Appreciating Hauerwas: One Hand Clapping

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The work of Stanley Hauerwas seems increasingly influential in theological and ethical circles. I think this influence is largely salutary, though it has what I see as some potentially troubling dimensions. Both for its influence as a whole, and for its insights, it merits close attention—critical and approbational—by committed Christians, and particularly those in teaching roles in the churches, especially in the United States. This essay, and Hauerwas's extremely charitable response following it, together constitute an attempt to express the real and urgent value of what Hauerwas has to say, and to chart some of the ways in which what he has to say—or, to be more careful, what people take away from his work—is a matter of contestable value. I underscore *contestable*—it is my good fortune to be able to include Hauerwas's response, not simply because it allows each reader to "decide for yourself," but also because I—and I suspect Hauerwas as well—genuinely feel the force of some of the claims made on both sides of these issues, and feel troubled that my affirmations may have elided something of value in their implicit denials. Such is the sinful state of our minds, that we always know more than we can comprehend in a single viewpoint.

My essay was initially presented on a panel dedicated to Hauerwas's work (with him as respondent) at the South-East Conference on the Study of Religion in Chapel Hill, North Carolina, in March of 1999. The essay bears some of the marks of that occasion, particularly in its rather personal Introduction. I keep the Introduction as personal as it originally was, not simply because Hauerwas's work inspires such self-indulgences, but also because I think some of the individual

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characteristics of my response to Hauerwas have a more-than-personal relevance—or rather, that they resemble others' personal encounters with Hauerwas's work. In this way as in many others his work is truly, and laudably, particularistic; it is the rare theological writer nowadays who, like Hauerwas, inspires genuine personal grappling.

Introduction

Why do we read other people's work? When we ponder this question, which is rare enough, we usually stiff-arm it by platitudes about "appreciating" other people's "positions." But more typically our engagements with others are so glib as to elide the question altogether. Either way, too often we engage people only to justify why such an engagement didn't need to happen in the first place, either because they are simply wrong, or because we are already right in the way they are. I like [x] and so should you; I don't like [y] and you shouldn't either. Yahoo and boo: Too often our engagements with other thinkers seem more like rooting for sports teams than they do a thoughtful attempt to encounter them. The egocentricity of such encounters is important, for overall assessments of thinkers are often too totally self-effacing; they seem to suggest that such essentially evaluative relations are the only sort of engagement with the thinker one could have. But to treat the other as wholly other is to act as if they have no words to speak to you, no words that you might take up as your own and so stand, in that inheritance, in a living relationship with them; it is to treat them as if they were dead. To use an engagement with someone's thought as the occasion for a global judgment on his work seems to gesture at the obituary; it seems as if, like the prodigal son, we are asking for our inheritance a bit too hastily. So I think it's important to keep in mind that we not *grade* the thinker, but think with him.

These issues always press most upon me when I read the work of thinkers like Stanley Hauerwas. Stanley's work has been foundational to my own theological education. I discovered that theology was for me the day that he came to my campus and people walked out of his talk. When I saw them leaving out of rage at what he—a professor—was saying, I said to myself, "Now that's more like it." At that time I thought that the ability to make people move with your words—even if, or perhaps *especially* if, the direction they moved was away from you—was something. At least, for Christ's sake, he wasn't dribbling those platitudes that make the audience fall asleep in their metaphor-

ical soup before the speech is halfway over. At least he wasn't a goddamned politician, or—what was far, far worse—*nice*.

At that time, I repeat. Yet there was something adolescent in my adulation of Hauerwas's work, and when I became a professor, I put away adolescent things. Well, that's not quite right—neither about being a professor, nor about my relationship with Hauerwas's thought. There is much that is both profound and right about much of what Hauerwas argues, and I've always felt the pull of his work. But I've come to find myself disappointed that the energy his work stirs in me doesn't always seem oriented in entirely useful directions. And here is the first sense of my subtitle: One hand wants to applaud. But the other holds back. Why? The answer to that question reveals a second sense of my subtitle. Hauerwas works best, and his thought is at its most valuable, when he is reacting against certain tendencies in much contemporary Christian ethics, tendencies towards sentimentalism, flaccid reasoning, and most basically what some would see as a crippling timidity in style and argument. That is, he is best understood as a hand clapping, looking for another hand to clap back, and his thought is most impressive (if that's the word for it) in that slap and sting.

One way of looking at this essay is to see it as an attempt to meet Hauerwas halfway, and see what sort of noise the encounter can make. It is in this way that we can see, I think, the real value of Hauerwas's work, for it is valuable in a way we can appropriate only by subjecting it to serious criticism. These criticisms are focused on some worrisome rhetorical tendencies towards a more oppositional stance than is needed, a form of *identity politics*—especially in how his criticism of religious ethics as collaborationist at times turn out to be itself collaborationist, collaborationist with what I want to call a culture of complaint or critique—as well as in what I want to call his incipient ecclesial triumphalism, a weirdly "Christendomed" theology that insists that we have all the answers already. I want to say that Hauerwas's diagnosis of our problems is right, and that this diagnosis indicts his thought as well, in part, and that it is only by working out the value of Hauerwas's insights that we can see some of the difficulties associated with some of his arguments, and vice versa.

I must be careful here. It is all too easy to lambaste Hauerwas as a "sectarian," or as too purely polemical a thinker, one who is too quick to *other* people, to oppose them. And in part I agree with these criticisms. However, responses to Hauerwas of this sort are often themselves similarly sectarian, simply "othering" him in the same way that

they accuse him of "othering" others.[1] That is, once they have diagnosed the problem, they feel that they needn't bother with what positive (in several senses) insights are motivating his thought. This doesn't help us get over the polemical temptation; it merely feeds it. But I think we have the resources in the Christian theological tradition to transcend the polemics to which we've increasingly succumbed since the Reformation. Furthermore, it has been my reading of Hauerwas, both in agreeing with him and in disagreeing with him, that has helped me appreciate this problem, and helped me see that Christianity has ways of getting beyond it.

Hauerwas's Attack Upon Christendom

Hauerwas's central contribution has been in his critique of modern religious thought and "modernity" or "liberalism" in favor of a more particularistic position anchored in the particularity and transcendence of the Incarnation. Like Kierkegaard, Hauerwas has persistently insisted that Christianity is a way of life that has yet to be discovered. Like John Milbank (a theologian whom he has deeply influenced and who has influenced him in turn), he is interested in making the Word strange to our world, in order for us to appreciate its reality and the distance we have to travel to inhabit it. In this first part I want to chart how this critique plays itself out, in his sophisticated criticisms of the academic discipline of religious ethics and in his more broadly theological-cultural critique of America as a land of essential amnesia.

Undisciplined Ethics: The Travail of "Religious Ethics," or Christianity as a Way of Life. Hauerwas's concerns begin from his observation of and reflection upon the growing autonomy of Christian ethical reflection, as it is practiced in academic circles, from theological formation and ecclesial involvement. The academic "disciplining" of ethics threatens to make it into just another slot in the endlessly self-replicating bureaucratic university, that sinkhole into which our culture tosses almost all nonutilitarian intellectual capital. As religious ethics has become a discipline of its own, it has focused its attention

[1] For an example of how a liberal critique of "othering" rhetoric can go forward without attention to how it itself is othering, see Robert Orsi's stimulating "Snakes Alive: Resituating the Moral in the Study of Religion," pp. 201-226 in *In Face of the Facts: Moral Inquiry in American Scholarship*, Richard Wrightman Fox and Robert B. Westbrook, eds. (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1998).

narcissistically on itself, making itself its own audience and thereby losing its essential ties with theological inquiry in general.[2]

The ramification and compartmentalization of ethics as a discipline with its own academic "audience" is not simply deplorable because of its indulgence in disciplinary promiscuity; it creates a second, and more profound, way in which ethical reflection is perilous today, namely, in its growing identification with the academic world, and the concomitant separation with the lived life of the Christian Church; ethical reflection, much like the theological reflection often practiced in the university today, becomes free-floating, unaffiliated with and not responsible to any particular ecclesial body or community of believers. (Here I do disagree with Hauerwas, at least as I read him, because he seems at times to veer towards an excessive exclusivity, insisting that appropriate ethical discourse can *only* serve the Church and care for no other audience at all; as we shall see, while the basic context of ethical reflection ought to be the *sitten* of the Christians, we need not rule out that others might learn something from the discourse, and we need not speak to them in our work only by hoping that they "overhear" our conversations with other Christians.)[3] When ethics loses its identity as a sort of normative moral ethnography, it does not become simply reflection at a greater distance; it becomes an entirely different thing. To borrow an image from Wittgenstein, such discourse seems to be nothing more than a wheel spinning freely in space, not hooked up to anything—but it only *seems* to be so, while in fact it operates, at least as part of the legitimizing machinery of the modern university.

But Hauerwas is critical of ethics as a discipline, because he thinks ethics as a way of life is so important; he wants to insist that practices, not abstract theological statements, are finally primordial. This insistence seems rooted in his early exposure to Wittgenstein, with his idea that language gains its sense by its enactment in communities of meaning. It's important to see what this insistence on ethical reflection does *not* mean. First and most importantly, by saying that practices are primordial, I am not appealing to a lame romantic ex-

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[2] See Hauerwas's "On Keeping Theological Ethics Theological," in *Revisions: Changing Perspectives in Moral Philosophy*, Stanley Hauerwas and Alasdair MacIntyre, eds. (Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press, 1983), for a good and relatively early statement of these concerns.

[3] I am indebted to Larry Bouchard for offering me the image of "overhearing" here.

pressivism or (at least initially) any sort of inclusivist reading which insists that people can mean the same thing, though they understand what they're saying differently, because their hearts are in the right place; this is the worst kind of condescension. On the contrary, ethics is determinately particularistic, at times veering dangerously close to narcissistic. (I will have more to say about this in Part II below.) Christian ethics, that is, does not begin from a primarily universalist perspective; as Hauerwas understands it, as I understand him, ethics is not about finding formal frameworks for understanding what we all want naturally to do anyhow. There is nothing like this phenomenological interest in Hauerwas, nor anything resembling a form/content distinction, which would picture something like a universal moral content which is amenable to different formal expressions (or "flavors") by different moral communities. Whether or not Christian ethics is distinctive all the way down, in beginning to do *Christian* ethics, we begin with the specificities of this language game.[4]

This emphasis on the primordiality of particular practices is, I think, one of the ways that Hauerwas has had the most marked influence on other thinkers. Because of him, there is a great deal of what we may call "moral ethnography" today in Christian ethics, detailing the ways in which particular practices generate "semanticizations" of lived life which give us a sense of who we are and who God is. Some of his students, such as Greg Jones in *Embodying Forgiveness* and Bill Kavanaugh in *Torture and Eucharist*, have shown that, in a way much more useful than, for example, a Levinasian would allow, ethics really can be, if not "first philosophy," at least "first theology"—or rather, as Episcopalians like to say (with the Patristics), *lex orandi, lex credendi*—the law of prayer, and lived liturgical existence, is the law of belief.

Hauerwas is not alone in this: in historical research one finds similar claims being made in Pierre Hadot's writings on ancient philosophy as a way of life, while theologians such as Catherine Pickstock and Ellen Charry have recently noted the pastoral and liturgical purposes of Christian doctrines as well.[5] More interestingly from my perspec-

[4] I have been deeply educated in this by Charles Pinches' luminous "On Form and Content in Christian Ethics," pp. 4-14 in *Sophia* 26:1 (March 1987).

[5] See Pierre Hadot, *Philosophy as a Way of Life* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1995), Catherine Pickstock, *After Writing: On the Liturgical Consummation of Philosophy* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1998), and Ellen Charry, *By the Renewing of Your Minds: The Pastoral Function of Christian Doctrine* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1997).

tive, though somewhat more distantly, Hauerwas's work finds resonances in a good deal of recent philosophical work (drawing on both Analytic and Continental sources) on what it is to "be minded," which is to be incarnated as an intellectual creature in a particular world of social and physical reality; philosophers such as Sabina Lovibond, Jonathan Lear and John McDowell have offered a way of reading the character of human existence as what we might call a way of being in the world.[6] Such positions, it seems to me, offer some of the most exciting, powerful, and (at least potentially) profoundly wrong ways of reading the character of the human that Christian thought confronts today, because they attempt, in John Milbank's phrase, to "naturalize the supernatural," to accept the reality of intellectual inquiry in a way that behaviorist and neo-expressivist readings of the human do not, and yet to understand that reality within a natural realm, in what I would want disputatiously to call a reductionistically materialist vision of human existence. (I think this is at the root of much of what is called "pragmatism," by the way, and so I think it's a temptation Hauerwas will have to confront as he continues his own work, which itself seems influenced in some ways by pragmatism, though it just might be good common sense.)

On Being Remembered: Hauerwas as Critic of American Culture. This last reference to contemporary philosophical temptations towards materialism moves us from questions of Hauerwas's contributions to method—that is, thinking about Christian ethics as a discipline—into questions of Hauerwas's contribution to matters of content, issues of the picture of the world, and particularly (in keeping with his insistence on the particular) the picture of America that Hauerwas presents. Here I think actually his more recent work, as it has in the past decade or so become more "undisciplined," in the wake of his critique of "Christian ethics" as an academic discipline (which I think will finally be seen as the payoff of his work on community, character, and virtue—work which has been essentially tactical in the service of his broader strategy to return reflection to an ecclesial basis),

[6] This has roots in thinkers as diverse as Gadamer, Hegel, and Wittgenstein. See Sabina Lovibond, *Realism and Imagination in Ethics* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1983), Jonathan Lear, *Love and Its Place in Nature* (New York: Farrar Strauss Giroux, 1990), and John McDowell, *Mind and World* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1994) and *Meaning, Knowledge, and Reality* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1998).

has grown in its suggestiveness about the problems besetting our society. Even if, as will be seen, I cannot wholly affirm his proposals, they are profound, and contain germinal truths upon which we can build.

Hauerwas's attack on the fragmented character of modern academic life in general, and its deleterious effects on Christian thought in the academy in particular, is related to his larger critique of the distance between religious belief and everyday life in America—or rather, more precisely, the profoundly *un-Christian* character of the religion *of* America.[7] Irrespective of its intrinsic value for its intellectual practitioners, can Christian ethics make a difference to the lives of (putatively) committed Christians in our society? The chances, according to Hauerwas, are not good. Initially they do not look good because there is a profound complacency in the culture about religious belief. Much like Kierkegaard, Hauerwas thinks that everyone assumes that the path of the Christian life is relatively well understood, and fairly easily followed. This complacency is connected to, indeed in part underlies, our desire to talk in putatively universal—but actually only in vaguely non-particular—ways about what "we" should do. Christians, according to Hauerwas, are kept from wondering about particularity, and think of Christian faith in terms of the quaint recitation of creeds, and a focus on cognitive and propositional refinements as trimming round the edges of our "ordinary" lives, because we assume we share most of our beliefs with our non-Christian neighbors, and we believe things are by and large all right. Hauerwas agrees with the first assumption, as a sociological fact, and disagrees with the second, as a theological and ethical assessment of where we are. Our world, and we in it, are insane; we are caught up in that insanity both cognitively and practically, in terms of the fundamentally nihilistic consumerism through which our materialist culture offers us happiness, a happiness which is built on the idea of a timeless (which is in fact just the opposite of an "eternal") self. Our resistance to particular languages and practices of faith in fact signify our resistance to acknowledging this truth.

So the world is mad; but how can we, complacent Whigs that we are, be brought to see this? I think it's fair to say that, in appreciating this vision of our situation, we can see the rhetorical challenge that Hauerwas's thought has always faced. And this rhetorical challenge il-

[7] This is a sort of "ideology critique," but only insofar as one understands it as a critique of idolatry.

luminates some of his more material projects. By this I mean that the key thing that keeps us trapped in this situation, unknowing it, is our habituation to (and by) it, our preconscious acceptance of routines of living which are essentially opposed to and corruptive of our world. Hence Hauerwas's longtime insistence on the importance of virtue-language and character formation can be seen as an attempt to make explicit the roots of the problem we face, the systemic distortion of human being that constitutes the core crisis of our society. Just as we have been habituated into accepting unquestioningly the need always to make more money, and buy more products, and not to take more vacation time and not to place absolute limits on the number of hours we work, we must be *de*-habituated of those patterns of behavior, and that can only happen by using new patterns of behavior to shove them out of the way.

But it is not quite right to say that we have been *mis*-formed, or formed differently from the way we should have been formed; as there is an ontological asymmetry between good and evil, the mis-formation we have suffered is better described as a *dis*-formation. It is not that we are different from what we would have to be to be Christians; we are significantly *less* than what we would have to be. And central here is the fact that we are far too punctual creatures than we would have to be to inhabit the Christian story. We suffer from a sort of theological attention deficit disorder, and Hauerwas locates this as the root of those patterns of behavior that we need to unlearn, and he names it "forgetting." We Americans, he insists, have (or rather accept) no history: We do not acknowledge any essential (or more specifically any significant) link with what has come before us; we do not allow that we inhabit moral difficulties caused by, and have moral responsibilities because of, events and persons who existed long ago. If the reigning vice of academic Christian ethics is that we do not know where our heart is, the reigning vice of American citizens is that we think of ourselves as *unencumbered* by any relevant past. America is founded on forgetting—on the idea of a fresh start, a New Jerusalem—and has as its promise a land where the past really is past.

(In a way, this dilemma is a paradigm case of the modern dilemma in general; as John Locke said, "in the beginning, all the world was America,"[8] and the sense in which he meant that is perilously [if inadvertently] close to the sense in which I'm taking it here. For America

[8] John Locke, *Second Treatise of Government*, § 49.

is, in a way, the beginning of modernity: America is the earliest truly modern state and remains the purest example of that state, just because it didn't have to transform itself from a premodern society into a modern one, but was [in some sense] modern all along.[9] But while the character of the American narrative can be attractive, in formal content, to other peoples, Hauerwas's narrative is not finally, I think, interested in abstractions like "modernity" and "liberalism," though he spends a lot of time talking about them; what he's really interested in, again, is the attempt to live a Christian life here and now, in the wilds of America.)[10]

If, then, the basic problem with our characters, what lies at the root of our malformation, is our forgetfulness, the basic prescription is a series of practices of remembering. Or rather, we need to lead our lives as "being re-membered," being put back together again from a separateness that is only superficially spatial, but more basically temporal (this is where Augustine's term *distensio*, stretched-ness out over the rack of time, may be of use). The Christian churches have a number of devices to help us with this discipline of being re-membered, including (microscopically) the confession of sin and the public recitation of grace, and (more globally) the perpetual recitation of the liturgical year. What these and similar practices share is a way of seeing ourselves as recipients, not only in the present but from the past, as *inheritors*. (And here I will note that much modern thought has taken as the paradigmatic model of human relationship the exchange

[9] There's a question here about whether this description of "modern" can really be allowed to stand, or whether, as Bruno Latour has put it, we have never in fact *been* modern in the first place, at least insofar as we have never really lived up to the expectations of modernity but have used it as a story we deceive ourselves into believing; but I note it only to move on with the story. See Bruno Latour, *We Have Never Been Modern*, Catherine Porter, trans. (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1993).

[10] Incidentally, I'd like to put in a brief plug here for Hauerwas's taking on thinkers like Richard Rorty, who are offering, it seems to me, a relevantly similar sort of critique—though coming from a very different standpoint—of the decline of thinking about America. I suspect that such an engagement, especially with works like Rorty's *Renewing our Country* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1998), where he explicitly claims that America's problem is that it's still not gotten over "sin," would serve a useful purpose for Hauerwas's own project. The sort of "strong poet" motif that Rorty has been championing for some time has its political formulation in this slim but quite interesting volume, and I think that an engagement with it would reap considerable rewards for Hauerwas. Something like this engagement happens in the work of some of his more recent students; see David Toole, *Waiting for Godot in Sarajevo: Theological Reflections on Nihilism, Tragedy, and Apocalypse* (Boulder, CO: Westview Press, 1998).

between autonomous agents, while in earlier ages the relationship was more typically described in terms of inheriting; one can see the differences operating most clearly in the different role of children in, say, Plato's *Republic* and Hobbes's *Leviathan*.)[11] We have lost the ability to understand what it means to have a past, to be in a tradition, to be in history; our basic project, and one basic purpose of Hauerwas's work, has been to get us to reconnect with that history, to accept the pains of *distensio*, of being re-membered—in large part by others, as the grammatical form suggests—to end in the recollection of *all* time.[12]

Or so, as I read him, Hauerwas claims. But here I begin to feel resistance to this account on an apparently minor point, which is that he seems to accept the "modern" world's self-understanding, without suspicions of its adequacy. But one may doubt, as I will below, that this description is an altogether honest one. Most basically, I want (believe it or not) a far more *offensive* theology, on the strategic level, than Hauerwas seems willing to give us (despite all his offensives on the tactical level, which often strike me as not much more than suicidal banzai charges). And this will connect, as we will see, with worries I have about his diagnosis of the problem in terms of *forgetting*, and his prescription of a practice of *remembering*—which can be taken, I worry, in a far too propositional, informational, cognitive way, which both warrants the charges of polemical othering that so often attach to Hauerwas's work, and merely continues the identity politics understanding of our world that the Christian faith works basically to transform.

I want to argue that the practices Christianity promotes lead us not into further detachment from the world, but just the opposite: they teach us that the basic problem with the world is that it is *un*-attached to itself, and Christianity, as signified especially in the Incarnation, is a matter of coming to be rightly *in* the world, which is a procedure wherein we not only remember our pasts, but in a way *learn the world*, and indeed learn it better than it knows itself.

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[11] Of course, paternalism is not absent in the modern state; it merely becomes the prerogative of the abstract sovereign power, which is lodged in the state.

[12] This is where, it seems to me, Hauerwas might owe us more reflection on his doctrine of God; he says suggestive and, I think, true things about the meaning of the concept of *eternity* as found in God's being as "the fulness of time," but I think it would help his work if he would spend some time on this issue as well.

The Other Hand: Some Concerns about Hauerwas

Above, I praised both Hauerwas's critique of religious ethics and his critique of contemporary American culture; in a way, as I mentioned, I talked in succession about the form and the content of his thought. Now, in raising some worries about his position, I'll double back, noting some difficulties that I see in his interpretation of the way we live now, then offering a different, and I think superior, interpretation, one which has important implications for how we might go about doing Christian ethical reflection, implications that Hauerwas may want to resist.

In brief, I think the sectarian accusations in fact have some purchase on his thought, though not quite in the way many of his critics suggest. For his temptations towards sectarianism are not *anti*-cultural, but on the contrary just what the culture ordered; it is by being "anti-cultural," by taking an *oppositional* stance, that Hauerwas's work is most cultural. Indeed Hauerwas can at times sound like a participant in theological liberalism at its unreflective worst—his thought can be amenable to being taken to be "*Kulturprotestantismus*," "culture-protestantism," the idea, a sort of bastard child of Schleiermacher and Bismark, that the theological task is essentially the task of the culture's "human affairs" division. To show this, I need to show that Hauerwas's work works, at times, against its own better judgment; he errs, that is, in himself forgetting—or rather denying—that we retain fragmentary (and sometimes *more* than fragmentary) memories of our true selves. His denial of this fact leads him to offer practices of rehabilitation which are amenable, in our setting, to appropriation for sectarian purposes, and in so doing, his work participates in the very cultural conditions—of "identity politics"—that it at other times rightly condemns.

To show this, I want to focus on the interpretive image that Hauerwas employs to understand our situation, the image of forgetting, of a culture that has lost its past. This is not the best image we can use; we ought to employ a model not of forgetting but of *denial*: Our problem is not that we have no routes by which to access the relevant truths we need to know, but rather that we choose to *ignore* those truths, as best

[13] This ignoring does not translate univocally into "ignorance"; I do not mean, that is, that our problem is the Platonic one of a lack of knowledge. At least I do not think I mean that. There may be a way in which, with a more adequate conceptualization of knowledge, such an account would become plausible.

we can.[13] Hauerwas gets himself into trouble because he pictures the culture as empty, a vast, trackless desert, while I think it's better depicted not as empty but *too full*, and visualized not as a desert but as an overgrown city. Detailing this vision is the project I turn to now.

A Question of Vision. Hauerwas's claim, that we live in a world of forgetting, is only a *partial* description of our situation. To help explain what I mean here, let me say something about the real problem of what is called "identity politics." Identity politics, we are told by political theorists, is bad because it offers us only a way of separating, of telling us apart, without finding a way to talk about how we may be similar. This is of course the sort of problem that one might expect political theorists to have with "identity politics"; but there is a deeper problem with it, a problem that is prior (in several senses) to politics, and that centers around identity. This problem with identity politics is not that it is anchored in politically relevant differences, but that there are no identities *behind* the differences, that the differences constitute the identities; this sort of politics seduces us into understanding ourselves (more often serially, not simultaneously) as *not* x, not y, or not z, and offers us precious little in the way of understanding who we *positively* are; such a project would threaten the clear and distinct category schemes on which identities are defined. (This is a sort of weird analogy with Hegel's master/slave dialectic, in which you cannot know yourself except as you are in opposition to something else, and the structuralist idea, radicalized by Derrida, that signs refer only to other signs, and so "float" above a bottomless abyss that the roots of reference cannot plumb.)

The problem of identity politics, however, is merely modernity's, or more properly America's, manifestation of the perennial problem of a refusal to "have true life" that Christianity has always opposed.[14] It is the problem of admitting the other into the self, which is the only way that the self can be itself at all.[15] And here we can say that modernity is no worse off than putatively "premodern" societies, but simply

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[14] It is okay, by the way, to refuse to grant "modernity" any ultimate *theological* significance; doing so, and insisting on the "perenniality" of Christianity's problems—"perenniality" in the sense of existing before, during, and after the episode known (however dubiously) as "the modern"—is just another way of resisting modernity's self-description as, well, *modern*.

[15] See my "Pluralism, Otherness, and the Augustinian Tradition," in *Modern Theology* 14:1 (January 1998), pp. 83-112. I think Hauerwas's work on "witness" serves him well here.

manifests a difficulty we've had all along; while in the past the pseudo-identities we fabricated were largely *vertical* fabrications—historical identities, constructed by defining ourselves in terms of traditional roles and inheritances—today our pseudo-identities are *horizontal*, constructed by being different from those around us. This sort of Kantian "anthropology of right" reflects a vision of the unspeakable quiddity of the individual, where we are forever unknown to ourselves and live on the surface of our being. Though this vision has much of its epistemology detailed in the tradition rooted in Descartes and flowering in Kant's "negative sublime," it has its greatest positive exponents in thinkers like Emerson and Nietzsche, who claimed that the condition of being unknown to ourselves is itself the basic source of meaning in our lives.[16]

This identity politics requires a method of simplification to handle the complexities of our situation, and so fuels our persistent attempts at "active forgetting" as a way of escaping them. But this "active forgetting" is better described in more voluntarist terms as *denial*, for two reasons. First of all, this is always at best a *willed* forgetting, and so more of a *disowning* of knowledge than a loss of it. Second, and more devastatingly, this strategy typically ends up in a "forgetting," not only of our past, but also of one another in the present, which goes under the name of a neutral "tolerance" in contemporary liberal political thought. This has disastrous implications; it warrants a benign indifference to each other, and reduces the complexity of social life to simplistic sound bites, buttressed by a prickly *oppositional* discourse which we reach for when others come near the boundaries of our solitudes.

But Hauerwas himself sometimes fuels this oppositional temptation, by fixating so much on the differences separating "we Christians" and "the world" or "liberal modernity" or "the American story," and thereby allows us to claim differences when they needn't actually make any difference.[17] Indeed, sometimes his work offers little more

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[16] Much of the material for the ideas in this paragraph comes from my reading of John Milbank, *The Word Made Strange* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1997), especially his essay "Critique of the Theology of Right".

[17] For a provocative sociological position that may give credence to these suspicions, see Alan Wolfe, *One Nation, After All* (New York: Viking, 1998). While this book's rather hyperventilated claims seem hard to sustain (not least because, if we could be so sanguine, why get so hyperventilated about it?), it offers a suggestive and provocative account of our cultural differences.

than this oppositional discourse. Too often he focuses on clear-cut opponents rather than those with whom he shares considerable agreement. This attention to obvious enemies pushes him towards a less charitable and more polemical stance than he need occupy. He sounds sometimes too blustery, too much like he's already got all the answers, while at other times he seems too exhibitionistic, too fixated on the ritualistic reiteration of difference, of the "we're different from you because we believe [x]" variety. In so doing, Hauerwas often feeds the desire of churchgoing people for a form of identity politics—an identity politics in which the distinctions are theological, and not racial or sexual or political or economic, but an identity politics nonetheless. Furthermore, it doesn't so much address the root problem as feed it, because it gives people caught up in these identity anxieties an entire menu of differences that can allow them to deny their connections with others, deny that they are implicated in the neighbor and the stranger and the stranger in them, deny that the world we live in is thoroughly mongrelized (or rather, that it *should* be). The ritualized recitation of the differences separating Christians from their non-Christian neighbors turns out to be, in this context, not the informing of Christians of what they should be but have forgotten to be; rather, it supports denials of how we are implicated in one another, how we are at best barely Christian in any event, and how much of our lives are still caught in webs of sin—perhaps especially in denying our continued sinfulness.

This issue is often a matter of rhetoric. And at its best his work avoids this; for in indulging in these jeremiads, Hauerwas contradicts his best and most fundamental intuitions, intuitions which move his thought towards genuine engagement, as seen in his claims about the Christian obligation to welcome the stranger. But sometimes his work *does* contradict this, and much of the rest of the time, I fear, a great deal of his work is too easily readable as supporting that project, and therefore playing into our needs to have ways of telling us apart from one another. Were Hauerwas's unapologetic attitude formulated in less taunting terms, I judge that the illuminative power of his thought would increase.

So I want Hauerwas to think about what it is we really need, today in our culture, to become better Christians. And I think he should say something like this: We do not need more *information*, nor do we need to be *reminded* of the distinctiveness of the lives we are supposed to be leading (which, in our situation, is too often in fact merely

the arming of ourselves with a new rhetoric which serves either as holy water by which to baptize our persistently un-Christian behaviors or a holy incense smoke screen by which to obscure them); we need to be *converted*. And where conversion is required—which is everywhere—jeremiads such as those in which Hauerwas sometimes indulges are not only hazardous to the moral health of the speaker; they also allow the continued refusal of the audience to admit the truth. Rather than jeremiad, I propose we advance the cause of confession—a cause which Hauerwas's best work fundamentally supports. And that is my main methodological point, to which I now turn.

Jeremiad or Confession? There is, to be sure, a value in "reaching disagreement," and in showing people how strange the word really is, how alien to our workday's routines is the reign of God; but the value of this is largely for others. I think that Hauerwas's strategy is curiously other-directed, and other-governed, in a way that maybe lets the reactions of others shape his tone more than is wise. I want what is in some ways a more narcissistic strategy, because I want to learn for myself. But others are, for my money, facing many of the same problems I am, and I assume that what insights I have gained may have some relevance for their lives. So I want to offer a cultural critique that is more therapeutic than juridical.

I know calling this project "therapeutic" may seem to totter perilously close to the increasingly therapeutic (in a bad sense) cast of much public and private discourse in American culture in general; but better to run this risk than simply to ignore our situation. (There is a solid pedigree for this Augustinian rhetorical strategy—it is a matter of "stealing the Egyptians' gold," as Augustine notes in *De Doctrina Christiana* (II.40.60), and that he exemplifies in his writings: note, for example, his appropriation of the heroic rhetoric of the Roman *Imperium* in his *City of God*, whose first word—*gloriosissimam*—appropriates the keystone of Roman rhetoric, namely "glory," and applies it to the City of God.) To borrow from Wittgenstein, the really hard thing is to run *just off* the grooves of our ordinary expectations, and that, it seems to me, is the perilous course this discourse must run.

This therapeutic method is not most basically concerned with telling us where we should be, though it can accommodate that as a legitimate project. But its first and central purpose is not so much communication as articulation, bringing to awareness the manifold tacit commitments and cares we possess and deciding whether we want these cares, and if so how to bring them into some sort of intelligible

ordering.[18] Again, this project presumes that our basic problem is not an *absence* of understanding or caring, but rather an *excess* of interpretations and commitments; the task before us, then, is finding a way of negotiating all of these conflicts, and in that what we need is a way of better organizing our loves, and through those loves our lives.

So I think in the end that Hauerwas and I differ only, though it seems to me still significantly, in the strategies we would employ, and this difference seems founded upon different assessments of our situation. I think that Hauerwas would agree that our basic problem is not external oppression but inward malformation, and I think that this means that our basic strategy will be one that is less prophetic and more confessional.[19] We already live in what Robert Hughes has called a "Culture of Complaint," and to modify what the English political theorist John Dunn has suggested, "the most important question about [thought] at present, however, is not about its explanatory prowess or its openness to bad news. It is how far [it] contains the resources to show us how the future can be made less grim."[20]

Conclusion

It's clear, I hope, that my appreciation of Hauerwas is deep, though I hope it's equally clear that it's not unqualified. But what qualifications I put on it I think he might agree with as well. Still, in the end it won't matter, because with Stanley the point is not the conclusions but the argument, which, because of the character of risk involved, is perhaps one of the closest analogies in which we participate in this world in the real communion of the Trinity. And I want to end by saying that I think such arguments are what thinking is all about, and as such Stanley has served for me as a way of thinking, or as a necessary thinking partner. One learns at least as much by disagreeing with him

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[18] See Robin W. Lovin, "The Limits of Freedom and the Possibilities of Politics: A Christian Realist Account of Political Responsibility," *The Journal of Religion* Vol. 73, No. 4 (1993), pp. 559-572.

[19] I in fact think that there are three genres of theological writing: jeremiad or prophecy, confession or lamentation, and contemplation or ecstatic prayer. I mention them only to suggest that thinking about doing theology self-consciously in these modes might prove illuminating.

[20] John Dunn, "Conclusion (1992)" to *Western Political Theory in the Face of The Future*, second ed. (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1993), p. 133. Cf. Stuart Hampshire, "Morality and Pessimism," pp. 82-100 in *Morality and Conflict* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1983).

as by agreeing with him. Pugnacious and articulate, he's a fighter and he typically picks his fights well: Each interlocutor merits the attention it receives. His disputatiousness is good, both because it compels him towards an admirable specificity in argument, and because it highlights the way that theological work should be itself one form of the Christian life.

So this is the final reason I subtitled this essay "one hand clapping," for that is what Hauerwas's work really offers us. And I think this partiality is a virtue too rarely exhibited, and even more rarely praised. We ought not to imagine Hauerwas as a stand-alone author, producing a body of work as the Ford Motor Corporation produces cars. We do him an injustice if we do; such has never been his purpose. It is enough for one thinker in a tradition that she or he manages to raise issues in provocative ways. So my criticisms are not meant as condemnations of Hauerwas, but emendations of him; that he raises such issues at all is a considerable achievement in an academic environment more interested in conclusions than in ongoing debates. If Hauerwas's work does not entirely elicit assent, nonetheless it elicits gratitude, not least for forcing one to explain one's dissents. I may only have one hand clapping, but it's clapping pretty hard.

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