



The Myth of Religious Violence: Secular Ideology and the Roots of Modern Conflict

William T. Cavanaugh

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The idea that religion has a dangerous tendency to promote violence is part of the conventional wisdom of Western societies, and it underlies many of our institutions and policies, from limits on the public role of religion to efforts to promote liberal democracy in the Middle East. William T. Cavanaugh challenges this conventional wisdom by examining how the twin categories of religion and the secular are constructed. A growing body of scholarly work explores how the category 'religion' has been constructed in the modern West and in colonial contexts according to specific configurations of political power. Cavanaugh draws on this scholarship to examine how timeless and transcultural categories of 'religion' and 'the secular' are used in arguments that religion causes violence. He argues three points: 1) There is no transhistorical and transcultural essence of religion. What counts as religious or secular in any given context is a function of political configurations of power; 2) Such a transhistorical and transcultural concept of religion as non-rational and prone to violence is one of the foundational legitimating myths of Western society; 3) This myth can be and is used to legitimate neo-colonial violence against non-Western others, particularly the Muslim world.

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