William Cavanaugh on Theopolitical Imagination

By Bengt Rasmusson, 2007-02-02

As a kind of manifesto the Catholic and Radical Orthodoxy theologian William Cavanaugh in his book *Theopolitical Imagination* calls for a theologically informed vision of politics, a vision that can help the church to break out of its captivity to political, social, and economical myths of modernity. This can be said to be a vision of "theological politics" – or a post-secular political theology – that situates itself in contrast to public theology, political theology, and liberation theology.

The myths of modernity which Cavanaugh addresses in this book is the myth of the (nation)state as saviour, the myth of civil society a free space, and the myth of globalisation as a form of true catholicity or universality.

The myth of the state as saviour

The myth says: "The state had to step in and redefine and privatize religion in order to keep peace." ... This is nothing other than an alternative salvation story, a "theology in disguise".

Modern political theory (and liberalism) starts, says Cavanaugh, with the assumption that in the beginning there was the free individual and (more or less) violence. The founding fathers of modern politics – Hobbes, Locke, and Rousseau – all agree that we enter into society by way of a social contract and we do that as a way to protect our stuff, as a way of being protected from each other (Hobbes goes so far as to depict the "state of nature" as "the war of all against all"). The cause of the development of the sovereign state[1] was then to promote and protect the common good, in other words, to bring peace between competing individuals in general and between competing religious factions in particular, manifested above all in Western history in the "Wars of Religion" of the 16th and 17th centuries. Religion is – so the common wisdom goes – inherently violent since it is absolutist, divisive, and irrational. The state had then to step in and redefine and privatise religion (since it needed to have its subjects primary loyalty; the church can continue to care about souls, as long as the bodies of its members is handed over to the state) in order to keep peace. In other words: the Church or Christianity was (as is Islam today) "perhaps the primary thing[s] from which the modern state is meant to save us."[2]

Is this a "secular" theory based on neutrality and objectivity, asks Cavanaugh. No, it is nothing other than an alternative salvation story, a "theology in disguise" and, from a Christian point of view where you see the ground for true unity in the participation in God, "a false or 'heretical' soteriology."[3]. In trying to bring this basic myth into contact with actual history, he shows convincingly that the "Wars of Religion" is primarily *caused* by the rise of the modern state and its absolutistic claims on sovereignty (a process that perhaps began already in the 13th century), and is not the crisis that necessitated it. The entire state apparatus came primarily[4] into being to enable princes to make war. They needed more effective ways

[1] In *Theopolitical Imagination* Cavanaugh defines the state in the following way: "that peculiar institution which has arisen in the last four centuries in which a centralized and abstract power holds a monopoly over physical coercion within a geographically defined territory" (p. 10).
[2] *Ibid*, p. 20.
[3] *Ibid*, p. 2.
[4] Other reasons can be "the rise of capital market, technological innovations, geographical position, the introduction of Roman law, and urbanization" (*Killing*, p. 250).

to extract resources from the local population than the earlier forms of governance (e.g. empire, city-state, lordship) had made possible and in which people's political loyalties were based not necessarily on territoriality, but on feudal ties, kinship, religious or tribal affiliation). Regarding the more recent development in the history of political organization that we call "the nation-state" (we are talking about the 18th century), he says that it is "the result of the fusion of the idea of the nation – a unitary system of shared cultural attributes – with the political apparatus of the state. … It is only after the state and its claims to territorial sovereignty are established that nationalism arises to unify culturally what had been gathered inside state borders."[5]

"War made the state, and the state made the war."

To summarize his position regarding the "sub-myth" of religious violence, Cavanaugh often quotes Charles Tilly: "War made the state, and the state made the war."[6]. And one only needs to remember all the wars of the 19th and 20th century to see the truth in this. So much for the myth of the state as saviour, peacekeeper and protector of the common good. Cavanaugh writes: "violence becomes the state's *relegio*, its habitual discipline for binding us one to another."[7]

Perhaps one could argue that the nation-state at least internally (within its borders) works for the common good. But the reconciliation provided by the nation-state, claims Cavanaugh, "only comes after the creation of a prior antagonism, the creation of a novel form of simple social space that oscillates between the individual and the state." It is only the result of "an – ultimately tragic – attempt to ward off social conflict by keeping individuals from interfering with each other."[8]

Anyway, since the Church more or less (not always consciously) accepted this myth, with its duality between public and private and the creed that public faith "has a dangerous tendency to violence"[9], it has lost its vision of the "'political' nature of faith" and instead accepted the privatisation of faith, and has come to see its own role as a kind of apolitical provider of values or as an interest organisation and the state as the primary agent of social change.

The myth of civil society a free space

Is there a way out of this confinement of the Church and the Christian faith to the private sphere, which does not just redo the mistakes of Constantinianism or Christendom, the idea that the church needs to dominate the state or at least go hand in hand with it? Here has recently the civil society, seen as a free space of institutions like family, trade unions, schools, corporations, and churches, come into vogue as a middle way. Cavanaugh exemplifies by discussing John Courtney Murray and public theology with its accent on public policy and reasoned consensus, and the model based on the work of Harry Boyte with its accent on the democratic potential of civil society itself, on the empowerment of grassroots citizens' groups and local community action ("public achievement").

Even if Cavanaugh is more positive toward the Boyte's model than Murray's, he thinks that both models share a naïve faith in the myth that civil society is a free space. He shows here and in other writings that contrary to much popular thought it is the state that gives rise to society and not vice versa and that the state is not a limited part of society, but has in fact –

[5] *Killing*, p. 246.
[6] See e.g. *Killing*, p. 249.
[7] *Theopolitical Imagination*, p. 46.
[8] *Killing*, pp. 254, 255.
[9] *Theopolitical Imagination*, p. 46.

especially since the transition from state to nation-state and the emerging symbiosis of the state and the market – expanded and become *fused* with society.[10]

So civil society can hardly been seen as a free space. What we have is "a society of individuals alienated from substantive forms of common life."[11] In the end we either think that our political responsibility is best shown in our asking the state to do something about our problems or we try to awaken the church to greater social responsibility, but all is cast in terms of citizenship and the ultimate end of renewal of our nation-state's democracy (good citizens of USA or Sweden, and not first good citizens of the kingdom of God). Moreover, the price the Church has to pay for the admission to the "public" is a "submission of its particular truth claims to the bar of public reason."[12]

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And what do we have left? Just a church as "an essentially asocial entity that provides only 'motivations' and 'values' for public action"[13] and in from the back comes, so to speak, the nation-state as our primary community. Whatever happened, asks Cavanaugh, with "the possibility of the Church as a significant social space … an alternative 'space' or set of practices whose citizenship is in some sort of tension with citizenship in the *civitas terrena*"?[14]

The myth of globalisation as a form of true catholicity

If the state is a parody on the Church and the civil society can't be the free space where the Church can regain political responsibility, maybe the globalisation is a hopeful sign? The advance of globalisation has in some ways eroded the nation-states sovereignty, something which may open up, says Cavanaugh, "interesting possibilities for reimagination of more complex political spaces"[15] compared to the nation-state's simple space between the sovereign and the individual. But for the moment, he thinks, "corporations are the primary beneficiaries."

One could believe that the nation-state and the globalisation are mortal enemies. But that is not so, Cavanaugh maintains. Actually the nation-state has in some ways promoted the development. Globalisation is in fact "a hyperextension of the nation-state's project of subsuming the local under the universal."[16]. "Just as the state enacted a unitary national market" freed from interventions of local customs and the authority of families, guilds, clans, unions, churches, "so now the global market is taking it's place. Government has not disappeared but become decentralized and partially deterritorialized."[17].

It is a kind of vision of the world as being all one big village, a vision of true catholicity that produces peace and overcomes division. But actually, new global divisions are being produced, between rich and poor, north and south. It also produces fragmented subjects that, due to localities competing for capital, hover between an apparent attachment to the local and forced detachment from the local. "[T]he subject created is the …

The subject created is the ... universal homogeneous consumer.

[10] See his discussion in *Killing*, pp. 255ff.
[11] *Ibid*, p. 258.
[12] *Theopolitical Imagination*, p. 80.
[13] *Ibid*, p. 84.
[14] *Ibid*, p. 83–84.
[15] *Killing*, p. 265.
[16] *Theopolitical Imagination*, p. 99.
[17] *Killing*, p. 265.

universal homogeneous consumer", which prise the local and particular because of its novelty, but "whose 'catholic' tastes preclude him from attachment to any particular narratives."[18]

An Eucharistic counter politics

Is there a way forward? For Cavanaugh the only fruitful way forward in this context is "to tap the theological resources of the Christian tradition for more radical imaginings of space and time … around which to enact communities of solidarity and resistance."[19] He finds these more radical imaginations – which can expose the false theologies of our times – primarily in the Eucharist, in a "Eucharistic counter politics."

At the Eucharist the church is created, it becomes a body of a peculiar type: the body of Christ. It is body that transfigures *space* by overcoming privatization and comodification of the faith, a body which in itself is a true public space and enacts an alternative vision of community, a body that is truly catholic in that it becomes more universal the more it is tied a concrete, local community. It is a also a body which transfigures *time* by living with a dangerous "memory of the future", a memory of the future that makes it easier to see through false claims of sovereignty and that gives an eschatological anticipation of a new world which interrupts the homogeneous, empty time of the nation-state and the market, a time with unrelated presents, a time without end, without a telos.

Through the Eucharist, through this transfiguration of space and time, we can, says Cavanaugh, start to see the church, not so much as an organisation, but as a drama, a pilgrimage (using itineraries rather than maps) through time and space, on foot, so to speak, in close contact with real human beings.

Reflections, comments, and questions

I am in deep sympathy with Cavanaugh in his trying to formulate a theological politics, his critique of public and political theology for not being public and political enough. His emphasis on the Church as a true *res publica* in its own right is welcome. The Church cannot inhabit the private, apolitical space that has been assigned to it by modernity without being suffocated, without loosing its *true* relevance in the world. But this political relevance is not to be found in striving for power within the apparatus of the state, does not begin and end with lobbying for influence over state policy (in the hope that the state is the potential solution to any given social ill), because in doing so it will be difficult for the Church to escape the salvation story the state and the market embodies, and the temptation to translate the politics of Jesus in more universal and neutral terms – in so called "public terms" accessible to policy-makers – will be too strong.

The Church is itself (or is meant to be) an ekklesia, a sphere were politics proper happens.

Civil society may seem to be the rescue path, but that is to miss how colonized or fused it is with both the nation-state and the market, and accepting as a given that the Church is but one particular interest association among many, just a bridge between the supposed universal state and the free individual, whose main role then is to form good citizens.

To reclaim its true relevance and responsibility (these hallowed words of modernity!) the Church must break its imagination out of captivity to the nation-state and the market. It must see and constitute itself for what it is: an alternative social space. The Church is itself (or is meant to be) an *ekklesia*, a sphere were politics proper happens. It is a public body with a universal claim, because "it participates in the life of the triune God, who is the only good that

[18] *Theopolitical Imagination*, p. 111.
[19] *Ibid*, p. 4.

can be common to all"[20] and has become part of a salvation adventure with cosmic proportions, that knows of no borders, neither in space (the Church as international and inclusive) nor time (the Church as a memory and presence of the future).

But even if I am in fundamental agreement with Cavanaugh, there are some issues, or rather tendencies, which I find problematic. From what he says in passing in *Theopolitical Imagination* and elsewhere I can see that he certainly is aware of them, but I can't find that he really get down to them.

One problem is a lurking absolutifying tendency. This is especially visible in his critique of civil society as a free space. Isn't he often painting too much in black and white? In spite of his expressed intention, isn't there a risk of portraying the Church as only a separate space, only a rival performance, which just borders on society (maybe my own formulations above also could be interpreted in that way)? Even if we can't rely on the state to do justice and even if the Church shouldn't just be considered as one particular interest organisation among others within civil society, isn't there still a loot of room for *ad hoc* relations, creative non-systemtic possibilities for co-operation in acceptance of the messiness and contingency of the society and the world? Cavanaugh rightly refuses to accept Constantinianism and withdrawal from the public reality as our only choices when talking about the political nature of the Christian story of salvation. But he seems to prefer Augustine's model of the two cities (which, admittedly, he tries to interpret narratively rather than spatially) before the Jeremian diaspora model ("seek the peace of the city", Jer 29:7), even if he in passing mention the latter.[21] Isn't there a risk to succumb to the Constantinian temptation of self-absolutization in the former model? Anyway, I think the latter is a more fruitful model if we want to imagine a church with a clear and visible (but not static!) identity given by the grace of God, which lives in the middle of society, working for its good, without trying to be in control, without trying to set the agenda, without using any form of coercion, without trying to be "everyone". Is it symptomatic that the Mennonite theologian John Howard Yoder, who developed an account of the nomadic, diasporic, non-territorial existence of the church, can see dispersion and scattering as mission, as vocation, as expression of the grace of God, while Cavanaugh only can see it as a sin, an evil?[22]

Is Cavanaugh's view of the Church social and bodily enough?

But there is also another, maybe related, problem: is Cavanaugh's view of the Church social and bodily enough? I ask because of his (as a Catholic?) rather one-sided emphasis on the Eucharist as the primary basis for the Church's counter-politics. There is a tendency here to reduce the church to the Eucharist. But is it really possible to separate this practice from all the other practices that should constitute the Church? Of course, Cavanaugh doesn't believe that. He can say: "In the Church, then, the practices of the liturgy, the creeds, the scriptural canon, hospitality, binding and loosing, the exercise of Episcopal authority, all constitute the Church as a distinctive public body."[23]. And he mentions its social reality when balancing his discussion by pointing out the problems that exist. In *Theopolitical Imagination*, for instance, he says: "the Eucharist can be falsely told… many of our Eucharist celebrations … have been colonized by banal consumerism and global sentimentality."[24] But I don't find that he really expand on all these (and as far as I remember I haven't seen one reference to the ecumenical scandal of separate Eucharistic tables!). Instead he develops a vision of the Eucharist that

[20] *Killing*, p. 269.
[21] *Theopolitical Imagination*, p.114.
[22] See *For the Nations*, pp. 63ff and compare it with Cavanaugh's account in *Theopolitical Imagination*, p. 12; see also Yoder's book *Jewish-Christian Schism*.
[23] *Theopolitical Imagination*, p. 90.
[24] P. 121.

stresses its sacramental aspects at the expense of its social, and its forming imagination at the expense of its forming character and desire.

And all this marks his overall view of the Church. In his contribution to *The Blackwell Companion to Christian Ethics*, "Discerning: Politics and Reconciliation", he writes: "We hardly need reminding of the manifest sinfulness of those who gather in the name of Christ and his Church. In this light it is helpful to think of the Church not as a location or an organisation, but more like an enacted drama; it is the liturgy that makes the Church. In this drama there is a constant dialectic between sin and salvation, scattering and gathering."[25]

Is it really enough to see the Church as a drama of a constant dialectic between sin and salvation, in a time when capitalism has taken over as a therapy and discipline of the constitutive human power that we call desire? Is perhaps Cavanaugh's view of the global market too simplistic? If Daniel Bell, another Radical Orthodoxy theologian, is right when he says: "Capitalism is an ensemble of technologies that disciplines desire according to the logic of production for the market,"[26] then perhaps it is time to recover a view of the Church as an alternative way of life together that counters nation-state and capitalism by liberating and healing desire. Doesn't this need an everyday life together, strong enough to form character and heal desire?

It doesn't seem that Cavanaugh is willing to go this way. In a radio interview in June 2005 he says, with reference to his book *Theopolitical Imagination*: "A lot of what I am saying I think can be constructed as … an appeal for a leaner and meaner church, as it were, a kind of tighter, more disciplined, more organized church that would be smaller. … that is not the kind of vision of the church that I am really seeing at all. … I think there is an unfortunate tendency amongst some in the church today to put a little bit too much emphasis on drawing boundaries and not enough emphasis on the centre of the church".

Of course we should put our emphasis on the centre of the church, but doesn't that today mean a more disciplined social and bodily life together, strong enough to break out of a life of endless consumption? We have to draw boundaries, not boundaries of exclusivism, not boundaries of a fixed, unbending, and self-sustaining identity to be persevered at all costs, but boundaries of renewal – in "receptivity to God's ongoing generosity" and in "an ongoing negotiation with the other"[27] – that "makes" the church a visible, social, and non-coercive alternative, an inviting example worth considering.

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[25] P. 205.
[26] *Liberation Theology*, p. 99.
[27] Chris Huebner on Yoder in *A Precarious Peace*, p. 125.

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