

1997

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Recommended Citation

Stackhouse, Max L. (1997) "In the Company of Hauerwas," *Journal for Christian Theological Research*: Vol. 2 , Article 1.

Available at: <http://digitalcommons.luthersem.edu/jctr/vol2/iss1997/1>

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In the Company of Hauerwas¹

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1. I have been asked rather frequently as of late to respond in formal and informal settings to this or that writing by Stanley Hauerwas. I am not sure why. Maybe it is a conspiracy to get me to read him more. Perhaps some want to see sparks fly. Possibly they want to seduce me into a stance I do not now hold. They will be disappointed, for if I have anything to do with it we are not going to see fireworks or a public seduction. I believe in conversion, but not to some theologies. It may, however, become more clear that we agree at certain levels even if we disagree on what I believe to be key, substantive points.
2. I must admit that I never know quite how to respond to Stanley. He reads widely, thinks fast, and writes fresh. He is seldom boring. Frustrating perhaps, repetitive often. One reads his books and has not only *déjà vu*, but hears him speak and has *déjà dit*. I think I've heard him say that before although it is sometimes fresh twice and the audacity of it bemuses at least as much as it irritates. In some ways, that is an advantage. I do not have to lay out what his views and perspectives are, for everyone knows them in one version or another already. Besides, they correspond to certain features of American frontier pietism that resonate with many.
3. Knowing how to respond, however, is complicated by the fact that his thought is so laden with his presence. His enmities and his friends, his loves and his hates, his perceptions and his biases show up at every turn, and it is difficult to distinguish him from his ideas. Any criticism of his thought thus tends to sound like an *ad hominem* criticism of him personally. In this respect, I sometimes think that he not only sounds like Ross Perot, but plays the same role in American religion that Perot plays in American politics; but that may not be quite right for Stanley gives credit to his disciples. Still, the vigor of his style commends him and everyone knows that his persona is on display in everything he says and how he says it.
4. For example, I once wrote a book on the theological and ecclesiological basis (and the nontheological distortions) of human rights.² I argued that after the church joined biblical ideas to philosophical insights to form theology, and carved out a new kind of social space in society on that basis, subsequent theorists set forth the implications of these developments in a way that allowed widespread recognition of human rights that people ought not be tortured, that they had a right to freedom of worship, speech and press, etc. The spreading of such ideas allowed those influenced by them and the social changes they entail to pass human rights provisions into law. It was an enormous contribution by the faith to the world. I also pointed out that these rights were fragile without enduring theological foundations such as the doctrines of *imago dei*, the grace of reason, the providential orders of society, and the doctrine of vocation whereby people find themselves called to be participants in God's gracious sustaining of life as they work in various spheres of life outside the church. Modern, secular theorists kept the flower but threw out the root ideas, a development that made human rights appear more groundless than they were.
5. Stanley passed me in a corridor at the next AAR and said "Max, you are the most liberal conservative or conservative liberal I know; but I don't know which." He walked on. His brash categorization and confrontative labeling is part of who he is as well as what he thinks. How does one respond? This is a problem for me. Wherever he wants to put me, I don't, and I don't think most of the church fits his spectrum of liberal and conservative options or his account of the way the church and its theology has been and is related to areas of life outside its inner narrative. The mindmaps by which he reads the faith and charts the world do not compute, especially since everything he doesn't like goes under the tag of "liberal" with human rights, democracy, "orders" (or "spheres"), and "vocation" among the things he does not like (he says, in the book we are discussing, "vocation" makes humans cocreators with God, compromising God). I not only doubt the specific point, I get confused by him on points like this, for such matters seem to be just the integration of doctrine and ethics that his article on "Christian Ethics" demands.³ I fully agree that ethics is a fragile science and that it needs theology to sustain it; but he turns around and blasts the idea when it does not suit his preferences.
6. Part of my puzzlement is how one can challenge someone who, as it were, hits and runs and who claims, at least, not to believe in principles of right and wrong. Some time ago I was asked to review a book of his, a volume I don't like very much.⁴ Among other things, he argues again, *déjà dit*, that ethics is all about virtues and practices and stories, and not related to such "abstractions" as right and wrong. Now, for one thing, I think that is a mistake. I do not see how any ethic that claims to be rooted in a tradition that is quite aware of the Laws of God can avoid principles of right and wrong. They surely are not everything in ethics; but they are not dispensable.
7. Am I missing something? How can he speak of Christian continuity with Israel without recognizing that the very center of Jewish ethical identity and worship is the *Torah*, the primary historical testimony that universal moral principles are central to the grace of covenantal living, constitutive of the social order, decisive for the duty to be a light to the nations, and not at all the construction of some *polis* or social contract? In any case, a few weeks later he came to campus to talk to one of the courses. I saw him in the dining room. He came over to me and said "Max, you're wrong!" Fortunately, I had my wits about me that day. "Stanley," I asked, "how would you ever know?"
8. I face the problem of how to respond here, to this material. I pray that we are now "In Good Company," but you should know at the outset that I think it is wrong, descriptively and normatively, to see the church as *polis*. I know that Stanley is drawing the idea from Arne Rasmussen's treatment of his work, contrasting his view from the political theology of Moltmann. Political theology, Rasmussen says, is concerned with the political struggle for emancipation/liberation, the horizon within which the church's faith and practice is interpreted by many. In contrast, seeing the church as *polis* takes the church's story as the "counterstory" to the world's politics. I don't believe this, and have the same problem here as with his liberal/conservative spectrum. This is surely not the only, and I do not think the best, way of dealing with the turn of many to liberationist ideologies.
9. Some of us have been speaking of "public theology" for nearly two decades precisely to avoid both ends of this false dichotomy, as if they were the only options. A third option seems to be off his scope. In spite of the fact that "evangelicals" often say we are too liberal, and "ecumenicals" say we are too conservative, I stand with that growing number who think that the true public as in public worship, public opinion, public discourse, public morals, and especially public theology (which is inevitably is the organizing center and evaluative critic of the others over time) is prior to the republic. The decisive core of public meaning, theology, is neither private, privileged, and esoteric nor governmental, political and obvious to all. But that makes it no less pertinent to persons, to the common life, or universal in implication. Instead, the conjunction of theology and public discourse has implications for both selves and collectivities which both libertarian individualists and liberationist communitarians repeatedly miss.
10. The implications include the fact that, structurally, nothing else than religiously shaped values and the networks of interdependent relationships and institutions (always shaped by the church or some other "religious" movement or organization) is the core of civil society, and it is among the tasks of public theology in its ethical dimensions to discern, guide, oppose, form, and reform both persons and civilizations as needed through the constructive and reconstructive engagement in civil society. The Aristotelian presumption that "public" means politics in the governmental sense of a comprehending and ruling institution is precisely what is avoided. Rather, it proposes a social theory of politics rather than a political theory of society, for in the latter the church, to be itself, must become a *polis* to oppose the political order. Against these options, some of us hold closer to the central idea of "the city of God." to use Augustine's phrase. It is not the church, but is the morally and spiritually ordered actualization of grace working among and within people in the heart and in personal relationships, as well as in both church and society.
11. How to treat such matters as this? I was tempted in writing these comments to press such points critically. For example, I think it would be possible to show how dependence on MacIntyre's thinly veiled Marxist-Leninist, then Nietzschean reading of modern society makes for a poor reading of the social ethos and, for that matter, of theological ethics, in part because he is so contemptuous of Protestant (especially Puritan and Pietist) contributions to ethics.⁵ Nor do I think that we should be so confident of the human capacity to cultivate virtues by habituation to overcome evil, or so doubtful of the capacities for humans to carry on commensurable discourse about serious matters between contexts.

12. I could also argue that dependence on John Howard Yoder and George Lindbeck, whose writings he cites in almost every book, misleads the church on how it is and should be related to public ethical issues. On the whole, this Mennonite and this Lutheran both think that most Protestant Ethics has been a terrible error. One might also ask whether the characterizations of Reinhold Niebuhr and James Gustafson, also in almost every volume, are reliable and fair. I don't think so. I am also convinced that his affinities for John Milbank's reading of the relationship of theology and social theory are misplaced, and that one can easily quote opinions from Hauerwas about social and economic matters are indistinguishable from those of the "liberal" Jürgen Moltmann or the "liberationist" Rosemary Ruether from whom he wants to distance himself.
13. But another response may be more helpful. Can we find areas of agreement? I think we can. There are many small ones that we need not discuss; and there is at least one muddled one that I want to discuss. And these are all less than the biggest one that we need not, I pray, take up. That is this: I presume we are both seeking to discover and teach with intellectual integrity in a way that is faithful to the triune God whom we know in Jesus Christ and who is present to us in the very church that failed, while the world was faced with the threats of Fascism and Communism, to form the character of persons as vigorously as it should have. And, to put the agreement another way, I think that we could take communion together in that church.
14. The muddled partial agreement within this greatest commonality is that we both have a high regard for John Paul II's *Centessimus Annus* ("On the Hundredth Anniversary"), which he treats at some length. I choose it precisely because it is an area of partial overlap, and it forces us to face together a number of issues that are critical for the church and theology today.
15. One of these issues can be stated this way: Protestant theology of the past several centuries, some say since the Peace of Westphalia, has been tied to nationalistic thinking and institutions. An enormous amount of Protestant political theology is, essentially, nationalistic in its definition of the "us." For some, this takes the form of a sanctified patriotism that accompanies militarism, for others it takes the form of always designing ethics so that it will speak to national policy whether civil rights, health care or welfare policy, or whatever. Catholic theology in its "Romanist," "Americanist," and Liberationist forms has also been tempted by this. but the very fact of catholicity has kept it from confusing its soul with that of the nation. Hauerwas likes that. So do I.
16. However, we may like it for somewhat different reasons. If I understand him correctly, he likes it because it allows us to take the church as our *polis* and not the nation-state. I don't think that this is the best reason. I like it because I think that the church must address the public by influencing civil society, by contributing to what others call the "moral ecology" of the common life. Two areas that are distinct from the state, but decisive for our future on earth and for the patterns of life we develop as we seek to anticipate the life to come namely, the neighborhood-urban-metropolitan crises, below the state, and the new regional-global-cosmopolitan developments, beyond the state. These represent simultaneously disruptive changes in the center of organization and emerging, social interdependencies for which there is, at present, no *polis*. They both require a new ecumenicity, a new catholicity of spirit and a new evangelical zeal for reformation.
17. I believe what the Pope argues at this point, and what Stanley ignores: that the church must address these emergent complexes from the standpoint of a theologically-grounded ethic, not simply from that of a neo-Aristotelian theory of the cultivation of virtues. Indeed, the pope is quite clear about the need for absolutes, the "laws of God" as I mentioned earlier, as one indispensable resource for the present in the face of rampant relativism of various kinds. He also exemplifies a discerning dialogue with the various natural and social sciences, for he knows that both the truth he seeks to state and the likelihood of rightly ordered institutions he seeks to enable are potentially clarified by these conversations.
18. In this connection, a decisive ingredient is the discernment of the dynamics of the ethos outside the church, one which the pope argues is not without redeeming features. This, as I read it, is a characteristic conviction that Catholics, Calvinists, Methodists, we latterday Puritans, and many others share: that the institutions of the world outside the church, including democratic, corporate, academic, and technological ones, are not entirely evil and that one does not become evil by conscientious participation in them. Indeed, stamped by two thousand years of Christian influence, these spheres of intellectual, historical and social life ought to be viewed as potential loci of grace. Thus, one of the tasks of Christian theological ethics may be to critically evaluate and, as required, reinforce the inner moral architecture that sustains them when they are under challenge, as they are today.
19. I simply do not believe in views that claim that the church is and must be against the world, as if the enclave of (admittedly fragile) theological or ethical purity were assaulted by purely secular forces from without. For one thing, the world is in the church, both as paganism and as secularism, as every honest believer knows. For another, we are remiss if we fail to attend to the grace of God outside the church.
20. Today, many of the decisive ethical problems facing the people in our churches have to do precisely with social institutions and intellectual developments outside the church at levels for which there is no corresponding political order and for which the church is not fully competent within itself. They are issues that more frequently have to be dealt with in "civil society" by "community organizations" and "voluntary associations" in relation to the various spheres of the social order. Matters such as good schools, excellent and accessible medical care, quality movies and music and TV offerings, responsible corporations and unions, and enduring, loving families are not matters that can be built from the top down by any regime, nor from the bottom up by the formation of virtue within the churches alone. Rather they have to be formed, and repeatedly reformed, from the center (*their* center) out, and take shape in law, cultural expectation, educational curriculum, corporate policy, and physical architecture. This requires a public theology able to engage them with an ethic that aids them clarify how they live in the world. A certain expansive scope, thus, is required along with a personal conversion and socio-institutional savvy if anything like sanctification, holy living, viable communities, care for the neighbor or a relatively just society is to be sustained.
21. I am aware that Stanley has repeatedly said he is not a sectarian, but I find nowhere in his work resources that would help us identify what the structure of such institutions might be.
22. The fabric of such institutions, the Pope knows, has already been influenced by Christ, the faith, the impact of the church and the practical morality of believers who have sought to live and work in these spheres with spiritual integrity. In real life, these "secular institutions" are less secular, fragmented, incoherent, and decadent than nihilistic analyses, the hermeneutics of suspicion, or the partisans of deconstruction advertize. To be sure, both the spheres and the people in them need attention and repeated opportunity for renewal, but they are not without moral resources, and not all that God is doing in the world is in the church. Our great danger is that we worship a God who is much too small when we only see God as Christ in the church.
23. My research recently has taken me into an analysis of economic corporations, and their impact on families, cultures, and societies. The record is quite mixed, of course; but every alternative mode of organizing production is, by comparison, worse - although Stanley seems, in his unsystematic comments about modern economic life, to still be in the 1960's, somewhere between the "flower children" who dropped out for pot, sex, and sitar music, and the "militants" of the SDS (Students for Democratic Society) who grandfathered the Unibomber and loved posters featuring raised fists. They all hated the institutions and conventions of society. Such institutions are, we agree, not the church, but they are also not realms of wickedness and evil that we must avoid since they have no good in them. Let me stress a critical point again: the problem of sin is not between church and world, but within both. And the possibilities of redemption are not for the church only, but for the world also, which "God so loved...."
24. We cannot, I think, dismiss attempts to work with these arenas of life by saying that we are tempted to make an idol of family, or corporation, or the "Cities of Man." These are indeed temptations, but the church too can become an idol, and I repeatedly point out to my students that the New Jerusalem, as Biblically portrayed, has no church. The key problem is how to speak creatively to, with, and about such areas of life and to equip the people of the churches to live creatively, constructively, and faithfully in them as they exercise their vocations in the world to the greater glory of God. The Pope's letter, like the Reformational traditions, and the Puritan forebearers in America, treat such areas of life in theological perspective, as areas in which the Holy Spirit may move. Indeed, even liberal traditions are not faithless when they seek to discern and follow this. What is faithless, indeed, is to ignore these issues and areas of life in our time.
25. At the other level I mentioned, the area of new international, cosmopolitan developments, various forces of globalization technology, corporations, communications, ecological awareness, struggles for human rights, etc., etc., are creating a new global society for which there is no existing political regime, but in which there is an increased recognition of a common catholicity of meaning. I am convinced that we can discern the presence of Christ, the grace of God, and the power of the Holy Spirit in some of these developments and am doubtful of *a priori* localistic resistance to them as it appears in both liberal and conservative circles. Precisely at the time when more and more people are linked into a communicating web by technology and computers and media, many fail to see the integrating, nonfragmenting developments that we might call an "alternative postmodernism" to what usually passes under that name (and often celebrates fragmentation). Such a view is reinforced by the fact that while some say we have no

way of reaching moral consensus across cultures, we are in a period of the most rapid growth of international, cross-cultural law and jurisprudence ever in human history, with wider and wider senses of what is just and right. How can Stanley's *polis*-church account for such things?

26. Even more, The United States may be called upon, from time to time, with others, to maintain peacekeeping troops in places like Bosnia and Rwanda. Of course, this will have to be done with multilateral agreements and under the highest standards of justice that we can discover, but I think that members of churches can join in these efforts as conscientious participants, often working with people who are nonChristians. Must they stop doing that? If not, on what basis would Stanley say they may continue?

27. Again, much of the substance of *Centessimus Annus* moves toward identifying the principles by which a universalistic ethic could be specified for humanity. In his comments in this book, Stanley explicitly denies that we should develop ideas of social justice, including for the poor, and says it won't help at all. He ignores those aspects of the encyclical that call for them, including the selective use of capitalist institutions and developments to help overcome poverty. I agree with the Pope, not with Stanley.

28. I do not take this to be some abstract, distant theory that I am after, although I have a less negative view of abstraction and of theory than does Stanley. To fail to deal with abstraction or theory makes analytical comments journalistic. Still, I take this to be simply the acknowledgement of what people in our churches do every day: compete in a global market for jobs, trade crossculturally, get their news from international media, send email and fax around the world, have the value of their retirement funds and the costs of food determined by world grain prices, get diseases that derive from other continents, feel summer heat or winter cold according to what other people do with their forests or acid rain, etc.

29. In my view, if we take the church as *polis*, we would be tempted to ignore the existential fact and moral demand that all of us participate in the new catholicity and ecumenicity of the world, prompted by these global developments. Should we not heed the call to help the world develop the moral constitutional order by which we may do better, or at least as well, and certainly not worse, than the Constantinian and Magisterial and Puritan forebearers did when they were called upon to help frame an ethic for worlds undergoing massive transformations and enlarged horizons?

30. And if we do so, is it because of Schleiermacher's reasons, at least as interpreted by Barth according to Hauerwas' account of the relation of doctrine and ethics, to serve the civilization? Or is it possible that we must do so in order to serve God's purposes, *ad majores gloriam dei* through the instruments of civilization given to us by the grace of God? It could be that God is interested in a lot more than the church, and is most interested in the church when it is not so self-centered, when it also prepares people to live in the world, serve the neighbor, near and far, who, without such aid, may well end up without jobs, food, medicine, clothing, shelter or dignity, in camps for fugitives, or under threat of torture, rape, or oppression. Are such questions on Stanley's horizon? If so, we need to discover how what he has done in his many writings can aid us in what may be the biggest challenge to theology and the church in our era. How, in other words, do we heed the command to all disciples to go unto all the world, in the new urban and the new global society? Is that not one of the greatest challenges for today? It may not be the whole of the Gospel, but it may be central to the vocation of theological ethics and of the churches in our time.

Endnotes

¹ Comments on Stanley Hauerwas' *In Good Company: The Church as Polis* (Notre Dame, IN: U. of Notre Dame Press, 1995), originally delivered at the 1996 meeting of the Christian Theological Research Fellowship.

² *Creeds, Society, and Human Rights* (Grand Rapids, MI: Wm. Eerdmans Publishers, 1984; reprinted by Parthenon Press, 1996).

³ S. Hauerwas, "On Doctrine and Ethics," *The Cambridge Companion to Christian Doctrine*, ed. C. Gunton (Cambridge: Cambridge Univ. Pr., 1997).

⁴ "Liberalism Dispatched vs Liberalism Engaged," *The Christian Century* 112/29 (Oct. 18, 1995) 962-967. Based on Hauerwas, *Dispatches From the Front* (Durham, NC: Duke Univ. Pr., 1994).

⁵ See my, "Alasdair MacIntyre: An Overview and Evaluation," *Religious Studies Review* 18/3 (July, 1992) 203-208.