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William L. Portier

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

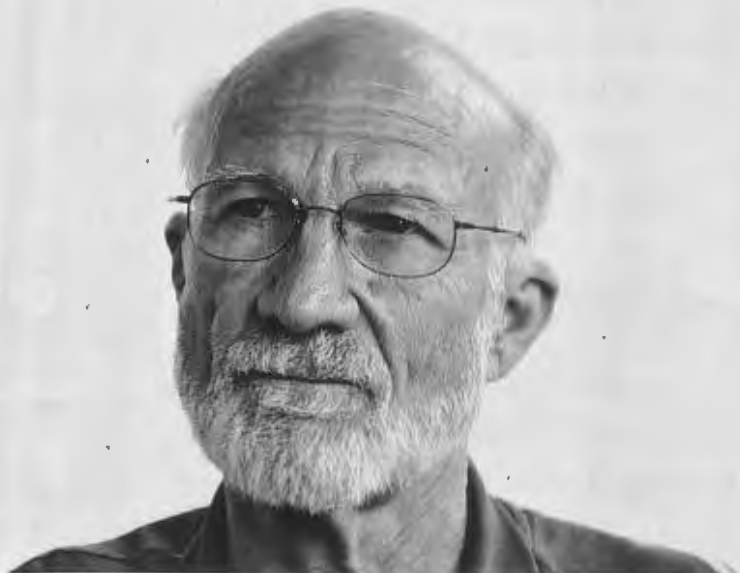
eschatology, the church, and what he calls “the difficulty of reality.” The voice of the late Mennonite theologian John Howard Yoder, Hauerwas's colleague at Notre Dame, haunts these pages. From Yoder Hauerwas learned that the establishment of Christianity as a dominant religion, beginning with Constantine, 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



Stanley Hauerwas

church Mennonite” and “congregation-
alist 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 plau-
sible attempt to relate this to Anglican
polity.

Such is Hauerwas’s church. But
what is the world? Hauerwas
takes questions Catholic theolog-
ians 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. Reject-
ing 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 poli-
tics makes it easy for Catholic thinkers
to dismiss, in the name of the good-
ness of creation or the graced charac-
ter 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 “relig-
ion” let them make up their minds
about America?

What if Hauerwas is right—and right
as a matter of fact, rather than on theo-
logical 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 mis-
sion of the church, but its attempt to do
so would not surprise him. He might
argue that the bishops’ focus on mat-
ters of sexuality and the family fulfills
an unspoken concordat with liberal
states, one that domesticates faith and
makes it private. To be sure, the im-
petus 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 men-
tion 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 swal-
lowed. When Hitler sought to create a
German Christian Church, Karl Barth’s
Barmen Declaration helped midwife the
Confessing Church, with its commit-
ment to the Lordship of Christ alone.
In an earlier century, when Napoleon
wanted to make the church a depart-
ment 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, unavail-
able 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 re-
ally 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 reflec-
tion on J. M. Coetzee’s novel *Elizabeth
Costello*. Comparing himself to Coe-
tzee’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

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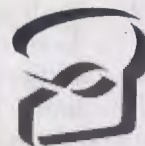
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questions Catholics might view in terms of nature and grace. "How," Hauerwas asks himself, "can I think consistently with theologians like John Howard Yoder and Karl Barth and at the same time learn from philosophers like Ludwig Wittgenstein, Iris 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 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. ■

William L. Portier is *Mary Ann Spearin Chair of Catholic Theology at the University of Dayton*. His most recent book is *Divided Friends, Portraits of the Roman Catholic Modernist Crisis in the United States* (Catholic University Press).