. This is not to say that there are no normative standards for ethics and politics, but it would resist a dualist conception of frameworks that *a priori* denigrates other voices in asserting they have nothing to offer the world because they do not fall into one specific conceptual framework. There would be nothing against Cavanaugh's 'politically direct ecclesiology' in this regard, but following Lévinas suggests that one's ecclesiology should partner with society, recognizing no one group, system, or ideology has a monopoly on holiness, love, and mercy. As such, a pluralist model could embrace the ethos of a tradition by recognizing the universality of grace in the world, and the value of other voices without asserting any dominant superiority. Ethics is a human inheritance, and not the possession of the Church or something that can be called, at its root, Christian. Ethics is the ground of human subjectivity, giving rise to various philosophical, theological, and political frameworks, all of which are ambiguous in performing the Good demanded by the Other.

The ambiguity of idealist systems and ideologies, religious, political or otherwise, demands humility rather than triumphalism one because all action taken toward justice involves a degree of violence. For Lévinas, justice opens from ethics, but always takes a particular, conceptual shape and thus betrays its ideal. Justice and consequent goodness amounts to the concrete calculation of the an-archic, affective event of ethics. Yet, subjects or societies aiming to carry responsibility forward are unable to apprehend the Infinity of others, and account for the totality of society. As the ethical unfolds into justice and goodness, there is never simply you and I, but you and I, and a third, a fourth, a fifth, toward infinity. We exist in a matrix wherein the embrace of one may also be the denial of another. Justice, opening from the ethical but faced with the totality of society with pluralistic needs, always betrays even the best intentions to embrace another.[32] While this does not rule out the possibility of goodness manifest in justice, what goodness there is in the world comes at the price of a betrayal, and suggests the impossibility of the ethical manifest in the political, regardless of who is in charge. As such, it would be wise to eschew triumphalism and assertions of the superiority of any idealist system or ideology, as even the best among human frameworks emerges as paradox and betrayal of another.

**2.3 Conclusion**

While questioning the ability of any political framework to encompass ethics in any absolute form, we cannot allow such a position to paralyze existence. At a certain point, we must calculate and make choices on how our world should look, be it at the price of a betrayal. As such, regardless of the differences in the technicalities of thought, in many ways Lévinas and Cavanaugh would stand together against the violence of liturgies devoted to Mars, whenever he

[32] See Emmanuel Lévinas, *Otherwise than Being*, 23-59.

leads the state into the utterly banal abuses of war and economic exploitation. A Christ centered ecclesiology should eschew egregious violence in favor of a different ethos, even if this betrays an inescapable violence arising in comparing what is incomparable. And yet, I would suggest that the Christian Church make room for other voices rooted in a humanist ethic, including those embracing the liberal democracy of our own nation-states who seek to eschew violence in the midst of a world that will never be Good and never apprehend God, but where goodness is nevertheless a possibility. The kingdom of God opens up out of a more basic human inheritance that is and will always be prior to and beyond the Church.

**3. Cavanaugh and Lonergan in Dialogue**[33]

William T. Cavanaugh's work is dedicated to recovering the theopolitical imagination of the Christian community in contemporary liberal democratic contexts. In what follows I will augment and assess Michael Buttrey's summary of the relationship between two aspects of Cavanaugh's work, the critical or genealogical and the constructive or ecclesiological. My remarks proceed in three main stages. First, I distinguish between two interrelated features subject to deconstruction in Cavanaugh's account of modernity: (a) the relationship between religion and politics or between religion and the secular;[34] and (b) the relationship between radical individualism and the attendant prioritization of market ideology.[35] Second, I highlight two ways in which Lonergan and Cavanaugh's critique of modernity overlaps. Third, in spite of this agreement, I argue that Cavanaugh's genealogical propensities lead, in the limit case, to

[33] I want to thank Michael Buttrey for encouraging Matthew and myself to read Cavanaugh's work. In preparation I worked through three of Cavanaugh's major works: *Theopolitical Imagination* (London: T & T Clark, 2002); *The Myth of Religious Violence*; and *Migrations of the Holy*.

[34] This is the main focus of Cavanaugh's *The Myth of Religious Violence*.

[35] This connection is articulated in various parts of all three works but most especially in *Theopolitical Imagination*.

anthropological and soteriological positions that are in tension with Catholic teaching on natural law and the universality of God's grace.

### 3.1 Cavanaugh's Genealogical Deconstruction of Modernity

The first feature of modernity Cavanaugh deconstructs is the Enlightenment-inspired distinction between politics and religion and the related claim that religious believers are intrinsically 'absolutist,' 'divisive,' and 'irrational.'[36] These characteristics contribute to violence, expressed historically in the sixteenth and seventeenth century Wars of Religion.[37] In response, Enlightenment authors and their contemporary supporters call for the differentiation of religion from politics.[38] In contrast with premodern religion, the establishment of a purportedly rational and independent secular realm breeds the capacity to recognize and respect a wide diversity of conceptions of human fulfillment. The resulting privatization of religion is further facilitated by the early modern discovery of religion's essential core, an interior, predominantly affective disposition 'removed from its particular ecclesial context'[39] that finds expression in certain beliefs that remain separable from politics and economics.[40]

In all of his work, Cavanaugh argues to a greater or lesser extent that the modern religion-secular distinction presupposes an individualist anthropology that finds expression in the work of authors such as Hobbes, Locke and Rousseau.[41] Each of these authors characterize the subject that inhabits the state of nature as radically asocial and prone to competition for power

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[36] Cavanaugh, *Myth*, 17-18.

[37] See for example: Cavanaugh, *Myth*, ch. 3; and *Theopolitical Imagination*, ch. 1. See also William T. Cavanaugh, "The City: Beyond Secular Parodies," in *Radical Orthodoxy: A New Theology*, eds. John Milbank, Catherine Pickstock, and Graham Ward (New York: Routledge, 1999), 182-200.

[38] See for example: Cavanaugh, *Theopolitical*, 31-42; and *Myth*, ch. 2.

[39] Cavanaugh, *Theopolitical*, 33, n.56.

[40] This is the main argument of *Myth*, ch. 2. See especially 69-85.

[41] See for example: Cavanaugh, "The City," 186-190; *Theopolitical*, 15-20, 43-46; Cavanaugh, *Myth*, 80, n.117; Cavanaugh, "'Killing for the Telephone Company': Why the Nation-State is Not the Keeper of the Common Good," in *Migrations* 19-24. In *Theopolitical*, 15-20.

and property.[42] This conception of the subject is complemented by a truncated form of soteriology that associates salvation with the alleviation of self-interested and sectarian forms of violence made possible by the establishment via contract of civil governance.[43] By reducing the common good to collectivized self-interest, liberal societies prioritize market ideology and marginalize alternative visions of the human good.[44]

Drawing on post-modern philosophy, Cavanaugh develops a genealogical reading of modernity that exposes the contingency of the religion-secular distinction and its related individualist anthropology. More specifically, Cavanaugh regards both features as ideologically-motivated cover stories created to support the legitimation of the modern nation-state, self-interested acquisitiveness, and the marginalization of religion.[45] This movement results in what Cavanaugh calls the 'migration of the holy' from the 'international church' to the twin-poles of the nation-state and the market.[46] According to Cavanaugh, far from representing the progressive unfolding of Enlightenment rationality and tolerance, this transfer of allegiance results in the establishment of distorted forms of religious commitment. The quiet triumph of American 'civil religion' and market ideology provides an alternative centre of gravity for a post-Christian world that contributes, in an American context, to forms of Messianic 'exceptionalism.'[47] The latter

[42] See especially, Cavanaugh, "The City," 186-190; and *Theopolitical*, 15-20. See also Cavanaugh, *Myth*, 124-130.

[43] Ibid.

[44] Cavanaugh, "'Killing,'" 23-24. Cavanaugh, *Theopolitical*, 43-46, 73-80.

[45] See for example, Cavanaugh, *Myth*, 4, 7, 9-10, 120-121, 179.

[46] Cavanaugh, *Myth*, 10-11.

[47] Cavanaugh, "Messianic Nation: A Christian Theological Critique of American Exceptionalism," in *Migrations*, 88-108. Cavanaugh examines the reality of 'civil religion' in *Myth*, 110, 113-120. See also Cavanaugh, "The Liturgies of Church and State," in *Migrations*, 115-122. For the notion of market ideology as 'religion' see: *Myth*, 22, 58, 107-109; and *Theopolitical*, 73-80.

sanctions state violence in support of efforts to spread democracy and capitalism around the globe.[48]

### 3.2 Overlapping Concerns: Cavanaugh and Lonergan

Cavanaugh's critique of modernity ought to be commended on two fronts. First, Cavanaugh is correct that the religion-secular distinction has been and continues to be used to inappropriately marginalize religious voices in the public sphere. Cavanaugh's deconstruction of rigid forms of secularism could reorient public discourse in ways that better respect historical consciousness or what Canadian philosopher and theologian Bernard Lonergan regards as an 'empirical' notion of culture.[49] Second, Cavanaugh's criticism of the dominance of market ideology is perceptive and mirrors what Lonergan calls the 'general bias of common sense.'[50] Hobbes, Locke, and their contemporary neoliberal successors all tend to view the individual as structured by a combination of spontaneous egoism and instrumental reason, the confluence of which counsels the establishment of a political community capable of protecting mutual self-interest.[51] General bias is a truncation of the human good that arises when self-interested distortions of practical intelligence bar the expression of cultural meanings and values capable of passing critical judgment on individual desires and the social orders that serve them.[52] From this perspective, culture loses its independence and instead comes to serve as a theoretical

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[48] Cavanaugh, *Myth*, ch. 4.

[49] See Bernard Lonergan, "The Human Good as Object: Differentials and Integration," in *Topics in Education***,** ed. Robert M. Doran and Frederick E. Crowe (Toronto: Univ. of Toronto Press, 2000), 76-78. Bernard Lonergan, "Natural Right and Historical Mindedness," in *A Third Collection: Papers by Bernard J.F. Lonergan S.J*, ed. Frederick E. Crowe (New York: Paulist Press, 1985), 170-171.

[50] Bernard Lonergan, *Insight: A Study of Human Understanding* (Toronto: Univ. of Toronto Press, 1992), 250-251, 253-257, 262.

[51] Bernard Lonergan, "Human Good as Object: Invariant Structure," *Topics in Education*, 42, 45-47.

[52] See Cavanaugh, *Theopolitical*, 73-80.

rationalization for the modern state's distorted views of the subject and society.[53] Against this, Cavanaugh's deconstruction of the modern state's purportedly rational prioritization of economic concerns serves, at least potentially, to reorient public discourse to include a variety of alternative cultural frameworks.

### 3.3 Anthropological and Soteriological Tensions in Cavanaugh: A Lonerganian Reading

At the same time, there are lingering tensions in Cavanaugh's work that distinguish his response to the contemporary situation from Lonergan's. More specifically, I contend that despite his attempts to differentiate pejorative from benign objectifications of the norms implicit in modern ethical and political practice, Cavanaugh tends to equate modernity in general with its aberrational expression. By contrast, Lonergan is concerned to differentiate modernity's structural achievements from their distortions, a challenge more in keeping with Vatican II's call for *aggiornamento*. There are two issues at stake in this potential rehabilitation, issues roughly correlative with what the Thomist tradition regards as nature and grace. In what follows I point out the tension that exists in Cavanaugh's thought concerning both notions, his default tendency to side with Christian particularity, and then Lonergan's alternative.

First, there exists a tension in Cavanaugh's response to the rise of constitutional democracy. On the one hand, Cavanaugh continually affirms the value of the separation of church and state.[54] On the other hand, Cavanaugh's tendency to conceive alternative cultural-linguistic frameworks as distinctive religions, theologies or mythologies leaves little space for a principled commitment to democratic norms that would distinguish his position from a mere *modus vivendi*.[55] Any attempt to conceive of a normative distinction between politics and

[53] Lonergan, *Insight*, 255-257, 262. Lonergan, "Differentials," 65.

[54] See for example: Cavanaugh, *Myth*, 14, 121, 179, 192.

[55] The term *modus vivendi* is taken from John Rawls' *Political Liberalism* (New York: Columbia Univ. Press, 2005).

religion or between philosophy and theology appears to stand prone to genealogical deconstruction. In other words, Cavanaugh seems committed to evacuating the secular or transcultural side of this distinction entirely while shifting all conceptual frameworks to the status of contingent 'religions.' This sort of critique underlies Cavanaugh's rejection of politically 'indirect ecclesiologies' that appeal to some prior consensus, such as natural law, capable of providing a thin conception of the good shared-in-common by members of communities who hold alternative thick commitments.[56] What Cavanaugh is left with is the particularity of the Christian community,[57] a particularity that stands in tension with the particularity of other traditions. This conclusion is no doubt in keeping with Cavanaugh's efforts to widen discourse in the public sphere but it appears to come at the price of criteria capable of governing both intra- and inter-tradition discourse.

For Lonergan, the deconstruction of pejorative variations of the religion-secular distinction that center on the myths of religious violence and Enlightenment rationality does not lead to the conclusion that all variations of this distinction are philosophically indefensible. According to Lonergan, the rise of historical consciousness challenges Christians to discover transcultural norms that govern intra- and inter-tradition dialogue and debate that respect rather than deny the historicity of human meaning. The key to redrawing the religion-secular distinction from this perspective lies in distinguishing the cultural-linguistic determinations constitutive of any particular tradition from the transcendental source and norm of all concepts, judgments and their ongoing revision.[58] In other words, Lonergan remains willing to distinguish the variety of *a posteriori* horizons correlative with the conceptual frameworks or 'religions' that Cavanaugh so

[56] See ch. 2, "The Myth of Civil Society as Free Space," in *Theopolitical Imagination*. Cavanaugh, "The Church as Political," in *Migrations*, 131-136.

[57] This fact is perhaps most clear in *Theopolitical Imagination*, 43-52.

[58] Bernard Lonergan, *Method in Theology* (Toronto: Univ. of Toronto Press, 1972), 11.

strongly affirms from the subject's *a priori* basic horizon constituted by her transcendental desire for intelligibility, reality and value. In response to the contemporary crisis of meaning that Cavanaugh's deconstruction of distorted forms of transculturality helps expose, Lonergan commends a process of cognitive and existential self-appropriation whereby the developing subject objectifies, verifies and takes open-eyed control of her conscious intentional striving.[59] It is my contention that the heuristic account of human fulfillment correlative with the subject's *a priori* basic horizon provides a historically-conscious account of natural law, a thin conception of the good implicit in democratic reason-exchange. Although Christians may continue to appeal to their thick commitments in this reconstituted public sphere, since the truth of such historical claims is never more than at best highly probable, no particular account of human fulfillment may supersede the heuristic account. In this way, Lonergan's transposed notion of natural law provides an alternative anthropological foundation for democratic practice that is compatible with both pluralism and Christian commitment.

The second tension that is present in Cavanaugh's work centers on the presence and reality of sanctifying grace. On the one hand, Cavanaugh is at pains to affirm Vatican II's stance on the universal offer of God's grace.[60] At the same time, Cavanaugh holds two positions that would appear to contradict this affirmation. First, Cavanaugh quite explicitly denies the existence of a transcultural inner subjective experience that Wilfred Cantwell Smith labels 'faith.'[61] In my judgment, in order to speak about salvation as correlative with something more than simply nominal membership in the Body of Christ one needs to be able to identify the transcultural dimensions of grace within human consciousness and history. Second, Cavanaugh tends to

[59] Lonergan, *Method*, 14-18, 38, 83, 240.

[60] See for example: "The Sinfulness and Visibility of the Church: A Christological Exploration," in *Migrations*, 152; and Cavanaugh, "From One City to Two: Christian Reimagining of Political Space," in *Migrations*, 66.

[61] Cavanaugh, *Myth*, 101-102.

dichotomize the relationship between liberal democracy and the church in a way that correlates the former with historical decline and the latter with redemption.[62] This Augustinian-tinged church-world dualism tends to restrict the availability of Christian salvation to those who participate in the 'Eucharistic counter-politics'[63] of the visible Christian communion. For Lonergan, however, sanctifying grace is a theoretical term that points to the experience of unrestricted being-in-love, a datum of consciousness offered to all human beings that incipiently fulfills and strengthens the subject's transcendental desire for value.[64] Religious experience, far from being created by language-use, is a pre-verbal reality that is only subsequently interpreted by diverse religious traditions. The corresponding process of religious self-appropriation moves from *a posteriori* interpretations of religious love to the recognition that religious experience is a transcultural phenomenon. Since the historically-conditioned interpretations of the reality encountered in the experience of religious love are at best highly probable, Lonergan's transposition of sanctifying grace counsels religious freedom and mutual respect between adherents of different faiths.

**3.4 Conclusion**

Although Lonergan shares many of Cavanaugh's concerns, I have contended that there are tensions in Cavanaugh's work whose resolution may in fact distance his response to modernity from Lonergan's. On my reading of Cavanaugh, the deconstruction of the myth of secular rationality leads to the rejection of all transcultural norms, a move that reduces all particular conceptual frameworks to the status of 'religions.' In a similar way, Cavanaugh's tendency to read all attempts to identify the essence of religion as inextricably bound up with the

[62] This is most apparent in *Theopolitical Imagination*, 46-52.

[63] Ibid.

[64] Lonergan, *Method*, 106-107

modern project's marginalization of religion leads, in the limit, to a church-world dualism that appears incapable of accounting for the universality of grace. In both cases one finds a particularism that appears to be the product of Cavanaugh's genealogical proclivities. In response I introduced Lonergan's rehabilitation of the modern turn to the subject in general and his transpositions of nature and grace in particular. The former provides foundations for democratic practice that avoid Cavanaugh's critique. The latter provides the basis for speaking about salvation outside of the visible Christian communion in an intelligible way.

**4. Response**

I'm delighted to have the opportunity to read and respond to Matthew Eaton and Nicholas Olkovich's excellent critiques of Cavanaugh. The Lévinasian and Lonerganian criticisms they put forward are thoughtful, serious, and very different from each other, making it difficult for me address both in a brief response. Therefore, in this final section I will primarily attempt to address Eaton's charge of triumphalism, and conclude with a few questions for Olkovich's concerns about Cavanaugh.

Cavanaugh himself is aware of the charge of triumphalism, and attempts to address it by giving a constructive proposal for how we can simultaneously affirm the witness and sinfulness of the church. He does this by drawing on Chalcedonian Christology and emphasizing the analogy between Christology and ecclesiology. As he explains, the council of Chalcedon affirmed the biblical theme that Christ became sin, a humiliation for God, but one freely assumed in order to save humanity. Or as Cavanaugh puts it, 'in the drama of salvation sin does not simply obscure the visibility of the divine glory, but helps make it manifest in the form of the

humiliated God.'[65] Therefore, in Chalcedon Cavanaugh finds a refusal to protect Christ from sin, an insight he hopes to adopt for ecclesiology.

At the same time, Cavanaugh recognizes that there is not a one-to-one relationship between Christology and ecclesiology. In his words, the church is 'Christ's body, not his divinity' and it 'plays the part of sinful humanity' in the ongoing drama of sin and salvation.[66] Because the drama is ultimately a comedy, the church lives in hope; yet as a pilgrim people, on the road, the church cannot escape its sinfulness. Cavanaugh integrates these diverse tensions by placing penitence at the core of the church. Specifically, he argues that instead of sin negating the holiness of the church, 'The holiness of the church is visible in its very repentance for its sin. The church is visibly holy not because it is pure, but precisely because it shows to the world what sin looks like.'[67] In other words, Cavanaugh's response to the charge of triumphalism is that the church should indeed be a model for the world, but a model of *repentance*, not purity. Only in the recognition and repentance of sin can the church maintain its visibility alongside its sinfulness and witness to a world that does not know sin, or God.

Now, even with Cavanaugh's insistence that the church is not pure, but sinful, I suspect Eaton is quite right to argue that Cavanaugh's ecclesiology is insufficiently pluralist for Lévinas' taste. However, I would contend that Cavanaugh's distinction between the nation-state and civil society, and his definition of the state and the church as liturgies or performances *within* civil society, supports a more dynamic understanding of the relationship between church and society than the stark polarization Eaton critiques. Overall, though, I share Eaton's sense that Cavanaugh

[65] Cavanaugh, *Migrations of the Holy*, 160-161.

[66] Ibid., 162. Cavanaugh's use of theatrical metaphors is clearly inspired by Balthasar.

[67] Ibid., 165.

and Lévinas have a common concern with the inherent violence of the modern nation-state, and would be allies in the project of deconstructing its myths and liturgies.

Indeed, some aspects of Cavanaugh's thought are perhaps surprisingly closer to that of Lévinas, a French continental philosopher, than those of Bernard Lonergan, a fellow Catholic theologian. Certainly Olkovich's summary of Cavanaugh's post-modern method and presuppositions is correct, and Olkovich may also be right that Cavanaugh's lack of interest in natural law or transcultural norms limits his ability to engage in democratic reason-exchange, although I'm not sure Cavanaugh would see this as a problem, given that he is attempting to undermine one of the founding myths of modern politics. Likely more worrying for Cavanaugh is the charge that he appears to contradict Vatican II's emphasis on the universal offer of God's grace by denying the existence of what Wilfred Cantwell Smith calls 'faith.' However, I note Cavanaugh understands himself to be defending Aquinas, *against* Smith, for associating '*religio* with both inner and outward expressions.'[68] Cavanaugh's appeal to Aquinas here suggests he is attempting to recover a premodern understanding of religion less reliant on experience alone, which I suspect may need a more in-depth examination before it can be compared to the more modern sensibilities of Vatican II and Bernard Lonergan. Still, I take Olkovich's point that Cavanaugh's presuppositions, methodology, and conclusions are in tension with some major strands of modern Catholic theology.

[68] Cavanaugh, *Myth*, 102.