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One of the central aims of the work of Stanley Hauerwas has been to combat the tendency of modern academic theology to see the tasks of theology and of Christian ethics as fundamentally separate in their nature. This separation results in abstraction on both sides, with theology addressing itself to a set of disembodied beliefs and ethics cataloguing behaviors that are perfectly intelligible without God as their backdrop. Nicholas Healy’s book can be viewed and assessed as a kind of grappling with this basic Hauerwasian motive, and its manifest ramifications in Hauerwas’s writings, including the latter’s rhetorical style, occasionalism, engagements with philosophy and social theory, and turn to the liturgy as a source for theological ethics. Healy claims to be quite in sympathy with this agenda. But Healy concludes that, all things considered, Hauerwas’s work undermines its own agenda as much or more than it promotes it. Healy has therefore set out in this book to provide a systematic critique of one of the most widely read theologians of the last thirty years. By “systematic” I point to the way Healy criticizes Hauerwas’s work through the application to it of abstract, typological categories. He reads Hauerwas’s work as a system of concepts orbiting around a conceptual “center,” the church.

After an introduction to the book and a skillful treatment of the development of Hauerwas’s work in the first two chapters, in chapter 3 Healy lays down his basic charge in a succinct form. Hauerwas’s theo-ethical writings evince what the author calls “ecclesism,” defined as “a distortion of Christianity consequent upon a reductive focus upon the church as the central and structuring locus for all theological inquiry” (p. 40). In other words, he is claiming that, as a system whose aim would be to provide a conceptual map of “Christianity,” Hauerwas’s work is compromised by its center, the emphasis on the church. Because of its emphasis on the church, or a “reductive focus on the church,” both God and the church are distorted within his work. First, the church itself is idealized. Hauerwas’s church, claims Healy, imagines a more uniform process of forming its members, coupled with a more sure structure of authority, than empirical studies and the self-understanding of Christians can support. Further, Hauerwas’s emphasis on formation through practices leading to visible witness tends toward the exclusion of “ordinary Christians.” Second, Hauerwas’s ecclesism tends to push God out of the picture.

To defend the charge of “ecclesism,” Healy turns to David Kelsey’s distinction among three “theological logics”: “the logic of belief,” “the logic of coming to believe,” and “the logic of Christian living.” While each of these
logics may properly steer theological inquiry, problems arise when they are conflated. They enable Healy to argue that Hauerwas's ecclesism is generated by conflating the "logic of Christian living" (or, how one lives out Christian convictions) and the "logic of belief" (discourse about God taken as a separable object), such that the former crowds out the latter. He makes an analogy between Hauerwas and Schleiermacher. Just as for Schleiermacher the "logic of coming to believe" dominated the logic of belief (as well as that of Christian living), so in Hauerwas the "logic of Christian living" overruns the "logic of belief." The reference to Schleiermacher allows Healy to locate Hauerwas's work historically within this modern trajectory, buttressing Healy's sub-thesis that Hauerwas is insufficiently "theocentric." Healy goes on in subsequent chapters to defend his central claim by offering evidence from Hauerwas's account of ecclesial authority, which supports a simplistic view of Christian formation and sounds to Healy like an outdated form of Roman Catholicism (p. 68). He advances to consider Hauerwas's ecclesial approach to scripture, noting how the focus on the text's moral teachings in his Matthew commentary flows from Hauerwas's famous claim that scripture "needs the church" (p. 70).

Healy's book raises the interesting question of whether Hauerwas reduces theology to ethics, and thus continues Schleiermacher's modern project in a different key. While the question is well worth raising, the success of Healy's charge depends on whether his systematic approach with its use of abstract categories works as a tool for reading Hauerwas.

In a section within chapter 1 titled "Decision and Difficulties in Reading Hauerwas," Healy bemoans the fact that Hauerwas's thinking is not more clearly (that is, systematically) presented and asserts that Hauerwas's rhetorical style obscures what it is he is trying to say, making things hard on the one who would read him "well," which Healy clarifies to mean "to understand precisely what he is saying by attending carefully to what he writes" (p. 12). But Healy takes this as a license to systematize Hauerwas in the course of reading and assessing his work. He therefore says he will largely ignore Hauerwas's less academic works as these are "more illustrative of, than a substantive contribution to, the main argument" (p. 12).

Healy is right to claim that to read Hauerwas well can be a difficult task. Yet his solution, to attempt to systematize Hauerwas's work by identifying its center and its periphery, is, I believe, misguided. For, I fear, it implies that the task of reading Hauerwas is more like decoding a map than taking a journey. What students of Hauerwas need is a guide who can help them process the puzzlements and frustrations reading Hauerwas almost inevitably engenders, and to go on. The "therapeutic," in the sense associated with Wittgenstein, character of Hauerwas's writing is integrally connected with its occasionalism and attention to the particular. Therefore, I would steer away
from using this book with advanced undergraduates and beginning graduates. Students at the doctoral level, who have had the experience of reading Hauerwas and time to reflect on it, may profit from Healy's analysis.

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Many of us have had our lives made more enjoyable, more fulfilling, and more whole with the companionship of a dog. Sometimes we admit this sheepishly, purchasing holiday or birthday gifts for our pets, but with a self-effacing sense of humor. And sometimes, when a working animal saves a loved one from isolating disability, or when we lose a beloved pet, we are absolutely earnest about the power of an animal's love.

In A Dog's History of the World: Canines and the Domestication of Humans, Laura Hobgood-Oster traces how human history intersects—and grew to be intertwined with—the history of domesticated dogs. Not only did we become socialized and domesticated together, alongside our working and pet animals, our dogs have served us in a range of relationships as varied as human vocations and needs. For example, fifteen thousand years ago, dogs were our partners in hunting and herding. Rock carvings dating from the third to the first millennium in Armenia reveal that dogs were already helping humans guard and herd animals, and were even serving as household companions. Burial sites of dogs ranging from the Iron Age in Rome, to Japan between 8,500 and 8,000 years ago, to the Victorian age in England, and to North American pet cemeteries in the early twentieth century document the ways we humans have mourned and buried our workmates and companions.

Details about burial sites reveal that sometimes dogs were intended to help us enter the afterlife, or protect us in the next world. Some dogs—across centuries and in every place where canines lived with humans—were buried with food, with pillows or blankets, or with little glass bowls of water. Dogs were often buried with their human companions; Hobgood-Oster shares poignant details of such burial sites that remind contemporary readers that we have had dog-loving kindred spirits in every generation.

Not all of our interactions have been as heart-warming or simple, however. For example, Hobgood-Oster identifies painful histories of puppies