Hauerwas on Hauerwas: Review of 'Approaching the End: Eschatological Reflections on Church, Politics, and Life'

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Hauerwas on Hauerwas

Approaching the End
Eschatological Reflections on Church, Politics, and Life
Stanley Hauerwas
Eerdmans, $24, 269 pp.

Stanley Hauerwas has achieved singular preeminence among theologians in the United States as a public intellectual. Writing on subjects from Christian ethics to law, pacifism, bioethics, and political philosophy, he has provided bountiful fodder for academics while managing to leave footprints in the general culture—he is surely one of very few theologians ever to appear on Oprah. Any new book bearing Hauerwas's name is noteworthy, and the latest one doesn't disappoint. In Approaching the End, the theologian revisits his earlier works, responding to critics while trying to write "in a different voice" and encouraging readers to "think twice about how they learned to think about how I think." Such convoluted reflexivity signals the self-referential character of this book.

Hauerwas divides Approaching the End into three parts dealing respectively with eschatology, the church, and what he calls "the difficulty of reality." The voice of the late Mennonite theologian John Howard Yoder, Hauerwas's colleague at Notre Dame, haunts these pages. From Yoder Hauerwas learned that the establishment of Christianity as a dominant religion, beginning with Constantine, turned Christians complacent, making them forgetful of eschatology, and inclining them to feel too much at home in the world. They lost their sense of living "between the times" of the revelation of the Lordship of Christ and his final manifestation. The coercion and killing for the Kingdom involved in Christendom and subsequent confessional states led eventually to an almost complete "fusion of Christianity and nationalism"—a fusion that denied the lordship of Christ, whose own death established his dominion as "the Lamb who was slain" (Rev 5).

When Hauerwas talks about Constantine and Christendom, he isn't really talking about the fourth century and the Middle Ages, but rather about America, "the great experiment in Protestant cultural formation." He inhabits a historical-theological narrative that begins proximately with the Niebuhr brothers. This tradition addresses the task of responding theologically to "the end of Christendom"—that is, to the dwindling of the social and cultural hegemony of "nonsectarian" Protestant Christianity in the United States. Catholics have a serious stake in this project, since from the beginning they sought admission to Protestant America. Now that they're in, the end of Christendom is their problem too.

Of two prevailing theological approaches to the loss of Christendom, one—Hauerwas's—focuses on the life of the church and its witness in society, the other on Christianity's public role in shaping opinion and influencing political policy. Many maintain that the first alternative withdraws into the church and fails to engage America. But this is a mistake. Like his antitype, Reinhold Niebuhr, Hauerwas is a theologian to America. His America, however, has suffered the loss of Christendom, and in assessing this loss Hauerwas draws favorably and often on Brad Gregory's The Unintended Reformation, which examined the ways in which the Protestant Reformation undermined religious belief and shaped the contours of modern secular individualism. While Hauerwas fears that "Catholicism in America may now be a form of Protestantism," a matter of denominational choice, he asserts that Christendom's end means at least "that the church is finally free to be a politics." What Hauerwas means by "church" here is not so easily explained. In fact, his language about the church tends to make Catholics crazy. Which church, they ask, where is it?

Part II's chapter on Christian unity takes up these questions. In it Hauerwas responds to Lutheran theologian George Lindbeck's query: Why, given his concern with the unity of the church, has Hauerwas not participated in formal ecumenism? His response provides the most comprehensive account of his own "ambiguous ecclesial status" and "promiscuous" ecclesial practice. A review cannot do justice to this extraordinarily honest account of Christian unity from the perspective of a self-described "high
church Mennonite” and “congregationalist with Catholic sensibilities.” It ends with Yoder’s account of the church’s unity and catholicity as “necessarily local,” and a close-to-bizarre yet plausible attempt to relate this to Anglican polity.

Such is Hauerwas’s church. But what is the world? Hauerwas takes questions Catholic theologians treat under the rubric of nature and grace and subsumes them into the contrasting alternatives of church and world, with world essentially identified with the modern liberal state. Rejecting as insufficiently eschatological Jean Porter’s arguments on the necessity of the doctrine of creation for natural law, he remains an admitted theocrat who has nevertheless renounced coercion in the name of Jesus. This seeming denial of any rightful created autonomy to the worldly realms of culture and politics makes it easy for Catholic thinkers to dismiss, in the name of the goodness of creation or the graced character of our world, Hauerwas’s powerful case against liberal states. Why, he asks, don’t parents who want their children to make up their minds about “religion” let them make up their minds about America?

What if Hauerwas is right—and right as a matter of fact, rather than on theological grounds Catholic thinkers might reject? What if it is through historical contingency, rather than theological necessity, that modern states demand the human sacrifice of war as the price of their legitimacy? He would agree with the American Catholic bishops that the state cannot define the mission of the church, but its attempt to do so would not surprise him. He might argue that the bishops’ focus on matters of sexuality and the family fulfills an unspoken concordat with liberal states, one that domesticates faith and makes it private. To be sure, the impetus for public political protest has shriveled. Philip Berrigan expressed his conscientious objection to war by pouring blood on draft-board records, hammering warhead nose cones, and submitting to imprisonment. Today’s American Catholic bishops protest the state’s attempts to define the missions of the church’s hospitals and schools with lawsuits and fortnights for freedom. If Hauerwas had a fortnight for freedom, its agenda would include conscientious objection to war. Alas, he doesn’t mention abortion.

Hauerwas recognizes the powerful instinct of the state to swallow churches whole, and appeals to the resources that the faithful have to resist being swallowed. When Hitler sought to create a German Christian Church, Karl Barth’s Barmen Declaration helped midwife the Confessing Church, with its commitment to the Lordship of Christ alone. In an earlier century, when Napoleon wanted to make the church a department of the French state, Catholics turned to the pope as embodying the transnational unity of Christ’s church. A Protestant, Hauerwas appreciates the “political importance of the papacy,” but he worries that American Catholics do not. Along with Mennonites, Catholics have transnational resources, unavailable to other Christians, for resisting omnivorous states. Hauerwas challenges Catholics in the United States to ask if they have become just another liberal Protestant denomination in thrall to American nationalism. Do they really get the catholicity of their own church? Hauerwas wants Catholics to be Catholic.

The stumbling block that often keeps Catholics from taking this challenge seriously is Hauerwas’s stark church-world dichotomizing. He tackles this difficulty at the beginning of Part III in “Bearing Reality,” a powerful reflection on J. M. Coetzee’s novel Elizabeth Costello. Comparing himself to Coetzee’s character—“Like Costello, I am old and trapped by a track record whose defense can stop thought from meeting the demands to say as best one can what is true”—Hauerwas acknowledges that his emphasis on the centrality of Christ has identified him as “one whose strong theological voice tends to overwhelm an appropriate acknowledgment of what it means to be human.” This essay raises...
questions Catholics might view in terms of nature and grace. “How,” Hauerwas asks himself, “can I think consistently with theologians like John Howard Yoder and Karl Barth and at the same time learn from philosophers like Ludwig Wittgenstein, Iris Murdoch, and Cora Diamond?”

He approaches the question of what it means to be human via analytic philosopher and Wittgenstein interpreter Cora Diamond’s notion of the “difficulty of reality” in naming aspects of life that defy explanation but with which, whether in pain or astonishment, we must nevertheless live. For Hauerwas, the intractability of another’s pain, as set forth in Coetzee’s novel, exemplifies the “difficulty of reality.” To this perspective he brings Yoder’s account, in a 1988 address to the Society of Christian Ethics, of the difficulty of being a Christian. (Hauerwas misses an opportunity to treat, in Yoder’s own terms, the pain and division caused among Mennonites by continuing allegations of sexual misconduct on the part of Yoder—a disappointing omission, given his book’s determined honesty.) Part III’s remaining essays, on habit and on questions of theology and medicine, deepen Hauerwas’s answer to the question of what it means to be human.

In writing Approaching the End, Hauerwas tells us that he set out to surprise us with the “tone if not the substance” of his reflections. Readers may judge whether he has turned into “an old lion who has learned to eat straw,” or has simply continued to ask hard questions and offer surprising answers. Either way, such an engaging intellectual retrospective by a world-class theologian deserves a wide readership, both among those committed to the Lordship of Christ and the continuing life of the church, and among those simply interested in what it means to be human.

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