



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

By William T Cavanaugh

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## **The Myth of Religious Violence: Secular Ideology and the Roots of Modern Conflict** By William T Cavanaugh

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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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.

## **The Myth of Religious Violence: Secular Ideology and the Roots of Modern Conflict** By William T Cavanaugh **Bibliography**

- Sales Rank: #498753 in Books
- Published on: 2009-09-03
- Original language: English
- Number of items: 1
- Dimensions: 6.10" h x .90" w x 9.30" l, 1.32 pounds
- Binding: Hardcover
- 296 pages

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## Editorial Review

### Review

"Cavanaugh not only sets the bar of future scholarship higher but also avoids oversimplifications that can obstruct conflict resolution. Future scholarship on religious violence will inevitably need to interact with the theories laid out in this book." --*BYU Studies Quarterly*

"[A]n important book." --*Commonweal*

"Williams T. Cavanaugh's *Myth of Religious Violence* is a disciplined, detailed and painstakingly thorough book that sets out to debunk the all-too-pervasive liberal myth: that something called 'religion' is necessarily inclined to produce violence, especially left unchecked." --Leigh Edwards, Durham, North Carolina

"Cavanaugh not only exposes the myth for what it is, he provides details to show precisely how the myth is not grounded in reality." --*Christian Century*

"...an important and highly interesting work...enough to make one doubt the modern dogma of religious violence and be alert to its ideological function in the West." --James R. A. Merrick, University of Aberdeen

"The book is well-written, thoroughly documented, and clearly argued, and it should be of value both to generalists and to readers with particular interest in the topic." --Debra Erickson

"A detailed and carefully researched rebuttal of the idea that there is some essence or necessary function of religion that makes it a more consistent cause of violence than other worldviews, belief systems or ideologies. He effectively unveils the self-serving nature of secular liberal condescension toward religion." --*Modern Theology*

"Razor sharp and pertinent... Cavanaugh leaves us hard pressed to imagine how the notion of a privatized, internalized 'God of One's Own' could ever be part of the solution to a problem that it is responsible for inventing in the first place." --*Common Knowledge*

## About the Author

**William T Cavanova** is Senior Research Professor at DePaul University in Chicago.

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