

Book Review

The Uses of Idolatry William T. Cavanaugh

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Idolatry, the worship of false gods, of “no gods,” of “ungods”—a shrewd “polemic coinage” as we read in Robert Alter’s translation of the Psalmist (96:5). That viewpoint is ancient Israel’s perduring legacy to Western thought, which at present is to say the globalized world at large. William Cavanaugh explores this legacy thoroughly and expertly in its manifold implications for beliefs and institutional practices that have succeeded the decline of religion in what Charles Taylor has dubbed our “secular age” in his big book on the matter. According to a consensus among historians, this movement dates from the Enlightenment, an epochal transformation that Cavanaugh quite rationally mistrusts in his astute reading of Taylor.

The book is a summa for our time, not least for its deft report on the origin of Israel’s anti-idolatry in Hebrew Scripture as it marks out a “people of God” amidst the pagan cultures surrounding them, and this same people’s all too frequent backsliding, the apostasies that chroniclers and prophets steadfastly rebuke. This idolatry critique emerges as a full scale cultural self-critique that generates a posture inherited by the West. As Jonathan Sacks argued in *Not in God’s Name: Confronting Religious Violence* (New York: Schocken, 2015), Israel is the only culture in the ancient world to inaugurate a literature of self-criticism, a model for our own Enlightenment-borne social sciences. Sacks’s fine-grained exegesis of Genesis draws upon the René Girard’s theory of mimetic desire as it leads to violence, to which Cavanaugh only makes cursory allusion, but his analyses consistently overlap with Girard’s, as do, from the outset, his own mainstream Catholic beliefs about creation and Whom we have to thank for its beauty, a leitmotiv of his reading of Scripture. We see this resonance in Cavanaugh’s chapter on Augustine’s anti-idolatry as deluded self-worship, worship of creatures rather than creator, and again in his discussion of Incarnation in a concluding chapter.

We find a summary statement of Cavanaugh’s own religious position as follows: “I want to suggest that the reason there is a God-shaped desire in human experience is that it corresponds in some way to a God who actually exists and bends the arc of the moral universe towards love” (2). He does not aim to prove this, as he says; in the best tradition of Reinhold Niebuhr and Martin Buber, he is a theologian dutifully addressing issues in the public realm.

Chapters on Taylor, on Max Weber, on Marx, and on Jean-Luc Marion exhibit ample quotation and probing analyses brimming with insightful commentary. Chapters on nationalism and

consumerism bring us thoroughly up to date on these hot-button issues. This is a very wide spectrum, a curriculum of sorts, affording a bountiful education in modernist thought and the fraught, anfractuous agencies that embody it. All these chapters are bound together by a single thematic link, namely, the way in which divinity, transcendence, otherworldly authority, and sacrificial obeisances have not simply withered away but rather “migrated” (a term he owes to Weber) to other institutional practices and allegiances. Cavanaugh rightly emphasizes the primacy of practices, of behavior, of what we do regardless of what we think or proclaim to think, as indeed is the emphasis of prophetic declamations and Jesus’ confirmation of them.

We owe to Weber the widely discussed notion of “disenchantment,” the evacuation of mysterious, supernatural powers inhabiting the cosmos, and Cavanaugh detects the ambiguities and hesitations in Weber’s own Enlightenment purview, noting the porosity, the fragility, of secular/sacred binaries. In effect, he is deftly performing a species of deconstruction (a word he never uses) that probes false dichotomies, illusory differences, and groundless antitheses, whereby Derridians write of the “theo-logo-centrism” inhabiting our conceptual systems. Cavanaugh never resorts to labels; he is aiming at clarity, not the eye-catching cleverness that bestrides much academic prose. He appropriately draws attention to Marx’s satire of “commodity fetish,” where he famously gibes that “it is a very strange thing, abounding in metaphysical subtleties and theological niceties” (310). In Marx’s best writing, metaphor is not rhetorical but hermeneutic, which is generally the case for literary masterpieces. Like Marx, Cavanaugh is spelling out what is “unthought” in all the texts he discusses, ever widening and deepening the reader’s understanding of idolatry among us. We can be grateful, too, for his judicious unpacking of the gnomic terminology of Jean-Luc Marion, an effort that gratifies the kind of request that Byron makes in *Don Juan* about the metaphysics of Coleridge, to wit: “Explaining metaphysics to the nation. / I wish he would explain the explanation.”

Cavanaugh is duly critical of nationalism, a no-brainer in its sacrificial proclivities against peoples flagged as other. In so doing, he demurs from an argument for the need of “strong gods” that we find in the pages of *First Things*, the conservative Catholic monthly that bills itself as “America’s Most Influential Journal of Religion and Public Life.” He coolly observes that the author “knows better than to attempt to provide biblical warrants for such an identification, for there are none” (270). In fact Saint Paul is archly opposed to theo-power politics: “God chose the weak of the world to shame the strong, / and God chose the lowly and despised of the world, / those who count for nothing” (1Cor 1:27-29; see also 2Cor 12:8-10). Nationalism is narcissism democratized. Here as elsewhere, Cavanaugh unveils continuities between ancient and modernist practices, dovetailing with Girard’s historical outlook as that of a “continuist,” as he states in *Battling to the End*. For all that, Cavanaugh’s thinking is not reductionist in challenging antinomies, but expansive, widening and deepening our historical consciousness, awakened first by ancient Israel as indivisible from our ethical horizon.

Consumerism, like all idolatries, has its own sacrificial modalities via the “deskilling” of human workers in service to mass production and market expansion, via outsourcing manufacture for

cheaper labor, all with the goal of fueling the narcissistic satisfactions of acquisition. This effectively results in the “white noise” evoked in Don DeLillo’s novel by that name, whose closing scene in the filmic version hilariously musicalizes an inane saturnalia of redundant commodities in our big box stores. I cite this to emphasize that Cavanaugh has not only history but our best writers (and film directors: Fellini, Buñuel, Hitchcock...) on his side, which accounts for Girard’s appeal to many humanists: “white noise” is a telling metaphor for the unlocalizable, anonymous—or uncanny, an ersatz of the sacred—buzz in our casual shopping mall and online shopping habituations. On this score, the reader should be reminded of Cavanaugh’s reading of “*homo amans*” in Augustine as now beholden to market ideology’s postulate of its “invisible hand,” itself a figure of providential agency whereby human accountability is effaced. Augustine distinguishes between “temporal and eternal things,” observing that the former “is loved more before we have it, and it begins to grow worthless when we gain it” (175). Or, as Shakespeare puts it, “Sweets grown common lose their dear delights” (Sonnet 106). For shoppers, the hollow satisfaction of this gain does not most often result in seeking after anything beyond it, but after more and more of the same, a feedback looping of Sisyphean futility

“We worship badly,” Cavanaugh remarks (1, 5), evoking our “need to worship,” indeed our “inherent need to worship”: “human beings have an inherent need to worship, one that is often misdirected” (153). Girard’s mimetic theory goes a layer deeper here: the engine of misdirection is the contagion of others’ motivations and desires propelling those we fancy as our own, issuing in crowd behaviors of all sorts that outperform individual agency, which is why Girard labels us as “interdividuals.” Far from being inherent, worship is a product of sacrificial scenarios, where the mimetic, reciprocal violence of all against all is finally economized, compacted, condensed into the violence of all against one, whose victim is worshipped as the fearful cause of violence while its death is experienced as its most welcome, providential termination. What is worshipped is our own violence that is fraudulently outsourced to the sacred. Sacrificial rituals recur and expand in efforts to reestablish social order. The violence inhering in nationalism is heir to this pattern, convening a people over against others. The only thing that is inherent in humans is desire, whose runaway, contagious mimetics make their home in violence, abhorred away, worshipped at home. In sum, *homo sapiens sapiens* “knows not what he does”; *homo religiosus*, *homo liturgicus* (religious man, liturgical man whose work is to worship) in Cavanaugh’s frequent mention, is *homo necans* (man the killer, following the book of that title by Walter Burkert), a pathology of desire as *homo mimeticus* at very our worst.

Another opaque notion in this book is “the reality of sin” (356, 389) which needs to be viewed as a misdirection of desire, and which Genesis divulges compactly. The “fall of humans” is seeded by a rivalry with their creator in eating the forbidden fruit and thereby grasping at knowledge of good and evil on our own: “You will be like gods,” Eve is told by the underhanded, sidewinding serpent, a good metaphor of misdirection. That same envy, the decalogue’s tenth, last, final word on our outlawry, is replicated in our first parents’ children: Cain, alleged as the builder of cities, of properly social order, commits the first murder in envious rivalry with his brother Abel for

God's favor. St. Paul warns against the "sins of the flesh," which standard exegesis identifies as the social world, bound together by bad imitation, to which he opposes the imitation of Christ: "I live; yet *not I, but Christ* lives in *me*: and the life which I now live in the flesh I live by the faith of the Son" (Gal. 2.20). The Hebrew word for what we causally label as sin is, in Robert Alter's masterful translations, "offense," "transgression," "crimes," highlighting not its intrapsychic but its interactional dispositions. Israel's and Christianity's Lord of Creation is by right reason offended when we overstep our neighbor's prerogatives as well His own, which are indelibly the same. Cavanaugh frequently avails himself of the very biblical difference, often overlooked by Girardians, between grasping and receiving.

Such lexical discrepancies regarding mimetic theory as I've indicated pale beside the virtual collaborations between Girard's work and Cavanaugh's own, as exhibited in his several books on religion and violence, and on self-deceptions driving our confusions about them. Their singular achievements are mutually confirmative as they illuminate the dark corners of our modernity, of "things hidden," per Girard, "since the foundation of the world." French and English share an adage about such concurrences in truth-saying: "*les grands esprits se rencontrent*"; great minds think alike.