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BOOK REVIEW

Cavanaugh, William T. 2024. *The Uses of Idolatry*

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Reviewed by Scott J. Hagley

It is difficult to attend a football game at Lambeau Field in Green Bay or Anfield in Liverpool and not recognize the tell-tale signs of religious enthusiasm. Sportscasters call these cathedrals to sport and capital "hallowed ground" in reverence to the storied histories of these two clubs. Fans throw themselves into certain liturgies, learned by imitation and repetition and passed on from generation to generation: singing the songs, drinking the beers, dressing in the colours, carrying totems for luck and good fortune. And when Steven Girard hits a strike from 35 yards out to win in stoppage time, or Aaron Rogers heaves a sixty-yard pass into the back corner of the endzone with seconds on the clock, tens of thousands of people are thrust into the kind of revelry usually reserved for the sawdust trail. For all our interest in the "secular West" and our age of "disenchantment", the signs of religious commitment are present for those with eyes to see.

In *The Uses of Idolatry,* William Cavanaugh explores the intense religiosity of our secular age, arguing that we willfully misunderstand the current moment by using terms like "disenchantment" to talk about late modernity. As Anfield or Amazon or resurgent nationalisms demonstrate, we live in an age of *misenchantment,* not disenchantment. Drawing together Durkheim and Augustine, Cavanaugh reminds us that we are, in fact, worshipping creatures who cannot help but create rituals and liturgies to integrate and organize our social life according to particular social goods. That we no longer do this by way of explicit religious communities does not change the functional religiosity of things like consumer capitalism and nationalism.

For Cavanaugh, "disenchantment" serves a polemical purpose, creating a sense of discontinuity between modern and pre-modern societies and flattering us with stories of rational progress. But a closer look at our theories of modern disenchantment makes such polemics harder to sustain. Cavanaugh turns to Max Weber's theory of rationalization and Charles Taylor's framing of the immanent frame to

show how the enchanted nature of human society is never able to be written out of the story. Weber, for instance, uses rationalization to describe the migration of religious belief form one realm to another. Capitalism, shaped by Puritan "inner worldly aestheticism" empties the world of meaning, trading ends for means and giving us over to the impersonal forces of the market and technology – the "iron cage" of modernity. Weber, Cavanaugh notes, does not use "death of God" language, but rather describes modernity as a new form of polytheism. The old gods are resurrected – Apollo become capital (41). As with former polytheistic eras, we are pushed and pulled by forces beyond our control, with the difference being the impersonality of modern bureaucracy and technology and capital flows, along with the possibility of choice. But make no mistake, Weber found the "border between enchantment and disenchantment" hard to defend (43). Cavanaugh concludes: "An exchange has taken place, whereby God has been depersonalized, reduced to merely immanent and impersonal forces of human creation, while the most mundane and rational processes and institutions have been divinized … enchantment and disenchantment are inextricably entangled" (47).

Cavanaugh identifies a similar tension in Charles Taylor's work, arguing that Taylor is unable to maintain the binaries that describe our current age as secular, such as belief/unbelief, religious/nonreligious, immanent/transcendent. Drawing from Emile Durkheim's functionalist theory of religion, Cavanaugh shows how Taylor's account ignores modern religious activity that falls outside the bounds of religious belief. Capitalism and nationalism, for example, exhibit a Durkheimian religious function, but no discernible belief in God or gods, and so they fall to the side of Taylor's account. Secularization, Cavanaugh argues, "is the very invention of the religious/secular binary and the process by which certain things got labeled religious and others did not" (99). For "it is not religion that has declined, but Christianity" (102).

Because our world is *misenchanted* rather than *disenchanted,* idolatry offers a useful framework for thinking about the nature of Christian practice and theology in two different ways. At the most basic level, idolatry describes the objective worship of false gods in modern life. Working with the biblical tradition and Augustine, Cavanaugh explores the corrupting nature of idolatry, misdirected desire that distorts our sense of self, God and world. Here Cavanaugh echoes traditional jeremiads against the evils and dangers of idolatry. But idolatry offers a second, more nuanced frame for thinking about modernity. Not all idolatries are created equal. Turning to Jean-Luc Marion's phenomenology of the idol and his notion of "splendid idolatry", Cavanaugh places nationalism and consumerism on the continuum of idolatries. While nationalism certainly distorts our relationship with one another and God, it contains a "splendid" dimension as well. As a type of "splendid idolatry", nationalism draws us out of ourselves and cultivates in us a desire for something greater than the self, an urge to give ourselves to something transcendent. Consumerism, however, does the

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reverse. It offers a self-enclosed and enclosing form of idolatry, a hall-of-mirrors that leaves one worshipping the self, or the image of the self.

Those familiar with Cavanaugh's other works on capitalism and nationalism, such as *Being Consumed* and *Migrations of the Holy,* will not be surprised that the book ends with a meditation on the Sacraments and Incarnation. The consequence of misenchantment, he argues, is not materialism but rather a form of disembodiment, an attempt to escape from the world of things and our existence as creatures. In Cavanaugh's view, the Incarnation affirms God's solidarity with creation, offering the possibility that what is created can be *icon* and not only idol. The Sacraments – distinguished from principles of sacramentality – place us within the story of God and God's people and on the continuum between idol and icon. They are given by God, a concrete place in which God gives of Godself, but they are also a practice we give ourselves to, thus speaking in a kind of "'middle voice', in which humans are neither simply active nor passive in the face of God's action" (375). Idolatry, in the end, "can be healed only by encounter with the living God … [for] to worship the incarnate God is to participate in God's kenosis; rather than grasp God, we allow ourselves to be poured out in the encounter with God, to receive the presence of God as a gift" (382).

In many respects, *The Uses of Idolatry* introduces important and troubling lines of inquiry into the tired "Post-Christendom" discourse. By subverting well-worn accounts of Weber and Taylor, he shifts attention away from declining church attendance to what he calls the "migrations of the holy" in Western contexts. And by interrogating late modernity with a thick understanding of idolatry, he affirms the importance of Christian worship and sacramentality in this misenchanted time. But it is also here, in considering the Sacraments, where Cavanaugh becomes the most predictable and perhaps the least demanding of his readers when considered against the "splendid" and "unsplendid" idolatries of nationalism and consumerism, or of pop culture and sports fandom. The rise of violent ethno-nationalisms in the United States and Europe within and amid Christian communities affirms Cavanaugh's basic insight regarding idolatry and late modernity. However, the fact that this is happening, not only among evangelicals and Pentecostals, but also within Catholic and Orthodox communities characterized by the type of sacramentality to which Cavanaugh appeals, raises new questions about the conditions of possibility for encountering the living God, and what faithful witness to this God looks like in our misenchanted time.

About the Reviewer

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