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Defending Hauerwas

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To the Editors

At odds

We thank you for the October 24 issue, which presents a fair debate concerning Catholic thinking on same-sex marriages. In the end we find ourselves at odds with your editorial policy ["State of the Unions," September 27, 2002] and with the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith's statement on this issue.

As individual Catholics seeking a moral position, we are bound, in the final analysis, by prayer and by consciences informed by credible, competent sources. The church, while very important to us, is but one of those sources. As a people, we will probably be ultimately influenced by whether same-sex marriage is hurtful to those in the marriages and their children, and whether such unions harm us in any other way.

JOHN AND JUDITH ANN NEFF
Knoxville, Tenn.

Defending Hauerwas

Jeffrey Stout and Stanley Hauerwas have long been friends and conversation partners. One would not know that from reading Stout's "Not of This World" (October 10). Nor does one emerge from Stout's essay with an accurate sense of Hauerwas's position.

Stout's presentation is incomplete in many ways. For example, he labels Hauerwas's ethic as "perfectionist," implying that it is, in the words of the article's title, unrealistic or "not of this world." However, Stout fails to mention Hauerwas's untiring emphasis on human sinfulness and—most crucially—the subsequent centrality of the practices of forgiveness and reconciliation. This is a glaring omission, given how Hauerwas posits gospel-based practices of forgiveness and reconciliation as the alternative to a Niebuhrian "realism" for which the realities of

sinfulness lead to the "tragic but necessary" use of violence.

Stout labels Hauerwas and Alasdair MacIntyre "new traditionalists," which is as oversimplified as calling them "communitarians" (a charge they both deny). What is a "new traditionalist"? Stout never says directly, but the reader is left with the sense that it is a bad thing to be. Tradition, for Stout, becomes a generic theoretical category—something old, static, primitive, underdeveloped, and worse, "premodern" and "authoritarian."

Tradition, as Stout renders it, is antirationalist. This is an astonishing claim. Stout charges that Hauerwas "thinks of democratic questioning, conflict, and reason-giving not as valuable social practices." Not only does such a position presume a naive misunderstanding of authority and obedience as contrary to argument and reason-giving (think, for example, of the relationship between the practice of law and constitutions, authority to which citizens of democracies are called to be obedient), but it also ignores the shape of Hauerwas's life and character. As Stout well knows, Hauerwas has testified before Congress and lobbied the federal government on the question of war.

Another caricature is implied by Stout's demand that Hauerwas return to the "language of justice." Here Stout ignores a crucial dimension of Hauerwas's work, one he should not have missed: specifically, that for Hauerwas theological convictions only make sense when they are embodied in actual Christian communities. Hauerwas refuses to talk about generic categories such as "tradition" or "justice." His refusal to do so is secondary to a more general refusal to abandon Christian reasoning. Just as there is no such thing as "tradition" apart from a specific tradition, one cannot talk about justice as an abstract category. Yet appeals to justice in this society do precisely that. They presuppose that one can talk about justice

apart from a notion of goods. In a society that is committed to ducking the question of substantive good, "justice" becomes merely a way to talk about protecting ourselves from each other's incursions. That sets the bar much too low for Christian accounts of the common good.

In other words, instead of talking about empty abstractions, Hauerwas talks about the church. Yet Stout doesn't talk about Jesus or the church. He just talks about Hauerwas. He does mention the church briefly—but only to subsume it into a larger category of "our common life" (the family, the university, etc.). Curiously, especially in light of where the essay ends up, Stout fails to include the centrality of the military in his list of practices and institutions that he thinks comprise our common life.

In the same vein, Stout's comments about Hauerwas's pacificism are little more than an ad hominem attack. While it would certainly be nice to hear Hauerwas's thoughts on, say, tax resistance, Stout ignores Hauerwas's tireless and public advocacy in opposition to the Gulf War and the current war in Iraq, his work with selective conscientious objectors in the military, and so on.

In the end, Stout does not argue why "Hauerwas is wrong about liberal democracy." He does not carefully outline Hauerwas's objections to the idolization of democracy—which is a more accurate description of Hauerwas's position than Stout's—nor does Stout offer any reasoned argument why Christians should support democracy as an end in itself, especially in its current convoluted U.S. incarnation. One might be able to make such an argument, but Stout has not provided one here.

Finally, we would like to direct one final comment to *Commonweal* itself. While we appreciate the journal's decision to engage its readers in important ongoing arguments about the relationship between Christian

(Continued on page 4)

COMMONWEAL

November 21, 2003 / Volume CXXX, Number 20

UPFRONT

Correspondence *More on Stanley Hauerwas, with a response from Jeffrey Stout* **2**

Editorial *Democracy at home & abroad* **5**

Et cetera *He comes with a microphone & a sword* **6**

A quiet heroism
Peter Steinfels
James O'Gara, R.I.P. **6**

COLUMNIST

Iraq's future
E. J. Dionne Jr. **8**

SHORT TAKES

The Court & religion
Robert F. Drinan
Can you major in theology on a state scholarship? **9**

Pilgrims' progress
Timothy P. Schilling
Thanksgiving abroad **10**

Why Postman matters
Peter Kavanagh
Visionary or technophobe? **11**

ARTICLE

DANA GIOIA GOES TO WASHINGTON
Cynthia Haven
A profile of the NEA chairman **13**

POETRY

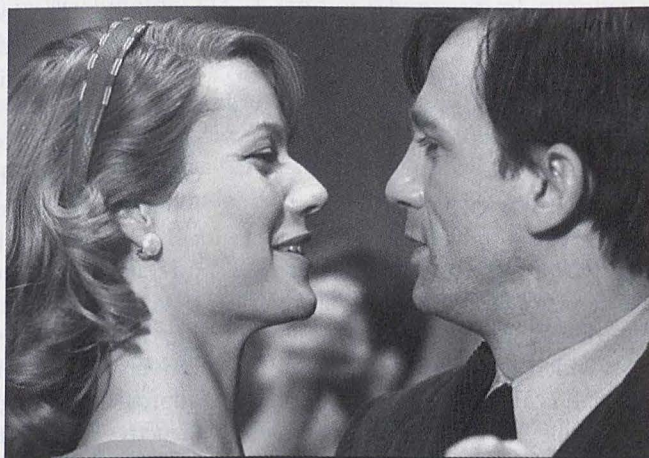
Tree at My Window
Darius Victor Snieckus **12**

[It Was the Best Paper that Drew My Pen]
Sarah Appleton Weber **18**

VERDICTS

SCREEN

Sylvia
Rand Richards Cooper **17**



Ringling the bell jar

BILL KAYE / DAVID APPLEBY

BOOKS

Children's books
Daria Donnelly
Maurice Sendak's latest & more **19**

The Battle for Rome
by Robert Katz
Richard Cohen **22**

Witness to Integrity
by Anita M. Caspary
Kathleen Sprows Cummings **24**

Humanitarian Intervention
edited by J. L. Holzgrefe and Robert O. Keohane
George Jaeger **26**

Dreadful Conversions
by John C. Cort
Mel Piehl **28**

THE LAST WORD

Pastor Eveline
Willard F. Jabusch **31**

(Continued from page 2)

commitments and secular, liberal democracy, we were surprised to find such a lengthy argument against one particular person without a response. We hope that the editors will continue this important conversation with articles that are more balanced and accurate. It will be a lively dialogue indeed!

TERRENCE W. TILLEY

M. THERESE LYSAUGHT

BRAD KALLENBERG

KELLY JOHNSON

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The writers are members of the department of religious studies at the University of Dayton.

The author replies:

The very first sentence of *Democracy and Tradition*, the book from which my article was adapted, refers warmly to my friendship with Stanley Hauerwas, which goes back to the mid-1970s. It is a friendship I value greatly, and I believe Hauerwas understands that my book's discussion of him, which is much longer than the article, is intended as an act of personal and civic friendship. I infer this from the blurb he offered for the back cover, which commends the book for its "charitable reading" of those with whom I disagree.

Now, it may be that he himself is being too charitable in reading me this way. And even if my motives are charitable, or at least friendly, it does not follow that my reading of Hauerwas is either complete or wholly accurate. So I welcome instruction from those who have read him closely and who worry that I have misrepresented his writings.

My friendship with him requires that I speak the truth, as I see it, about how the more extreme of his rhetorical devices have tended to obscure whatever democratic commitments he actually has, causing his critics to charge him repeatedly with a sectarianism he explicitly rejects.

I carefully avoid endorsing the

charge these critics make against him. I do try to diagnose how his rhetoric creates an impression, shared by many of Hauerwas's followers as well as many of his critics, concerning what he is against. This has much to do with the awkward way in which what he borrows from John Howard Yoder fits together with what he borrows from Alasdair MacIntyre.

The core of what I call the new traditionalism is MacIntyre's overly simple contrast between premodern traditions of the virtues and a liberal modernity that is imagined to be "after virtue." My book invites Hauerwas to rethink his depiction of our society's political dimension without relying uncritically on this contrast.

I am interested in what Hauerwas might say about democratic practices if he resisted the temptation of conflating them with liberalism, defined pejoratively as an essentially antitraditional project. Judging by the lengthy, constructive, wonderfully generous response to *Democracy and Tradition* that will appear as the postscript to his new book, this is a conversation he welcomes. His article in the current issue of the *Journal of Religious Ethics* strikes a similarly positive note.

Do I accuse Hauerwas of antitraditionalism? No. He spends almost every waking hour exchanging reasons with his fellow citizens and fellow Christians, and he is right to think of reason as essentially embodied in traditions. Still, he does often echo MacIntyre's claim that modern democratic discourse, being "after virtue," can be nothing more than "civil war by other means." The question is whether this claim adequately accounts for the practices of reason-exchange in which Hauerwas himself actively participates.

Do I believe that traditions are essentially "old, static, primitive, underdeveloped, and worse, 'premodern' and 'authoritarian'?" No. My book's main thesis is that modern democracy is itself best understood as a tradition—in-

deed, as a tradition we have good reason to embrace, despite its many flaws and dangers. Part 2 of the book, which offers criticism of liberals as well as traditionalists who exaggerate the contrast between tradition and modernity, is followed by part 3, which aims to preserve and perfect what I find valuable on both sides of the debate.

Do I, in calling Hauerwas's ethics "perfectionist," imply that he fails to be realistic about the need to cope with human sinfulness? Hardly. My book defends a kind of perfectionism in ethics that I take to be quite close to Hauerwas's, both conceptually and historically. What perfectionism means in this context is belief in the importance of what Hauerwas calls sanctification as a virtue-oriented discipline of rectifying what requires rectification in one's own character.

Like Hauerwas, I hold that this discipline benefits from meditation on exemplary lives, from reading novels, and from the good company of truthful friends. Also like Hauerwas, I worry about the dangers of idolizing democracy or, even worse, idolizing the nation-state. Yet I'm not convinced that his way of talking about the church avoids the kind of abstraction he criticizes in the work of others. Furthermore, I am reluctant to accept his rhetoric as the last word on democratic culture.

Does the historical evidence support the conclusion that democratic culture is essentially "after virtue" or antitraditional? And if not, how shall we think of it and relate ourselves to it? *Democracy and Tradition* offers my answers to these questions, but it aims mainly to initiate a public conversation about them, one that will include theologians like Stanley Hauerwas as full-fledged, valued participants. Indeed, the book spends a lot of time criticizing liberal secularists for blocking such a conversation, and advising them of the importance of reading authors like MacIntyre and Hauerwas.

(Continued on page 29)

(Continued from page 4)

from the *Baltimore Catechism*): God made man to know him and be happy with him forever.

THIRD COP: That's funny. I thought God made man to break the law so we could have a job. [Laughter on all sides.]

Cort still plainly chafes at the frequent ideological misrepresentation of Catholics' role in the American labor movement—a distortion that has been perpetuated in many latter-day leftist-tinged labor histories. Catholic labor activists were regularly smeared as “red-baiting clerical fascists” when they opposed Communist control of unions, even though they were often instrumental in legitimizing unionism among pious Catholic factory workers.

Cort attempts to set the record straight on this score through pungent bibliographical commentaries as well as his dramatic personal accounts of various union fights (some of them literal). The Catholic labor causes of the 1930s and 1940s clearly formed the passionate heart of Cort's public life, and *Dreadful Conversions* is most vivid and insightful in recalling them. Yet many other dimensions of Cort's varied and colorful career are presented in the same earnest, anecdotal, and often very funny voice. He recounts his long, painful battle with tuberculosis, his extensive career as a journalist (he long edited the journal *Religious Socialism*), his service as a Peace Corps and War on Poverty administrator in the 1960s, and his movement with his family into inner-city Boston during the heated racial crises of the 1970s. Cort's wife Helen Haye Cort and their ten children are a consistent presence through the later chapters of *Dreadful Conversions*. He includes “interviews” with his children about their lives in the inner city, as well as an account of an uproariously funny “family meeting” about domestic duties in the 1970s that might have been titled “Patriarchal Liberal Catholic Has His Consciousness (Partly) Raised.” (An earlier version appeared in the July 3, 1981 *Commonweal* as “How the Females Put an End to Male Oppression.”)

A fair amount of the book is taken up

with Cort's continuing argument for what he calls “Catholic socialism,” though his undogmatic social ideology seems closer to that of his friend and fellow ex-Catholic Worker Michael Harrington, who talked about “the left wing of the possible” and helped usher the remnants of the old Debsian Socialists into the Democratic Party. On a few topics Cort seems less than completely revealing, and one sometimes suspects that *Dreadful Conversions* stops short of conveying the full inner life of this wise and thoughtful man. He says surprisingly little about the conflicts and shifting concerns of Catholic liberalism during his lifetime, about topics like birth control and papal authority, or about his extensive association with *Commonweal* (he wrote a regular column for this journal and served on the editorial staff from 1943 to 1959).

One would also like to know more about Cort's spiritual journey. Considering the depth of his conversion and his boldness in presenting his unwavering, lifelong Catholic commitment in various public forums, Cort's memoir touches rather lightly on theological matters and only hints at precisely how his personal faith has nurtured and sustained him through often difficult circumstances—beyond, of course, inspiring his deep commitment to social justice. This minimalist treatment of spiritual matters may reflect less an autobiographical reticence than a now-less-common type of lay Catholic piety, one that was so deeply ingrained in a way of life that it hardly required articulation. Here and there, though, one catches glimpses of the religious insight that underlies that taken-for-granted commitment. While generally critical of avant-garde theologians like Hans Küng, Cort strongly endorses Küng's statement that “Without faith in the cross, faith in the risen Christ lacks its distinctive character and decisiveness.” In showing how one layman has lived out such a “theology of the cross” in the modern American context, *Dreadful Conversions* may remind Catholics and others of what their faith at its best can yield. □

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In short, I defend the legitimacy of religious voices in the public square against those who wish to exclude them. I am proposing a new model of public discussion—beyond both liberal secularism and the new traditionalism—a model that aims to learn much from each.

Perhaps the brief excerpt printed in *Commonweal* leaves a misleading impression of what I am up to. Luckily, the book can now be purchased directly from the Princeton University Press Web site. Readers are now in a position to examine the whole thing and judge for themselves.

JEFFREY STOUT

The editors reply:

We are eager to provide space either for Stanley Hauerwas to respond to Jeffrey Stout's critique or for anyone else who would like to respond on Hauerwas's behalf. As Stout points out, Hauerwas has already written a lengthy rejoinder, which will appear in his next book, *Performing the Faith: Bonhoeffer and the Practice of Nonviolence* (Brazos). There Hauerwas welcomes Stout's criticism, writing that he hopes *Democracy and Tradition* will “inaugurate the kind of discussion that is so desperately needed in America,” and noting further that “Stout and I now seem to agree more than we disagree, which means our disagreements are all the more interesting.”

We agree with Hauerwas that such a discussion is desperately needed, and published Stout's essay in the hopes of encouraging it. *Democracy and Tradition*, which is a defense of the legitimacy of religious voices in the public square, should be required reading, especially for those who think liberal democracy and Catholicism should be partners, not adversaries. In alerting readers to the implications of Hauerwas's rhetorical and philosophical vilification of liberal democracy, Stout's essay was neither unbalanced nor inaccurate. Let the dialogue continue.