



WEEK 6: "NO SUCH THING AS ATHEISM - SECULARIZATION AND IDOLATRY"

BY WILLIAM CAVANAUGH

[WATCH OR LISTEN TO THE SESSION: BIT.LY/2JMOTLY](https://bit.ly/2JMOTLY)

SYNOPSIS: There is a great deal of concern in the Church over the rise of "Nones," and the rise of atheism in general in our culture. Many argue (Charles Taylor, et al.) that, with the rise of the modern world, a "disenchantment" occurred that split the natural world from the transcendent, and this has given rise to the movement of so many away from the Church and into atheism (lack of belief in God). Cavanaugh suggests this argument is misguided, however, and wants to reframe it through the lens of a biblical critique of idolatry.

According to Cavanaugh, the Bible is silent on atheism because it is assumed that atheism is not possible for most human beings. The Bible does have a lot to say about idolatry, but not always in the ways we have typically understood the term. Cavanaugh argues that idolatry in the Scriptures is far more about behavior than it is about belief. It is less about a conceptual error, but rather about error in devotion. In other words, idolatry exists both towards the transcendent and immanent realms (worship of others "gods" and worship of things in the natural world alike). Humans are worshipping creatures whose devotion falls on all kinds of things that are not God. As David Foster Wallace once said: "In the day to day trenches of adult life, there is actually no such thing as atheism, there is no such thing as not worshipping. Everybody worships...". Cavanaugh goes on to consider nationalism and consumerism as two examples of how idolatry exists in our current cultural context. Both demand loyalty/commitments from us, both are manifested in symbols/rituals, both employ narratives of salvation, etc.

As we consider our current cultural context, this biblical critique of idolatry is one way we can consider the church's engagement with the world. We can acknowledge that we all have devotions and commitments (idols) that are not God; and underneath everything we do, we're all longing for transcendence. This is the basis for a sympathetic outreach. In the end, however, the only way to oppose a false enchantment is to offer people a better enchantment, one that is rooted and grounded in the incarnation of Jesus Christ. We need to proclaim that the world is enchanted by the true God, who came to us in material form. And we need to show that Christianity is a practice of seeing and enacting the presence of God in all things.

Cavanaugh suggests the Eucharist as a means to demonstrate this reality each and every week, arguing that it is not just some superfluous ritual, but a different, richer way of dealing with the material world, and an important way for us to reject the artificial division between secular and sacred. "So the formal sacraments of the church are the burning focal points of God's presence in material reality." And we need these "focal points," not only to train our senses to see God's presence everywhere else, but also to change our desires and longings away from our idols and towards God.

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS:

1. Do you think it would be effective to engage culture on the grounds of mutual idolatry—that is, all of us are idolaters of something that is not God (“everyone worships”)? Why or why not? How might this change your current witness to those around you?
2. Cavanaugh mentioned nationalism and consumerism as two examples of modern “immanent” idolatry. Can you think of tangible ways these two examples are idolatrous? Can you think of other examples of idolatry?
3. Cavanaugh said: “Idolatry critique in the Bible is most properly self-critique. We would do well to direct idolatry critique at ourselves and our own daily practices, because we are all idolaters, of course.” What idols (transcendent or immanent) do you find yourself worshipping?
4. Can you think of questions that might help start a conversation about idolatry/worship with non-Christians/atheists/Nones?
5. How can we teach/train the people in our communities to see and understand the sacraments in the way Cavanaugh describes as “burning focal points of God’s presence in material reality”? Do your current sacramental practices and teaching point toward this reality?
6. Outside of the sacraments, how can the Church “offer better enchantments” than the world has to give? What might that look like?
7. Near the end, Cavanaugh argued that the Eucharist (and sacraments more generally) are not just better “enchantments” for people to consume, but they also “turn the act of consumption inside-out” and consume us, reconstituting the Church into a different community that, like bread, is defined by “being broken and given away and shared and consumed.” What are the implications of this perspective on the Eucharist and the church’s witness to the world?

ADDITIONAL RESOURCES:

Books by William Cavanaugh:

[*Field Hospital: The Church’s Engagement with a Wounded World*](#)

[*Migrations of the Holy: Theologies of State and Church*](#)

[*Being Consumed: Economics and Christian Desire*](#)

[*Torture and Eucharist: Theology, Politics, and the Body of Christ*](#)

A speech and book Cavanaugh referenced in his session

[*“This is Water” Commencement Speech*](#) by David Foster Wallace

[*Infinite Jest*](#) by David Foster Wallace

WEEKLY PRACTICE:

Consider a friend or acquaintance who is a non-Christian/atheist/None who would be open to an honest conversation about worship/idolatry. Present Cavanaugh’s argument to them and have a conversation about it. What is worship? Can we worship material things? What does that look like? And do you think it’s true that this is tied to a longing for transcendence?

or

Take an hour to reflect, either by yourself or with a small group, on the modern-day idols you worship. What are the beliefs, rituals and symbols, grand narratives of providence and/or salvation, and employments of sacrifice that are involved in these “idols?” How have these influenced you?