Episode 1,335: The Myth of Religious Violence

Guest: William Cavanaugh

WOODS: Well, I have to say, this is, as you know and I'm sure you intended it this way, a very controversial title for a book, because it does seem to run counter to everything we think we know about how the world works. And as somebody who is inclined to be sympathetic with this thesis, I have to say, I was very anxious to see how you were going to carry it out, what your plan of attack was. And I was hoping that it wouldn't just be a semantic argument about what constitutes religion. And it's not, although there is a very important discussion here about scholars and the difficulty they've had coming up with a series of criteria that really consistently satisfy the term "religion" so as to give it meaning. We will get into that in a minute. But I wonder if we could start off with having you just very, very briefly tell us what it is you're not saying in this book, and then what, in fact, you are trying to argue.

CAVANAUGH: Okay, so yeah, the title is meant to be a little bit provocative. Some people look at it as if it's the myth of the spherical Earth or something, as if I'm kind of a flat-Earther or trying to deny the obvious. So what I'm not arguing is that religion does not cause violence, so that Muslim extremists don't cause violence, that the Crusaders don't cause violence, that sort of thing. That's not what I'm arguing, precisely because that kind of assumes that we know what we're talking about when we talk about religion. Well, there's this thing called religion, and then we can decide whether it's inherently violent or inherently peaceful. And that's what I'm trying to kind of pull apart, is this idea that there's something called religion which is inherently more prone to violence than whatever the opposite of religion is, which is the secular. So the idea is not that the Crusades did not happen or that people don't do violence on behalf of Islam or on behalf of Christianity. Of course, they do. But the myth is the idea that there is something called religion, of which Islam and Christianity and Hinduism and Judaism, etc., are species, that has an inherent tendency to produce more violence than so-called secular ideologies and institutions — things like nationalism and capitalism and politics, as opposed to religion and that sort of thing.

So I will often start out asking audiences: who's caused more violence over the last hundred year, Muslims or atheists? And the answer is atheists, and it's not even close, because the estimates of deaths under officially atheist Marxist regimes range from a low of 70 million to a high of 120 million. And so I look then at what people do with that fact and discover that there's all kinds of sleight of hand that go on. So people that argue that religion has an inherent tendency to produce violence. People like Christopher Hitchens, for example, will just take all that violence done on behalf of atheist regimes and declare that that counts as religion too, because it's totalitarianism, Hitchens says, which is inherently a religious impulse because it is — I can't remember his exact argument — because it's absolutist, and absolutism is inherently a kind of religious impulse.

And so I begin to look at these categories of religious and secular and find that things are constantly getting smuggled across the border in both directions. And so what I end up arguing is that there is no inherent difference between so-called secular and so-called religious ideologies in terms of violence. People do violence for all sorts of things. They can kill for gods, but they can also kill for flags and for the workers' revolution and for nations and land and oil and so on. And so we need a more nuanced and empirical approach to the whole question of violence.

WOODS: You have a chapter where you're going through and discussing the work of numerous scholars in the area of religion, and you're looking at the way they've tried to define this term in a way that includes all the particular religions that we believe belong to that class, but would at the same time exclude things that we do not think to be religion. It turns out to be extremely difficult, if not impossible, to do. And I had not fully realized that until reading — I can't remember exactly which one. I bet it was more than one. As I was reading through the scholars and they're listing their criteria, each one of them sounded like American nationalism would satisfy exactly those things, because American nationalism involves symbolism and ritual and belief in certain principles that are empirically non-verifiable. I mean, "all men are created equal" is a metaphysical proposition. It's not something you learn in a laboratory. So I was quite surprised at this. But at the same time, I can understand why people would say, all right, maybe scholars have a tough time with it, but I'm the man on the street. I've got street-corner common sense. I know religion when I see it, and it's when people, they have a set of beliefs that can't be empirically verified, that have to do with ultimate meaning in life and that generally involves a god. And it turns out that that even that man-on-the-street definition doesn't work.

CAVANAUGH: Yeah, that's right, and one of the reasons that doesn't work is because a lot of things that we consider to be religion don't have gods as a kind of central concept. There's a lot of forms of Buddhism, for example, Taoism, that don't have a god or gods as a central concept. And so the whole argument that religion causes violence depends on a concept of religion that can be kind of neatly circumscribed so that you've got religion over here and secularism over there or secular ideologies over there. And it turns out that nobody has been able to come up with a way of separating these things that is in any way satisfying to all the different constituencies. And so it ends up just being subjective. It ends up, people come up with their definitions so that they can include the things they want to include under religion and exclude the things that they don't want to include under religion.

And so the interesting question to me is looking at the political reasons and other reasons why people want to create categories in the way that they do create categories. And so a lot of people are adamant that nationalism, American nationalism, for example, is not a religion. Well, why? Why do they insist on that? And there are a lot of good reasons to do that, one of which is you don't want to set up American nationalism as a competitor to Christianity. And so Christians who think that it's perfectly justifiable to kill for the flag, they justify this and they save themselves from the charge of idolatry by saying, no, this is not a religious thing; this is a purely secular thing, and my religion is something over here called Christianity.

WOODS: I want to move into the wars of religion. I mean, we're skipping some material — actually, you know what? Before we do that, this actually struck me on page 89, because it's a description that follows up on what you just said. We talk about Hinduism, and what struck me about it is, in particular here and I think Buddhism, you point out that, up until maybe the 19th century, the people who practiced these things wouldn't have thought, *We are practicing*

something called religion, and it consists of the following characteristics. They wouldn't have thought that way. But that it was Westerners observing these peoples who imposed this category, particularly Enlightenment Westerners who think of religion as this external set of observances that are separate from our daily lives. And so they took this way of looking at the world, they encountered these other peoples, and they just forced it on there. And so here in the book, you list things that Hinduism lacks. It has no founder, no prophets, no creed, no dogma, no system of theology, no single moral code, no uniquely authoritative scripture, no ecclesiastical organization, and the concept of a God is not centrally important. Well, that does make it problematic.

Now, on the other hand, couldn't we then just say: all right, look, it's true that it's hard to make one definition stick, so couldn't we instead just look at the three great monotheistic religions and say that they in particular have some kind of warlike characteristic to them? Granting that we can't apply a religious definition that satisfies all religions, so-called, couldn't we just say these three have some kind of problem, because that's really where we look to for — we don't really worry about Buddhist monks causing problems most of the time, so why don't we just focus on the three monotheistic religions and say they're similar enough that maybe we could call it religion with a star or something — we have a new term for it and say these things seem to cause violence?

CAVANAUGH: Sure. Well, those who think that Buddhists are all like Richard Gere are oftentimes surprised to see the kind of Buddhist violence that you find in Myanmar today, for example. So the idea that Buddhists are inherently peaceful and Christians and Jews and Muslims are not, I think, is extremely questionable. The Prime Minister of Sri Lanka was assassinated by a Buddhist monk in the 1960s. But this idea — so I mean, you could make an argument that there's something inherent in monotheism, for example, and people have made that kind of argument. So you shift the argument, then, to be an argument about monotheism, and you look at Islam and Christianity and Judaism as a special case. That's a different type of argument entirely, and that's not the argument that I was addressing in this book.

The argument in the book that I'm addressing is the argument that there's something called religion which is inherently violent. And that's the argument that has made it into our judicial system, into our political discourse, into journalistic discourse, and so on, the idea that there's this split between religious and secular. And so that's the argument that I'm addressing in this book. The argument about whether or not monotheism has a tendency to cause violence is a completely separate argument, and it's not the argument around which all of our political and legal institutions are framed, were framed around the question of religious and secular. So that's a different question.

I tend to be skeptical about the idea that there's something inherently violent in the quantity of gods. I think that it's more about the quality of gods. And the truth is that Islam, Christianity, and Judaism, certain manifestations of them can be violent, certain manifestations of them can be peaceful, and it doesn't do any good to kind of tar them all with a kind of broad brush, that you always need to be looking under very specific circumstances. How did will Wahhabist Islam develop in the 18th century? Under what conditions has this militancy evolved? And then you need to be begin asking questions: well, this kind of militancy evolved under conditions of Western colonialism. And so now, the blame begins to get spread around a little bit. But anyway, but that's another argument.

But what I would argue in general is that the more specific and more empirically based you can get, the more you're likely to stumble onto an interesting argument, rather than these kind of broad-brush arguments. Oh, Islam is violent, or religion is violent, or something like that. Those kinds of arguments tend to be useless at best and dangerous at worst.

WOODS: Let me ask one more thing before we go into the wars of religion. A lot of times people will say: well, it's because religion, so-called, is non-rational. Of course, these people are going to be impossible to deal with, because we have no common language we can speak to them in, because they've got concepts that are not subject to empirical verification, and here we are being rational and secular and skeptical, and we can't even talk to each other. So if we have a conflict, it has to come to blows.

CAVANAUGH: Right, yeah. Well, I mean, there's two ways to approach that question. The first is the idea that so-called religions are non-rational. There are long traditions of rationality and scholastic theology and so on in Christianity and in Islam and in Judaism. So the idea that these are somehow irrational, I mean, you read through Thomas Aquinas' *Summa Theologiae* and then tell me that it's irrational. I think it's absurd. It's an absurd caricature.

And then the other side of the argument, the idea that secular things are inherently rational and therefore peaceful is also extraordinarily questionable at best. The idea that people who kill for the flag, for example, are acting rationally, just because it doesn't have anything to do with an explicitly named god is ridiculous. And if you look at the literature around nationalism as a religion. You know Carlton Hayes' book *Nationalism: A Religion*, where he lays out the case for treating it as a religion, or Robert Bellah's idea of civil religion, it makes it clear that patriotism, nationalism behaves exactly in the same way as so-called religions do, and there is a non-rational element to it, an element of devotion to something whose meaning can't be kind of explained in purely rational terms. If you look at some of the literature on consumerism and the way consumer items are treated, for example, there's a whole vast literature on consumerism as a kind of religion, because it treats objects, purely material objects as having this kind of totemic value through which people construct their identity, which is very similar to the way icons are treated in certain kinds of Christianity, and so on. And so once you begin to look at these caricatures, they tend to kind of melt, and the boundaries between religious and secular tend to fade.

WOODS: All right, now I'd like to go on to the so-called wars of religion, because these are cited as the definitive proof of the thesis. And I count 44 bullet points that you came up with to show that the reality of the wars of religion, it's not just that it's more complicated than you think it is; it's that it's the opposite of what it would have to be for the standard understanding of these wars to be correct. That well, of course, Catholics versus Protestants, they both have their ridiculous ideas that nobody cares about but that they think really matter, so they fight about them, and that's what we fully expect. That has nothing to do with the so-called wars of religion.

CAVANAUGH: Right, yeah, I mean, this came upon me, this was actually my first published article, and it came out of a paper that I did as a graduate student. We were reading all of these arguments that the wars of religion were the foundation of liberal social orders, people like John Rawls and Richard Rorty and Judith Shklar, and the list goes on and on, of people who cite the wars of religion as being the foundation of our social order, because it showed us that you can't agree on religion, and so that religion needs to be privatized. And so the idea

was that Catholics and Protestants started killing one another after the Reformation, and then the secular state had to step in and create some order.

And it didn't take a whole lot of research. I mean, you could open up the *World Book Encyclopedia* — I mean, I was a graduate student, and I started looking at histories of the so-called wars of religion and found very quickly that the narrative that's being told by political theorists and legal theorists is nonsense, that you've got Catholics killing Catholics and Protestants killing Protestants and Catholics and Protestants collaborating in the so-called wars of religion. So that immediately kind of made me think maybe there's something more going on here. Maybe this whole idea of the wars of religion is a tall tale that's being told for certain kind of ideological purposes.

And so, if you read the history books, you find that the whole idea fades very quickly. I mean, the whole — these are not isolated incidents. I mean, the 44 bullet points that you mentioned, some of them are small incidents, but some of them are huge, like basically the second half of the 30 Years War was a war between the Habsburgs and the Bourbons, the two great Catholic dynasties of Europe at the time. Cardinal Richelieu, who was a Catholic cardinal, intervened on behalf of the Lutheran Swedes. So it all makes you begin to question the whole narrative that's being put forward.

And once you begin questioning this narrative, then you begin asking: why did these wars get labeled the wars of religion? And then you begin looking into the term "religion" and discover that the term religion as we use it, as distinct from the secular, was really something that came after the so-called wars of religion. And so they couldn't have been fighting over religion, because there was no such thing at the time. And in a way, this secular-religious political distinction was really a result of the wars rather than a motivator behind the wars.

WOODS: Now, there's a subtle, sometimes not so subtle, ending to this tale, which is, well, now that we've seen how these irrational people behave toward each other, that just goes to show that the modern state is the solution to our problems. And that seems a little bit self-interested to me [laughing], that the people who favor the present arrangement will say, "Well, look, maybe you don't like us, but it's either that or these crazy people fighting with each other." What about that part of the story?

CAVANAUGH: Right, yeah, so it was the theorists of the state that invented this whole tale of the wars of religion. And that's pretty easy to discover, as well, once you begin looking at the historical arguments. And so it's people like Hobbes, Locke, and Spinoza, and other kind of founders — Rousseau — founders of modern liberal states that came up with this idea that, oh, there's something called religion, which is inherently violent, and the secular state had to be created in order to solve the problem. Historically, of course, this is nonsense. I mean, the first secular states that you get, the kind of separation of church and state, for example, happened 150 years after the end of the so-called wars of religion and on the other side of the Atlantic in the United States. And so the idea that the wars of religion really resulted in the secular state is just nonsense. The wars of religion resulted in the absolutist state, in which basically the state dominated the church. And only eventually did the state discover that they didn't really need the church, and then they privatized it, rather than kind of institutionalized it.

So the idea that the secular state was the solution to the wars of religion is clearly false. But the idea that state is the solution to the wars of religion is also false, because if you begin to

look at the historical record, the creation of the modern state is really one of the, if not the primary cause of the so-called wars of religion. So the wars of the 16th and 17th century were primarily wars that were being fought over the creation of a centralized state over against the rights and territories of the local nobles and ecclesiastical figures and so on. So rather than being the solution to the problem, the creation of the state was really at the cause of the problem, and that's one of the things that I try to show in that chapter.

WOODS: And then finally, the book concludes with how the myth is used today, how it actually — it's not just rhetorical. It's not just something people say to be disparaging toward Christianity or Islam, but it has real-world consequences. So what are the real-consequences?

CAVANAUGH: Yeah, so the final chapter is about that, and I divide things into the domestic consequences and the foreign policy consequences. Domestically, I went back and looked at all the Supreme Court cases having to do with the First Amendment over the last hundred-and-some years. And what you find is that something called religion up until about 1940 is invoked in Supreme Court cases as a unifying impulse in American society. And then from about 1940 onwards in Supreme Court cases, religion is invoked as something which is a device of influence and needs to be marginalized from public spaces in American society. Even though from 1940 onwards is the time in which you've got the least conflict between Catholics and Protestants, for example, in American society, which was never really very great, but they begin to invoke — starting with a Supreme Court case in 1940, they begin to invoke this idea of the wars of religion as proof that religion is dangerous in public and needs to be marginalized.

And so it begins with a case over whether or not school children can be forced to say the Pledge of Allegiance in class. And the argument is: yes, they can be forced to say the Pledge of Allegiance in class — the Supreme Court rules this in 1940 — precisely because we need to be united around national identity, because religious identity is so divisive. And this is a case that was brought against the Jehovah's Witnesses. And then in case after case after case, banning school prayer, outlawing the idea that you can use public school property for religious education classes, things like the sharing of books and resources between public and private schools, all of these things get banned over the next decades on the basis of this myth that religion is inherently violent.

So one of the famous cases *Lemon v. Kurtzman* in 1967, which bans subsidies for parochial school teachers, they're invoking this idea of the myth of religious violence as if there are marauding bands of Rhode Island Presbyterians who are going to shoot the Catholic school social studies teacher. And at the same time, of course, we're carpet bombing Vietnam. But there the Supreme Court justices are fretting over the possibility of religious violence in the United States at times when it's at a historically low point, if nonexistent. And so it becomes this kind of tale that's told in order to marginalize Christian practices, primarily, from public spaces domestically.

And then in foreign policy, it gets used primarily against Muslims. So our social order is peaceful and secular. Their social order is religious and therefore inherently volatile and violent. And so we need to bomb them into the higher rationality, as it were.

WOODS: I'm curious to know what the scholarly reception was with your book, because you really take on major people who are religious scholars, let's say, or in the history of religion. I

don't know if they necessarily took note of your book, but was it well received, skeptically received? What would you say?

CAVANAUGH: I think it's been well received across a number of different disciplines. I had a legal philosopher who had a conference on the book at Dartmouth a few years ago after it came out, and there were people from all sorts of different disciplines in there. It's been reviewed in *International Relations* and other kinds of journals, so I think it's been pretty well received. And what I'm most pleased about is that I don't think anybody has been able to refute the argument and nobody who understood the argument has actually attempted to refute it. The only attempt at refuting it, I think, is in a theologian's book, Ephraim Radner's book *Brutal Unity*. And I actually had a sort of debate with him about this at the American Academy of Religion meeting in Baltimore a few years ago, in which he basically back down and admitted that he hadn't really understood the argument. He understood the argument as being that religion doesn't cause violence, which is what I pretty explicitly say is not the argument of the book. And so his kind of mischaracterization of the argument, I think, he's kind of backed down from that. You can read the whole exchange in my latest book called *Field Hospital*, where I have a chapter responding to different responses to the book. But for the most part, people haven't even attempted to kind of refute the argument as such. There's a lot of people that ignore it, because it's in their interests to ignore it, but I don't think anybody's been able to refute it or has even tried.

WOODS: Well, the book is published by Oxford University Press, so it's in scholarly circles. If you were to publish this book with a trade publisher, let's say, and pitch it to the general public, you would have so many Amazon reviews of people who had read nothing but the title, and they would be lecturing you about all the examples of religious violence, and it would just — I know this, because that's mostly where my books are published, and they look at the front cover, and they are indignant and outraged. They've not even cracked the thing open. So at least, *at least* you're shielded a bit from that. Do you have a website you'd like me to tell folks about?

CAVANAUGH: I don't. I'm kind of a Luddite. I still carry a flip phone, and I don't have any media presence. I'm not even on Facebook. So no, you can read the book and make your own judgment. Karen Armstrong actually wrote a book on religion and violence in which she incorporates some of my argument, and it's directed at a more popular audience, and I think she does a pretty good job there. So if people are interested in the more popular version of it, they might look at that. But I think I write pretty clearly, and I think my book is accessible to anybody who's interested.

WOODS: Oh, absolutely. Yeah, yeah, yeah, no, absolutely. Obviously, a lot of books that come out of these presses are weighed down by jargon that's particular to some disciplines, but that's not the case here. This was extremely readable and very provocative throughout, and really, really a thought-provoking even for me. So the book is *The Myth of Religious Violence: Secular Ideology and the Roots of Modern Conflict*. I will link to the book at TomWoods.com/1335. Professor Cavanaugh, thanks so much for your time.

CAVANAUGH: Well, thank you, Tom. I appreciate it.