



# The myth of Muslim violence: Theorizing religion in the war on terror

Ulrich Schmiedel 

Received: 28 October 2022 / Revised: 17 February 2023 / Accepted: 5 May 2023 / Published online: 12 June 2023  
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**Abstract** Both inside and outside the academy, identifications of Islam as a terrorist threat have gained traction during the on-going War on Terror. William Cavanaugh’s conceptualization and critique of what he calls “the myth of religious violence” claims to offer a critique of these identifications. This critique has been influential across a variety of disciplines. In this article, I assess both his more philosophical-critical and his more theological-constructive accounts of religion to argue that Cavanaugh’s myth is, essentially, apologetics. Cavanaugh’s apologetics for the church camouflages the differential treatment of religions during the War on Terror. If it has been about a myth at all, then the War on Terror has been about the myth of *Muslim* violence. Christianity past and present has condoned and contributed to this very myth. What is needed, then, is a conception and a critique of “religion” that, in contrast to Cavanaugh’s analysis, can account for the significance of Christianity for the differential treatment of religions in the public square, both descriptively and prescriptively.

**Keywords** 9/11 · Religion · Violence · Political theology · Myth of religious violence · War on terror

“Whether we bring our enemies to justice or bring justice to our enemies,” President George W. Bush proclaimed a few days after the attacks of 9/11, “justice will be done” (Bush 2001). In *Holy Terrors*, Bruce Lincoln compares the proclamations of Bush and Bin Laden in the aftermath of 9/11. “Both men constructed a Manichean struggle” (Lincoln 2002, p. 20). According to Lincoln, the dualism that characterized this struggle was symmetrical: Bush marshaled his religion against Bin Laden,

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✉ Ulrich Schmiedel  
School of Divinity, University of Edinburgh, Edinburgh, UK  
E-Mail: [ulrich.schmiedel@ed.ac.uk](mailto:ulrich.schmiedel@ed.ac.uk)

Bin Laden marshaled his religion against Bush. “When both sides experience their struggle in religious terms, the stage is set” (Lincoln 2002, p. 95). Yet the stage had been set long before Bush and Bin Laden stepped onto it.

When the War on Terror was declared, scholars of religion had been pointing to a return of religion to national and international politics for a while. Samuel P. Huntington’s “The Clash of Civilizations?” had been published at the end of the Cold War. Comparing class conflicts to civilizational conflicts, Huntington stressed the significance of religion for making and maintaining a civilization: “In class ... conflicts, the key question was ‘Which side are you on?’ and people could ... choose sides and change sides. In conflicts between civilizations, the question is ‘What are you?’ That is a given that cannot be changed” (Huntington 1993, p. 27). At the core of Huntington’s clash is the construction of personal and political identity. Religion, for Huntington, is key to this construction. The clash is presented as a given when civilizations with Christian inheritance and identity are presumed to combat Islam as much as civilizations with Islamic inheritance and identity are presumed to combat Christianity. “In coping with identity crises, what counts for people are blood and belief” (Huntington 1996, p. 126).

Drawing on Bernard Lewis’ “The Roots of Muslim Rage” (Lewis 1990), Huntington singled out Islam. The categories of religion and race, Farid Hafez suggests in his contribution to this special section, overlap in Huntington’s identification of Islam as a threat to American and European ways of life (Hafez, in this special section). Huntington’s combination of “blood” and “belief” clarifies this overlap. Since 9/11, the identification of Islam as a terrorist threat has spread rapidly and radically on both sides of the Atlantic, inside as well as outside the academy.<sup>1</sup>

William T. Cavanaugh’s conceptualization and critique of what he calls “the myth of religious violence” set out to stop the spread by changing what scholars say about religion in violent conflicts (Cavanaugh 2009). For Cavanaugh, the idea that religion causes war is a myth—a myth with catastrophic consequences during the War on Terror. Cavanaugh’s critique of this myth has been immensely influential in a variety of disciplines. For a theologian, it is no small feat to be read and referenced by scholars from across the academy. Indeed, it is difficult to find a handbook on the role of religion in violence to which he has not contributed (Cavanaugh 2007 2009, 2011a, 2012, 2016, 2017a, b). Cavanaugh himself has stressed that his reflections on religion constitute a self-sustained critique of secularism that can cope without any appeal to theology (Cavanaugh 2009, p. 14, 2014, p. 486).

In what follows, however, I analyze and assess both his more philosophical-critical and his more theological-constructive accounts of religion. Offering a critical and constructive close reading of Cavanaugh’s work at the intersection of theology, philosophy, and political theory, I argue that his more philosophical-critical and his more theological-constructive accounts of religion hang together. Given that

<sup>1</sup> For overviews, see Cesari (2004, 2010, 2013). The impact of the construct of the clash of civilizations on contemporary politics is covered by, *inter alia*, Hurd (2015) and Haynes (2019). Analytically, the category of “culture talk” (Mamdani 2004) has been crucial.

Cavanaugh has stressed that he is not a systematic theologian,<sup>2</sup> such a systematization of his accounts is risky. However, it is worth taking this risk because it allows scholars who are familiar with his philosophical writings to learn more about his theology and scholars who are familiar with his theological writings to learn more about his philosophy.<sup>3</sup> Cavanaugh's conceptualization and critique of the myth of religious violence is, I continue to argue, apologetics.<sup>4</sup> Of course, apologetics in itself is not problematic. Throughout the history of theology, apologetics—the defense of Christianity—has been a significant task for theologians. Hence, attending to the apologetics for the church in Cavanaugh's myth is not meant to trigger mechanisms of disciplinary defense that try to keep theology out of philosophy and political theory or philosophy and political theory out of theology. On the contrary, I accentuate Cavanaugh's apologetics to assert that such disciplinary defenses miss the mark. Whether we—by “we,” I mean scholars of religion who work inside and outside departments of theology—agree or disagree with it, there are arguably theologies operating in discussions of the category of religion and discussions of the critique of the category of religion. In Cavanaugh's case, this theology is apologetic. The problem with Cavanaugh's apologetics is not that it is apologetic. The problem is that it camouflages the differential treatment of religions during the War on Terror. If it has been about a myth at all, the War on Terror has been about the myth of *Muslim* violence. Christianity past and present has condoned and contributed to this very myth. While I cannot cover the impact that Christianity has had on identifications of Islam as a terrorist threat in European and American history, I clarify how any apologetics that follows Cavanaugh's approach prevents scholars from precisely such coverage.

Although Bin Laden was killed by U.S. soldiers in the operation “Neptune's Spear” about ten years after 9/11, the Global War on Terror continues. Under President Barack Obama it was renamed “overseas contingency operation.” Through drones, Obama expanded the combat into Pakistan.<sup>5</sup> It has been expanding since. The recent withdrawal from Afghanistan—of which some say that it “ended the 9/11 era” (Rhodes 2021)—has not ended this “overseas contingency operation.” Currently, the U.S. military is engaged in a variety of counterterrorism missions across the globe.<sup>6</sup> Even if Islam is not mentioned, the identification of Islam as a terrorist threat runs through public and political discourse about religion. This is the case today perhaps even more than in the aftermath of the 9/11 attacks.

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<sup>2</sup> During a panel on “The State of Systematic Theology,” organized by the Christian Systematic Theology Unit for the annual conference of the American Academy of Religion in 2019, Cavanaugh stressed that he is not a systematic theologian.

<sup>3</sup> Cavanaugh has been criticized for being too descriptive, on the one hand, and for being too prescriptive, on the other (Carlson 2011, pp. 13–14). Reading his more critical-philosophical and his more constructive-theological writings together allows for a rebuttal of these criticisms.

<sup>4</sup> Throughout, I elaborate and expand on my discussion of Cavanaugh in Schmiedel 2021, pp. 255–304.

<sup>5</sup> Usmani and Bashir (2014) analyze the impact of the drone strikes on Pakistan during the War on Terror.

<sup>6</sup> Savell (2021) offers a striking overview of the spread of U.S. counterterrorism operations across the globe.

## 1 The enemy state

According to Cavanaugh, “the inability to define religion has been described as ‘almost an article of methodological dogma’ in the field of religious studies” (Cavanaugh 2009, p. 57; citing Wilson 1998). Cavanaugh draws on this description to demonstrate how the definition of religion can be used to delegitimize some forms of violence by deeming them “religious” and to legitimize some forms of violence by deeming them “non-religious.” Through the myth of religious violence, the violence of the state is shrouded. The state, I suggest, emerges as a cause of violence in Cavanaugh’s critique of “religion.”

Cavanaugh engages both substantivist and functionalist definitions of religion. With the critics of substantivism, he suggests that substantivist definitions of religion are too confined (Cavanaugh 2009, pp. 102–105). Too many phenomena that ought to be considered “religion” are excluded. With the critics of functionalism, he suggests that functionalist definitions are too comprehensive (Cavanaugh 2009, pp. 105–118). Too many phenomena that ought not to be considered “religion” are included. Crucially, Cavanaugh also argues against the concept of transcendence characteristic of most combinations of substantivist and functionalist definitions. The concept of transcendence has had a chequered career in the history of philosophy and theology. Cavanaugh targets definitions of religion that take experiences of transcendence as a point of departure.<sup>7</sup> The concept of transcendence comes with the same problems as the definition of religion: “transcendence” can be either so confined that too much is excluded or so comprehensive that too much is included (Cavanaugh 2011a, p. 24).<sup>8</sup> However, Cavanaugh’s core charge against the definition of religion is essentialism.

The charge of essentialism is spelled out in Cavanaugh’s critique of R. Scott Appleby’s *The Ambivalence of the Sacred*, a study that attracted a lot of attention in the aftermath of 9/11.<sup>9</sup> In this study, Appleby argues that religion can be a factor in both violent conflict and non-violent conflict transformation. Appleby draws on Rudolf Otto’s phenomenology of “the holy” (Otto 1971 [1917]) for a definition of religion that can account for its legitimation of both. Conceptually, Otto’s holy fulfils the function of a transcendence that can be experienced but not expressed. It is “undifferentiated, neither creative nor destructive in itself, but capable of both” (Appleby 2000, p. 28). Building on the holy, which, in Otto’s phenomenology, lies behind—strictly speaking, *before*—any moral and metaphysical differentiations, Appleby points out:

“At a given moment any two religious actors, each possessed of unimpeachable devotion ..., might reach diametrically opposed conclusions about the ... path to

<sup>7</sup> For the debate on the concept of experience in the study of religion, see Hardtke et al. (2016).

<sup>8</sup> Cavanaugh points to nationalism: “The vaguer ‘transcendence’ is made, however, the less is it possible to exclude things like nationalism from the category. Indeed, it would be hard to imagine a better candidate for transcendence than the ‘imagined community’ of the nation” (Cavanaugh 2011, p. 24; alluding to Anderson 2006).

<sup>9</sup> Thomas (2020) credits Appleby’s study for both a “religious turn” and a “reflexive turn” in international relations.

follow: violent as well as nonviolent acts fall readily within the range. By our definition of religion as an authentic response to the sacred, both conclusions would be considered religious, although only one of them, presumably, could be ‘correct,’ that is, penetrating the ambiguity to perceive the actual ‘will of God.’” (Appleby 2000, p. 30)

According to Cavanaugh, Appleby’s concept of religion relies on the “acceptance of Otto’s contention that, at the heart of the sacred, there exists a unique numinous state of mind that is essentially religious” (Cavanaugh 2009, p. 46)—the encounter with the transcendent. Cavanaugh charges Appleby with essentialism because he traces violent and non-violent actions to this very encounter. The encounter is assumed to be at the core of “a unique numinous state of mind” that constitutes and characterizes all religions. It is the essence of religion.<sup>10</sup>

According to Cavanaugh, such essentialism has problematic consequences. Appleby’s study distinguishes between religious violence (which can be traced back to the encounter with the transcendent) and non-religious violence (which cannot be traced back to the encounter with the transcendent). Yet only the violence that is defined as religious rather than non-religious is tackled. “The danger is that, despite the author’s best efforts, his general theory of religion ... will reinforce the tendency to denigrate some forms of violence”: there is legitimate, so-called non-religious violence, on the one hand, and there is illegitimate, so-called religious violence, on the other (Cavanaugh 2009, p. 49).

Cavanaugh argues against such essentialism by asking when and where religion was conceptualized. His answer points to the aftermath of the wars of religion that raged across Europe in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries. The standard story is that during these wars Catholics fought Protestants and Protestants fought Catholics until the state intervened to tame religion. Cavanaugh sees this story in the political philosophies of Thomas Hobbes and John Locke, stressing that

“the basic elements of the wars-of-religion narrative are already found in the ... sources of modern political theory. As the story goes, the primary cause of the wars of sixteenth- and seventeenth-century Europe was fruitless squabbling over ... doctrine. ... The solutions offered vary, but all center on the state’s appropriation of powers hitherto claimed by the church.” (Cavanaugh 2009, p. 129)

Cavanaugh’s core concern is not to ask what counts as religious and what counts as non-religious, but who benefits from the counting. His answer: the state.<sup>11</sup> Characterizing the differentiation between the religious and the non-religious as “creation myth” of the state (Cavanaugh 2009, p. 123), Cavanaugh argues that the construc-

<sup>10</sup> Criticizing Appleby’s reliance on Otto, Cavanaugh contends: “Otto’s analysis prioritizes an internal, intuitive, essentialist, and ahistorical category of experience that, by its nature, is secreted away in the heart of the individual and therefore unavailable to the researcher” (Cavanaugh 2009, p. 46). Appleby has responded to Cavanaugh’s charge. For a detailed discussion, see Schmiedel 2021, pp. 277–286.

<sup>11</sup> The argument is initially articulated in Cavanaugh (1995).

tion of the state comes at the cost of the church. The definition of religion that distinguishes between the religious and the non-religious challenges the church as a unified and unifying canopy (Rowe 2009). The assumption that religion causes violence so that it should be relegated from the public to the private sphere—curtailed and controlled by the state—rests on this definition. It justifies the state’s “monopoly on the means of violence” (Cavanaugh 2009, p. 123).

According to Cavanaugh, however, the standard story is not correct. He lists cases from the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries where Catholics fought with Protestants against other Catholics and where Protestants fought with Catholics against other Protestants. These cases speak against the standard story (Cavanaugh 2009, pp. 142–151). Among historians who are trying to come to terms with these cases, he identifies two approaches. Either it is assumed that political, economic, or social factors were more important than religious ones or it is assumed that religious factors were more important than political, economic, or social ones. Against both approaches, Cavanaugh argues that they attempt to comprehend the wars with the ahistorical category of religion. Yet during the wars, there was no essentialist category to distinguish between what is religious and what is non-religious (Cavanaugh 2009, pp. 155–160). Cavanaugh’s argument, then, is not that the wars were caused by non-religious rather than religious factors. Hector Avalos assumes that Cavanaugh argues that “[i]f there is no such thing as religion, then it follows that there is no such thing as religious violence” (Avalos 2011, p. 143). Yet Cavanaugh’s argument is more subtle and more sophisticated than Avalos suggests. Cavanaugh argues that the category of religion that allows for the very distinction between the religious and the non-religious is itself a weapon in the war. Once it is acknowledged and accepted that religion cannot be isolated as the cause of the wars, a new story can be told: “The so-called wars of religion appear as wars fought by state-building elites for the purpose of consolidating power” (Cavanaugh 2009, p. 162). In Cavanaugh’s story, then, the state is the cause of violence. Cavanaugh draws on Talal Asad to stress the significance of the state for secularism. As Atalia Omer has argued, this stress on the state is central to what she calls and criticizes as the “Asadian line” (Omer 2015, p. 29), the line of critique that draws on Asad’s phenomenology of the secular to theorize and tackle the politics of domination at the core of modernity (Asad 1993, 2003).

Cavanaugh labels his critique of religion “constructivist” (Cavanaugh 2014, p. 492).<sup>12</sup> What is new about Cavanaugh’s constructivism—it might be one of the reasons for its success during the War on Terror—is the clarity with which he captures the uses to which the category of religion can be put in politics. According to Cavanaugh, the assumption of the standard story sets a norm that problematizes and privatizes religion in the public square. Societies in which religion is public come into view as societies that fail to meet the norm.

<sup>12</sup> Cavanaugh refers to Wilfred Cantwell Smith as inspiration for his constructivism. According to Cavanaugh, Smith (1962) has demonstrated how “religion” was defined in the aftermath of the European Enlightenment.

Colonialism is one of Cavanaugh's examples for the enforcement of the norm in these societies. He points to historical sources in which Europeans suggest that the inhabitants of Asia and Africa have no religion. This suggestion changes in the process of colonialization. "Once the native peoples were conquered and colonized, however, it was 'discovered' that they did in fact have religions after all" (Cavanaugh 2009, p. 86). A consequence of this "discovery" was that "religion" could be problematized and privatized. The concept of religion was turned into a "powerful tool for the classification of native cultures" (Cavanaugh 2011a, p. 28; drawing on Masuzawa 2005) which allowed the colonizers to displace the indigenous elites from positions of power by separating the religious from the non-religious.<sup>13</sup>

As his reflections on colonialism accentuate, Cavanaugh's conception and critique of the myth is about more than the European wars of religion. He is interested in the consequences of the concept of religion that came up during these wars. Given that these wars were taken as a paradigm for current conflicts during the War on Terror because they involved both state and non-state actors (Münkler 2017, 2018), it makes sense that Cavanaugh also assesses the consequences of the concept of religion for the contemporary United States with reference to these wars. In his chapter, "The Myth of Religious Violence," Cavanaugh points to the fallout from the concept of religion in the post-9/11 politics of the United States, both nationally and internationally (Cavanaugh 2011, pp. 29–31).

During the War on Terror, the myth of religious violence is articulated through Orientalist discourses in which the rational West is contrasted with the irrational rest—the Muslim world.<sup>14</sup> Cavanaugh highlights Lewis' "The Roots of Muslim Rage" (Cavanaugh 2009, p. 194). Building on Lewis, Huntington's construct of the clash of civilizations exerted enormous influence on the U.S. government under Bush. The distinction between religious and non-religious violence was convenient for a government that had declared the War on Terror because the reference to religion—here the secular West, there the sacred rest—concealed political problems. "The myth of religious violence thus allows us in the West to shrug off any specific grievances that the Muslim world might have about U.S. relations with the rest of the world" (Cavanaugh 2011a, p. 31). One example he repeatedly refers to is the Islamic Republic of Iran:

"When Americans' television screens were suddenly filled with strange people chanting 'Death to America!' in 1979, we were at a loss to explain why. The story we have come to accept is that those people over there had some kind of weird religious revival. We shake our heads at the ... craziness of it all. ... We congratulate ourselves at having solved the problem of religion in public long

<sup>13</sup> Omer (2015, p. 40) cautions that the "Asadian critique of religion ... does not mean that Hindus, Buddhists, and Tibetans were invented out of nowhere. Rather, these identities were imagined in highly contextual and complex manners, and while their imagining cannot be fully understood outside the intersecting discourses of colonialism, nationalism, and Christian missionizing, they cannot be reduced to these discourses either."

<sup>14</sup> On the construction of the Muslim world, see Aydin (2017).

ago. And we are thereby licensed to overlook the specific grievances that some in the Muslim world might have about U.S. involvement there.” (Cavanaugh 2009, p. 198)<sup>15</sup>

The myth of religious violence covers the causes of the conflict in a “convenient fog of amnesia” (Cavanaugh 2011a, p. 31). Again, the distinction between the religious and the non-religious is used to cover the violence of the state. State-building elites draw on the myth of religious violence to justify their monopoly on violence—European state-building elites in the sixteenth and seventeenth century as much as American state-building elites in the twentieth and twenty-first century.<sup>16</sup> “In the United States, it helps to foster the idea that secular political orders are inherently peaceful, such that we become convinced that the nation that spends more on its military than do all the other nations of the world combined is in fact the world’s most peace-loving country” (Cavanaugh 2009, p. 226).

To sum up so far, Cavanaugh’s critique of the category of religion characterizes the state as a cause of violence. Any concept of religion that distinguishes between the religious and the non-religious camouflages this violence by presenting the state as a power that needs to tame religions. The state is constructed through the category of religion. This construction is not confined to the European Wars of Religion, but has consequences today. Pointing to the War on Terror, Cavanaugh concludes: “The myth of religious violence can thus become a justification for further use of violence. We will have peace once we have bombed the Muslims into being reasonable” (Cavanaugh 2011a, p. 31).

## 2 The state enemy

According to Cavanaugh, the state is constructed through the distinction between the religious and the non-religious that comes with the usurpation of the church’s political power. Since the state causes violence, this usurpation—he refers to “migrations of the holy” (Cavanaugh 2011b; drawing on Bossy 1985)—needs to be countered. In Cavanaugh’s critique of the myth, I suggest, the violence of the state requires the peacefulness of the church and the peacefulness of the church rests on the violence of the state.

<sup>15</sup> In his chapter “The Myth of Religious Violence,” Cavanaugh adds: “Malignant forms of Islamic theology are no doubt implicated in the theocracy that now rules Iran, but the popularity of those theologies cannot be understood without a hard look at the secularizing violence of the Shah and his ... sponsors” (Cavanaugh 2011, p. 31).

<sup>16</sup> It is strange that the same discourse is identified as mechanism behind these two historically and culturally very different operations of state-building. As Omer (2015, p. 49) quips about Asadians like Cavanaugh, the focus on the critique of religion as a state-constituting category “leads them to engage in a kind of phenomenology of the liberal-secular, in which, despite a plurality of languages, cultures, and geographies, they nonetheless identify similar patterns everywhere. ... In other words, the violent act of defining religion serves to securitize religion for state projects and ultimately the neoliberal ... agenda of the United States. And it is the same everywhere.”



In his conceptualization of church, Cavanaugh comes close to his teacher, Stanley Hauerwas. Like Hauerwas (*inter alia* 1983), he argues that church gains or regains its power in a conflict between ecclesial and non-ecclesial communities. For Cavanaugh, the “Christian micropolitics” that revolves around the Eucharist is constructed in this conflict (Cavanaugh 2011b, p. 4).<sup>17</sup> However, he contends that the church has misunderstood the conflict of ecclesial and non-ecclesial communities. Since the construction of the state, it has interpreted itself either as an institution inside the state (following Hobbes’ political philosophy in contrast to Locke’s) or as an institution outside the state (following Locke’s political philosophy in contrast to Hobbes), but it has left the state’s monopoly on violence unquestioned. For Cavanaugh, the issue with these interpretations is that they accept the state’s violence (Cavanaugh 2009, pp. 21–23). He draws on John Milbank to describe the consequence of such acceptance as “simple space” (Cavanaugh 2011b, p. 23; citing Milbank 1997), a category that has been crucial to Radical Orthodoxy (Shakespeare 2007).

By “simple space,” Cavanaugh means a conception of the public square which consists only of sovereign and subject. In this simple space, the sovereign awards rights and the subject accepts responsibilities, so nothing can come between them. In *Migrations of the Holy*, Cavanaugh explains how the church has responded to the simplification of space by the state. He emphasizes three models: the state ruling the church, the church ruling the state, or—this is the model that comes closest to Hauerwas’ ecclesiology—the church resisting the state.<sup>18</sup> Although Cavanaugh’s concept of church resonates with the models in which the church rules or resists the state, he criticizes all of them. The church must not accept the simple space that follows from the construction of the state.

In the guilds of the Middle Ages, Cavanaugh identifies a “complex space” that has not been reduced to subject and sovereign but consists of “overlapping loyalties” (Cavanaugh 2011b, p. 19). Building on Milbank, Cavanaugh finds this complexity in the Bishop of Hippo. “For Augustine, ... two distinct societies ... represent two distinct moments of salvation history. There is not one society in which there is a division of labor” (Cavanaugh 2011b, p. 56). On the contrary, both moments—the ecclesial and the non-ecclesial—compete in one public square:

“There is no division between earthly goods and heavenly goods, secular and sacred; there is no space of activities that is the peculiar responsibility of the earthly city. The city of God, therefore, ... is a public in its own right. Indeed, the city of God is the only true ‘public thing,’ according to Augustine, as pagan Roman rule had failed to be *res publica* by refusing to enact justice.” (Cavanaugh 2011b, pp. 57–58)

Augustine, then, is interpreted in a way that allows for the simple space that emerged with the construction of the state to be complexified or re-complexified. Against the simple space opened between sovereign and subject, Cavanaugh presents two cities in conflict and competition with each other.

<sup>17</sup> See also Cavanaugh (2004).

<sup>18</sup> For a detailed discussion of Cavanaugh’s account of these models, see Schmiedel (2019).

“Envisioning the two cities as performances helps us to avoid some serious problems with the way the church is imagined. The church as God sees it—the body of Christ—is not a human institution with well-defined boundaries, clearly distinguishable from the secular body politic. The church is ... a set of practices or performances that participate in the history of salvation that God is unfolding on earth. The earthly city likewise is not simply identified with the state as institution. In Augustine’s metaphor, both cities are groups of people united by the things they love.” (Cavanaugh 2011b, p. 66)

In the conflict between ecclesial and non-ecclesial practices, the church needs to counter the state as a cause of violence:

“The urgent task of the church, then, is to demystify the nation-state ... The church must break its imagination out of captivity to the nation-state; it must constitute itself as an alternative social space, and not simply rely on the nation-state to be its social presence; and the church must, at every opportunity, ‘complexify’ space.” (Cavanaugh 2011b, p. 42)

I offer such comprehensive citations of Cavanaugh’s conceptualization of the church to clarify how his philosophical critique and his theological construction hang together. Cavanaugh’s critique of the category of religion is crucial for his concept of church because it levels the playing field (Cavanaugh 2011c). As Cavanaugh, building on Asad, argues, the secular is neither neutral nor natural. Hence, instead of a contrast between a so-called religious community which ought to be private because it is by definition partisan and a so-called non-religious community which ought to be public because it is by definition non-partisan, the critique of the category of religion allows for a contrast between ecclesial and non-ecclesial practices. In this contrast, through which Cavanaugh breaks away from Asad (Omer 2015, pp. 59–61), there is no simple juxtaposition of a church as institution that counters the state or of a state as institution that counters the church. Yet there are ecclesial and non-ecclesial practices that counter and compete with each other (Cavanaugh 2005; Rowe 2009). To resist the violence of the state, the *church* must take—or, following Cavanaugh’s account of the history of the state, re-take—the control over practices that allow for the judgement of whether violence is or is not acceptable. “To resist, the church must at the very least reclaim its authority to judge if and when Christians may kill, and not abdicate that authority to the nation-state. To do so would be to create an alternative authority” (Cavanaugh 2011b, p. 45). Cavanaugh agrees with the separation of the church from the state and the state from the church, but argues against any separation that would lead to a church that is neither public nor political (Cavanaugh 2011b, pp. 3–4). On the contrary, the church must criticize the state’s monopoly on violence (Cavanaugh 2002, pp. 84–85).

Cavanaugh’s critique of the state can be traced back to his *Torture and Eucharist: Theology, Politics and the Body of Christ*. This study of the church in Chile under Augusto Pinochet is interesting for Cavanaugh’s theology after 9/11 because it sets the paradigm for the state as such in Pinochet’s dictatorship. Cavanaugh develops a definition of torture that points to its public and political consequences. Drawing on primary and secondary sources—including reports from those who escaped the

torture chambers of the regime—he describes how torture leads to the fragmentation of relationships. Through this fragmentation, the regime rids itself of any and all communities that could oppose the power of the dictator: “Fear of torture, fear of death, were concrete fears that only began to articulate the hidden anxieties which lurked not far beneath the surface of Chilean society. The net effect of this strategy was the disappearance of social bodies which would rival the state” (Cavanaugh 1998, p. 47). Torture, then, is an ecclesiological problem, because it attacks the church as a body rivaling the state. “The church cannot confront the torture system simply by treating it as a violation of any individual’s human rights. From the church’s point of view, torture should be read as aspiring to the disappearance of the visible body of Christ” (Cavanaugh 1998, pp. 70–71).

According to Cavanaugh, the counter that the church offered was too late and too little because the church accepted the state as sovereign. His critique of the church clarifies that the crucial step was made only when the torturers were excommunicated by the church.<sup>19</sup> The excommunication showed an ecclesiology that resisted the model of the public square run by the state, where religious authority is relegated to the inner, private realm while non-religious authority is relegated to the outer, public realm. Instead, this ecclesiology conceived of the Eucharist as the core of the church that connects the inner and the outer, the private and the public. In the Eucharist, the church shows itself as body of Christ: “Jesus was tortured to death. Tortured and torturers in the same church therefore threaten the transparency of the church as the body of Christ” (Cavanaugh 1998, p. 247).

From the practice of the Eucharist that excludes the torturers but includes the tortured, Cavanaugh develops his case: “I argue that a Christian practice of the political is embodied in the Eucharist, the remembering of Jesus’ own torture at the hands of the powers of this world. The Eucharist is the church’s response to torture, and the hope for Christian resistance to the violent disciplines of the world” (Cavanaugh 1998, p. 2). Cavanaugh goes so far as to insist that “torture is homologous with the modern state’s project of usurping powers ... which formerly resided in the diffuse local bodies of medieval society” (Cavanaugh 1998, p. 3), thus identifying the state *as such* with torture. This identification brings the contrast between ecclesial and non-ecclesial practices into clearer relief: on the one hand, there are ecclesial practices that prohibit torture and, on the other hand, there are non-ecclesial practices that produce torture—and, for Cavanaugh, these practices characterize the state. This state, then, requires resistance.

In “Making Enemies”, Cavanaugh applies his analysis of torture to the War on Terror. While Cavanaugh admits that the state can be imagined positively or negatively, he takes up the idea of “torture as the ‘imagination of the state’” from his study of the church under Pinochet to show that torture is a state strategy of the United States (Cavanaugh 2006, p. 308). Drawing on a report from the Red Cross, Cavanaugh lists the methods of torture that were used during the War on Terror.

<sup>19</sup> “Excommunication is ... applicable to those kinds of sin which impugn the identity of the body of Christ. Excommunication, by definition, is for ecclesiological offenses. If, as I have already argued, the excommunicated person puts herself outside the church in the very act of her sin, then the sin itself must be construed as a sign against the body of Christ” (Cavanaugh 1998, p. 247).

Detained by U.S. authorities, more than 100 people were tortured to death in three years of war (Cavanaugh 2006, p. 310). Cavanaugh does not delve into the details of the discussion of torture among theologians. He insists that torture is paradigmatic for the operation of the state. He resists the equalization of dictatorship and democracy—even under Bush, the United States are not a military dictatorship—yet insists that fear is crucial for both. “Fear is constantly stoked, but it is not the fear of the state but of the enemies of the state against who the state protects us. The tragedy of 9/11 is incessantly invoked ... The fear of 9/11 ... is kept ever before us and used to justify everything” (Cavanaugh 2006, p. 313).

What is crucial for the dynamics of torture is according to Cavanaugh “American exceptionalism” (Cavanaugh 2006, p. 315). The special position of the United States as the beacon of freedom can be mobilized to argue for and against torture. On the one hand, one can say that America must not torture because it is about freedom. On the other hand, one can say that America must not *not* torture because it is about freedom. The special status of the United States allows the country to take on the burden of becoming a torturer: “America must decide for itself what measures are required. But because of our exceptional goodness, America above all nations can be trusted to use such power prudently” (Cavanaugh 2006, p. 316).

Cavanaugh shows how both approaches mix in the rhetoric of Bush during the War on Terror. Drawing on Carl Schmitt, Cavanaugh points to the relation between “exceptionalism” and “exception,” a relation that is crucial for the constitution of the enemy (Cavanaugh 2006, p. 317). “Sovereign is he who decides on the exception”, Schmitt suggested in his *Political Theology* (Schmitt 1986 [1922], p. 5). This suggestion contends that sovereignty cannot be captured by the law, because the law is made by the sovereign, not the sovereign by the law. The significance of the decision about the exception is spelled out in Schmitt’s definition of the political. According to Schmitt, enmity is the “criterion” that allows for the definition of something as political (when it is concerned with distinguishing between friends and foes) or apolitical (when it is not concerned with distinguishing between friends and foes) (Schmitt 1996 [1932], p. 26; Müller 2003, p. 33). Crucially, this criterion cannot be conceptualized through neutral categories, but is carried into effect by the sovereign itself (Schmitt 1996 [1932], p. 35). Bush’s well-known warning—“Either you are with us, or you are with the terrorists”—is a case in point (Bush, cited in Cavanaugh 2006, p. 320).

Since torture is so paradigmatic for the state, Cavanaugh calls for the church to counter the state. In Chile, “the Eucharist provided Christians with an imagination of another kind of body, the body of Christ, a community convinced it is the living body of the Son of God who was tortured to death by the state” (Cavanaugh 2006, p. 322). What follows for the War on Terror is that the church must stand against the state that tortures. Against the state’s exceptionalism, Cavanaugh puts the church’s exception: “Christ is the exception that becomes the rule of history. We are made capable of loving our enemies, of treating the other as a member of our own body, the body of Christ” (Cavanaugh 2006, p. 323). The consequence is that the church cannot accept the state’s control over violence. The church must decide when violence is or is not necessary. “In concrete terms, this means refusing to fight in unjust wars” (Cavanaugh 2005, p. 323).

To sum up so far, Cavanaugh conceptualizes church through the contrast between ecclesial and non-ecclesial practices. Given that, for Cavanaugh, violence is the core characteristic of the state since its very inception, the church that counters the state promotes practices of peace. Taking the philosophical-critical and the theological-constructive writings of Cavanaugh together, then, the church emerges as *the* promoter of peace. This presentation of the church is at the core of Cavanaugh's apologetics that camouflages how churches have contributed to the identification of Islam as a terrorist threat.

### 3 Why the enemy of my enemy is not my friend

Analyzing Cavanaugh's philosophical-critical and theological-constructive approaches, I have argued that his critique of the category of religion conditions his concept of church as much as his concept of church conditions his critique of the category of religion. The two hang together. Cavanaugh contends that the church must take back control over violence. Crucially, his apologetics is about more than a conceptualization of church that is perhaps too idealistic or too idiosyncratic (Winner 2018, p. 41). Normativity is *not* what is at stake here. The question is not whether there is normativity but which normativity there is in Cavanaugh's account. I suggest that Cavanaugh sets up a binary between ecclesial practices that are always already seen positively and non-ecclesial practices that are always already seen negatively. This binary provokes an ecclesial exceptionalism that falls under Cavanaugh's own critique. For scholars of religion, this binary has problematic implications during the on-going War on Terror, both descriptively and prescriptively.

Christopher Insole (2006) and Anna Rowlands (2018) have highlighted the Manicheism in Cavanaugh's theology. Although he draws on Augustine, who is known for his critique of the Manichees, Cavanaugh's concept of church requires the ontological binary between ecclesial and non-ecclesial practices. According to Insole, Cavanaugh foists this binary onto the Bishop of Hippo, "thus crediting Augustine for anticipating the work of Alasdair MacIntyre and Stanley Hauerwas" (Insole 2006, p. 330). Yet for Augustine, both ecclesial and non-ecclesial are "collected in the net of the Gospel: and in this world, as in a sea, both swim together without separation, enclosed in the net until brought ashore" (Insole 2006, p. 330, citing Augustine). Insole argues that Augustine ought not to be considered the authority behind Cavanaugh's church. On the contrary, Augustine would object to Cavanaugh's binary because for him "we do not know who the outsider or the insider really is" (Insole 2006, p. 333).

What is arguably more important than the question of whether Augustine is or is not the correct theological authority are the implications of the binary for Cavanaugh's approach. Cavanaugh shows how the category of religion can be used to target societies that fail the standard of problematized and privatized "religion," set up in Europe during the sixteenth and seventeenth century. The universalization of this standard delegitimizes so-called religious violence and legitimizes so-called non-religious violence—that is, state violence. Yet the distinction is not only contingent.

The issue that Cavanaugh identifies is that the distinction also sets up the state as authority and arbitrator of the legitimate and the illegitimate, thus normatively justifying the state's own violence. Cavanaugh's critique of this set-up as it plays out in the War on Terror is clear and compelling. Cavanaugh demonstrates how the framing of the war as "about religion" has similar consequences in the past and in the present: religion is conceptualized as a cause of violence. This conceptualization facilitates a depoliticization of the church that justifies the violence of the state—in the current circumstances, the imperialism of the United States during the War on Terror (Cavanaugh 2011c).

However, the binary between ecclesial and non-ecclesial practice prohibits Cavanaugh from going beyond the myth. Expanding on Insole's critique, Rowlands explains that Cavanaugh 'leaves little (if any) space for conceiving of the practices ... for the common good at work beyond the institutional Church' (Rowlands 2018, p. 177). Omer (2015, p. 38) calls it a "purist trap". Cavanaugh's purism requires him to portray ecclesial practices as, *by definition*, positive and non-ecclesial practices as, *by definition*, negative.<sup>20</sup> As a consequence, his conception and critique of the myth of religious violence is apologetic. This apologetics conceals that the myth has been carried by both ecclesial and non-ecclesial actors past and present.

As Jayne Svenungsson argues in her contribution to this special section, the secularism that Cavanaugh targets has its roots and its rationale in Christianity. "The fact that Christianity historically occupies a privileged position," Svenungsson suggests, "commands a particular responsibility, especially on the part of theologians" (Svenungsson, in this special section).<sup>21</sup> Cavanaugh, however, covers up how Christians have condoned and contributed to the violence of the state. When Cavanaugh criticizes the church—as in his account of the Catholic Church in Pinochet's Chile—he criticizes it for *not* being church. This implies a construction of normativity in which the ecclesial practice is positive and the non-ecclesial practice is negative. Normatively, failures of the church are assessed as external rather than internal to the identity of the church itself. This externalization of failure in the construction of normativity becomes apparent in Cavanaugh's characterization of the Eucharist.

According to Cavanaugh, the Eucharist is at the core of the Christian micropolitics because it eradicates the "distinction between mine and thine" (Cavanaugh 2002, p. 47). However, throughout the history of theology, the Eucharist has emerged as one of the most contested and controversial sacraments. Churches continue to set conditions for who is and who is not invited to "their" Eucharist, thus cementing the boundaries between mine and thine that Cavanaugh claims have been eradicated.<sup>22</sup>

<sup>20</sup> As a consequence, Cavanaugh's account of the state reduces the function of the state to its monopoly on violence, omitting that the state has evolved to fulfil many functions, such as social security (Rowe 2009, pp. 587–589). Moreover, Braden P. Anderson (2012) argues that Cavanaugh's modernist analysis of nation and nationalism prevents him from accounting for the significance of Christianity for the evolution of nation and nationalism. Christianity must have been significant, Anderson proposes, for Christian nationalism to gain any traction with Christians today.

<sup>21</sup> See also Svenungsson (2013).

<sup>22</sup> Cavanaugh (2002, p. 52) acknowledges these conditions, but characterizes them as a consequence of non-ecclesial practice in ecclesial practice. Which criteria are used to draw this distinction?

Precisely because it draws a distinction between insider and outsider, the Eucharist can be used as a political weapon.

In *The Dangers of Christian Practice*, Lauren F. Winner encourages the church to be on the watch both for what is promising and for what is problematic in its practices (Winner 2018, p. 3). She enters a conversation with ecclesialogists such as Cavanaugh who pit ecclesial practices against non-ecclesial practices (Winner 2018, p. 167). Cavanaugh plays a role in her discussion of the practice of the Eucharist. Winner argues that Cavanaugh's account of the Eucharist contains the positive elements but not the negative elements of this particular sacramental practice (Winner 2018, p. 41). Recounting the incidents in which Jews were charged with desecrating the host throughout the history of Christianity, she contends that supersessionism is intimately connected to the sacrament. According to Winner, the violence against Jews that the Eucharist provoked is not an external destruction but an internal distortion of this sacramental practice. "At its very inception, the Eucharist is fractured" (Winner 2018, p. 55). "Because supersessionism is Christianity's characteristic deformation," Winner concludes, "it isn't adequate ... to cease repeating the anti-Jewish tropes that litter so much Christian speech over the centuries. Rather, what is needful is a Christian accounting of what it is about Christianity that has led us to those tropes" (Winner 2018, p. 37). Ecclesialogies that assume that ecclesial practices are, by definition, positive and that non-ecclesial practices are, by definition, negative prevent such accounting.

Crucially, the construction of normativity that runs through Cavanaugh's account of the Eucharist has consequences for his characterization of the significance of Christianity for the War on Terror:

"Christian churches are often deeply implicated in supporting America's war efforts. Such support, however, has had a negligible effect on the formation of U.S. foreign policy. ... For most of the past century, Christian theological arguments have had a minimal influence on the actual making and marketing of U.S. foreign policy. No U.S. president, no matter how personally devout, would argue for war based on ... Christian principles. Even within the George W. Bush administration, foreign policy has been directed by neoconservatives ... The architects of the Iraq war were not evangelical Christians, but men such as Paul Wolfowitz, Dick Cheney, Richard Perle, and Donald Rumsfeld." (Cavanaugh 2009, pp. 224–225)

Given Cavanaugh's critique of the distinction between the religious and the non-religious, this clear-cut account of Christianity—itsself predicated on a distinction between the Christian and the non-Christian—should strike any reader as at least somewhat suspect. Moreover, it is well known that Christianity was referenced as a motivation for the War on Terror by a variety of actors, both inside and outside the academy. Obama pointed to the significance of Reinhold Niebuhr's "Christian realism" for his politics during the War on Terror. Before him, both Bush and Blair referenced their relationship to God in their reasoning for the declaration of war. Tony Blair referred to "God's judgement" (Blair, cited in White 2006) for his decision to send troops into Iraq, a decision he stood by even after the report by

Lord Chilcott gave his government a crushing verdict (Harding 2016). How does Cavanaugh know about the policy impact of Obama's or Bush's and Blair's faith?<sup>23</sup>

There are also theologians who draw on Christianity—"Christian theological arguments," in Cavanaugh's words—to make the case for war. Jean Bethke Elshtain was advisor to both the Pope and the President, so one can assume that she had at least some policy impact. In *Just War Against Terror: The Burden of America's Power in a Violent World*, she draws on Augustine to defend U.S. ambitions and actions after 9/11: "I would argue that true international justice is defined as the equal claim of all persons, whatever their political location or condition, to having coercive force deployed on their behalf if they are victims of one of the many horrors attendant upon radical political instability" (Elshtain 2004a, p. 168). In addition to Augustine's just war theory, she builds on Dietrich Bonhoeffer's ethics to exculpate the torture of "enemy combatants" by U.S. soldiers: "In our context, it is whether terrorists who know no limits ... are to be stopped lest they murder again with the ultimate aim of establishing repressive Taliban-style regimes that institute cruelty" (Elshtain 2004b, p. 84). Of course, the colonialist argument that echoes through Elshtain's explanation of "America's burden"—as far as I can ascertain, she does not mention Rudyard Kipling's "The White Man's Burden" which seemingly inspired her subtitle—harks back to the history of Christianity.<sup>24</sup> The effects of the collusion of church and colonialism continue today.

What has been going on in the War on Terror, then, cannot be captured if it is characterized as a case of the delegitimization of so-called religious violence and the legitimization of so-called non-religious violence that, according to Cavanaugh, is so crucial to state-building elites. Rather, religion itself—in this case, Christianity—is involved in the legitimization and the de-legitimation of violence during this war. As Hannah Strømmen suggests in her contribution to this special section, "If there has been an 'unprecedented resurgence' of religion in the last decades, then it is just as clear that the ways in which religion becomes visible in the public is not evenly balanced when specific religions are invoked" (Strømmen, in this special section). Omer also argues that what has been going on is that "some religions need to be contained for others to maintain their hegemony" (Omer, in this special section). If the War on Terror is predicated on a myth, then the myth is much more incisive and much more insidious than Cavanaugh lets on: it is a myth of *Muslim* violence. Crucially, Christianity past and present has condoned and contributed to this very myth.

Throughout history, Christians have been complicit and complacent with Islamophobia (Green 2015). Hence, the failure of the church to counter anti-Muslim racism must not be externalized as if it was due to non-ecclesial influences rather than ecclesial identity. To recall Winner's reflections on the Eucharist, what is needed is an accounting of what it is about Christianity that has led to anti-Muslim tropes. The construct of the clash of civilizations has been so "contagious" because it can

<sup>23</sup> In "Religious Violence as Modern Myth," Cavanaugh explains: "Christians in the North American context today don't kill for anything but the liberal nation-state, with very few exceptions" (Cavanaugh 2014, p. 498), which means that their Christianity cannot be the reason for their militarism. Why not?

<sup>24</sup> For a detailed discussion of Elshtain, see Schmiedel 2021, pp. 131–170.



connect to the interpretations and instrumentalizations of Islam in the history of Christianity (Adib-Moghaddam 2013, p. xi). As Arshin Adib-Moghaddam argues in *Meta-History of the Clash of Civilisations*: “Some of us think of the clash of civilisations today, in short, because we have been coded to do so” (Adib-Moghaddam 2013, p. 12). Of course, Cavanaugh points out how Muslims have suffered from the myth of religious violence, but his conceptualization and critique of this myth cannot account for the significance of Christianity for this coding.

To be sure, I find arguments like Elshstain’s—to put it politely—dubious and dangerous.<sup>25</sup> Their theological constructions ought to be met with theological critiques. However, such critiques require that these theologies are recognized as theologies in the first place, regardless of how unpalatable they might be. Cavanaugh cannot accept them as theologies, because he has set up an ontological binary between non-violent ecclesial practices that counter violent non-ecclesial practices embodied by the state. For Cavanaugh, Christian scholars like Elshstain cannot have a claim to the traditions and theologies of the church, because such a claim would counter his binary set-up. They need to be seen as external rather than internal. Hence, in a way, these scholars need to be excommunicated, externalized rather than internalized.<sup>26</sup> The consequence is that the plurality within Christianity—there are those who defend the war and those who despise the war in churches, with “a rapidly widening rift” in American Christian conservatism alone (Stout 2004, p. 159)—is rendered invisible.

Cavanaugh’s apologetics is problematic for scholars who work more descriptively and for scholars who work more prescriptively. Empirically, churches are contested and controversial sites in which the identity of Christianity is constantly interpreted and re-interpreted.<sup>27</sup> Churches are projects rather than possessions (Schmiedel 2017). Accounts which assume that it is always already clear who or what is church and who or what is not church result in thin rather than thick concepts of church that invisibilize the struggle between those in the middle and those in the margins.<sup>28</sup> The conflicts and contestations on the ground are flattened. All that remains is apologetics for *the church*.

Perhaps ironically, it was a scholar of religion—not a theologian—who pointed out that Cavanaugh’s dismissal of the concept of transcendence has a normative consequence. In his review of *The Myth of Religious Violence*, Appleby argues:

<sup>25</sup> For a critique, see Schmiedel 2021, pp. 131–170.

<sup>26</sup> Cavanaugh points to the excommunication of Christians who tortured in Pinochet’s Chile. As far as I can ascertain, he has not addressed Elshstain’s defense of torture. However, it might not be too far-fetched to assume that he would agree with Stanley Hauerwas and Paul J. Griffith’s review of Elshstain’s *Just War Against Terror*: “In the end, the use of Christian language ... in this book is nothing more than window-dressing for a passion to impose America upon the world. It is not a book whose argument ... should convince anyone thoughtful; it is a book—and here, out of respect for its author, we do not mince words—informed by jingoistic dreams of empire” (Hauerwas and Griffith 2003, p. 44).

<sup>27</sup> See Healy (2000), for his classic critique of “blueprint ecclesiologies”.

<sup>28</sup> My critique of Cavanaugh is akin to Omer’s critique of the typology developed in Hurd (2015). See Omer (2018).

“In denying any transhistorical dimension of religion in favor of an approach that binds believers entirely to their historical context, the author devotes relatively little attention to the prophetic ‘function,’ which, if not unique to religion, is certainly a ... powerful weapon in its arsenal.” (Appleby 2010, p. 12)

According to Appleby, the “witness to the ... transcendent is central to religion’s unique capacity to sit in judgement of all (merely) earthly powers and promises” (Appleby 2010, p. 12).<sup>29</sup> The concept of transcendence, then, enables a normative critique of both a state that absolutizes itself against the church and a church that absolutizes itself against the state. Arguably, Cavanaugh targets Appleby’s transhistorical account of the transcendent. He is not opposed to theological references to the transcendent, but to *transhistorical* theological references to the transcendent. For Cavanaugh, the transcendent has to be theorized contextually and concretely. Hence, he locates it in ecclesial rather than non-ecclesial practices—namely, the Eucharist. Once it is located in these practices, however, theologians cannot draw on the transcendent to criticize them. The prophetic function loses its bite. It can target the outside of the church (non-ecclesial practices), but not the inside of the church (ecclesial practices), because the church itself is always already imbued with transcendence.

As mentioned above, theories of religion that refer to transcendence are an easy target. Conceptually, transcendence is empty. Why should scholars assume that there are encounters with the transcendent if all that can be accessed are the expressions rather than the experience of this encounter, the echoes so to speak (McCutcheon 2001)? My point is not to argue for theism as opposed to atheism—as Thomas Lynch put it, these are “boring answers to bad questions” (Lynch 2017, p. 135)—but to accentuate that, normatively, the emptiness of the concept is crucial to the critique: only if the transcendent remains empty can it anchor theological criticism of those ecclesial and non-ecclesial practices that claim to have captured it.<sup>30</sup> Because Cavanaugh’s apologetics for the church dismisses all appeals to a transcendence beyond the practices of the church, he falls under his own critique of exceptionalism. “America must decide for itself,” Cavanaugh had criticized U.S. exceptionalism, “what measures are required. But because of our exceptional goodness, America above all nations can be trusted to use such power prudently” (Cavanaugh 2006, p. 316). Yet the same could be said about the exceptional goodness of the church he envisions. On the one hand, one could insist that the church must not be violent because it is about peace. On the other hand, one could insist that the church must *not* be violent, because it is about peace. The church, then, would be the only institution that could carry the burden of deciding whether and when Christians should kill. For Cavanaugh, it “can be trusted to use such power prudently.” As in Schmitt’s political theology, the sovereign makes the law, not the law the sovereign. The exceptionalism of the church leaves no criteria by which the church could be

<sup>29</sup> Cavanaugh’s (2014) response suggests that he sees Appleby as criticizing him for using a functionalist rather than a substantivist concept of religion. For the debate, see Schmiedel 2021, pp. 285–287.

<sup>30</sup> For a detailed discussion of the significance of the concept of transcendence for public theology, see Schmiedel (2022).

judged—judgement can come only from the church itself. Yet what keeps the church from warmongering?

Altogether, then, Cavanaugh's argument is not that violence is rooted in non-religious rather than religious causes. Rather, he argues that the category of religion that allows for the distinction between the religious and the non-religious camouflages the violence that is rooted in the state. Any concept of religion that distinguishes between the religious and the non-religious shrouds the danger of the state in a myth. The War on Terror, where references to the violence of religion are used to conceal the imperialism of the United States, including the torture of "enemy combatants," play out this myth. While I find Cavanaugh's critique of the War on Terror convincing, I have pointed out that it comes with a binary set-up. To counter the myth, Cavanaugh contends that the church must re-gain the control over violence from the state. For Cavanaugh, a church that decides about war will be able to criticize the power politics of the state, creating or re-creating a politics characterized by the Eucharist that constitutes a social body. Cavanaugh's conception and critique of the myth, I have argued, is apologetics: the critique of religion conditions the conception of the church and the conception of the church conditions the critique of religion. The binary set-up has descriptive and prescriptive consequences. It downplays the role of Christianity in the War on Terror by equalizing all religions. Yet the War on Terror targets one religion in particular: Islam. Only if the complacency and the complicity of churches in the construction of anti-Muslim racism can be accounted for, can scholars go beyond the myth that religion causes violence. Today, this myth is about Islam more than any other religious or non-religious ways of life. What is needed, then, is a conception and a critique of "religion" that accounts for the differential treatment of religions in the public square.

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