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GOD, TRUTH, AND WITNESS: ENGAGING STANLEY HAUERWAS

A review of L. Gregory Jones, Reinhard Hütter, and C. Rosalee Velloso Ewell, eds. *God, Truth, and Witness: Engaging Stanley Hauerwas*. Grand Rapids: Brazos Press, 2005. 336pp. $39.99 (hardcover). ISBN: 1-58743-151-3.

The editors of *God, Truth, and Witness: Engaging Stanley Hauerwas* begin the introduction to the volume with the following claim: "Engaging Stanley Hauerwas . . . is joyful, frustrating, and transformative" (7). While I am not sure about its being "transformative," reading the volume that follows this sentence is also joyful and frustrating. It is *joyful* in as much as it is a collection of essays from some of the most influential thinkers in contemporary theology dealing with a wide range of topics. From Rowan A. Greer's account of Augustine's conception of truth to Neville Richardson's socio-theological report on the status of the church in South Africa, and from Arne Rasmusson's defense of Yoder's conception of politics to Harry Huebner's reflections on the possibility of a Christian university, this volume serves as something of a topological overview of the contemporary landscape in both theological speculation and church practice. However, the volume is also *frustrating* in that the essays do not always thematically cohere with each other in any clear fashion and, due to a lack of engagement with the major voices in *philosophical* literature, they repeatedly feel as if they are written to an audience that is more or less already on board with the general trajectories of the positions being advocated. Additionally, there is one further respect in which the volume is both joyful and frustrating: the "engagement" with Stanley Hauerwas announced in the title and in the first sentence of the book itself is, for the most part, sporadic and, occasionally, seemingly nonexistent. In what follows I will give a summary of the contents of the book, provide possible ways to find coherent thematic frameworks in the volume, and offer possible philosophical interlocutors that should be more directly addressed. First, however, let me suggest productive ways in which to understand the "engagement" with Hauerwas.

To begin, what exactly should the reader expect to find given the repeated mention of an "engagement" with Hauerwas? In the introduction the editors announce that

the volume is meant to be a *Festschrift* on the "occasion of [Hauerwas's] sixty-fifth birthday." The overall thematic rubric of the text is summarized by the editors as follows:

> We invited contributors to write essays that would engage Stanley Hauerwas's work, and we suggested themes of God, Truth, and Witness as foci for consideration. We chose these themes because they figure prominently in Hauerwas's work, especially his Gifford Lectures . . . . We thought that in the wake of Hauerwas's major book-length statement in the Gifford Lectures, it would be appropriate and fruitful to invite senior colleagues to engage him in continuing conversation (9-10).

Evaluating celebratory volumes such as this is a difficult task. To write an essay in honor of someone does not immediately suggest that the essay should be an engagement with the thought of that person. However, without a fairly substantive reflection on the work of the person being honored, a *Festschrift* can quickly become detached from the person to whom it is dedicated and emerge as a loosely held collection of unrelated papers. This book does a good job of "continuing [a] conversation" with themes that occur frequently in Hauerwas's authorship: e.g., witness, community, pacifism, critiques of liberalism, etc. Nonetheless, substantive considerations of Hauerwas's thought are far less prominent. Additionally, far too often, the impact of the arguments being advanced by the various contributors is significantly weakened because of the repeated gestures of personal praise and admiration to Hauerwas himself. With that said, the "engagement" with Hauerwas enacted in this book is more of a thinking *with* and a thinking *after* (understood as *in the wake of*) than it is a thinking *about*.

The volume is divided into four sections. Part One, "Truthful Witness . . . and the Freedom of Friendship," features essays by Rowan A. Greer, David B. Burrell, CSC, and Hans S. Reinders. Greer offers an essay in which he "meditate[s] upon Augustine's views of truth with a Hauerwasian framework in mind" (15). Drawing implicitly, though not explicitly, upon Hauerwas's connection between theology and ethics, Greer argues that, for Augustine, "truth overlaps with humility, love, and peace" (34). Moving from Augustine to Aquinas, Burrell's chapter is a sustained consideration of how the theology of Thomas Aquinas can address, and serve as a corrective to, the failings of contemporary "libertarian" notions of freedom. Reinders's contribution also deals with truth and freedom, but now with a focus on the question of friendship—particularly the possibility of friendship with the "intellectually disabled" as considered from a perspective of Christian Aristotelianism. While dealing with the issues of truth, freedom, and

friendship, the essays in Part One can be more appropriately considered as thematically connected by the question of methodology (whether understood theologically, epistemologically, or pragmatically). All three of the authors address the way in which one's beliefs are not held in isolation from the way in which one lives in the world. For Greer, this amounts to a realization that "truth must have truthful witnesses" (30). Burrell extends this notion of what we might call *embarked truth* by reading Aquinas in the light of Gadamer's contention that "any inquiry whatsoever rests on fiduciary premises" (39). This post-Heideggerian (or as Burrell terms it, "post-postmedieval") perspective is then echoed by Reinders's conception of friendship as an invitation that I have not chosen: "friendship . . . is in an important sense something I receive before I can give" (69).

Part Two, "Being a Christian . . . and Facing (Post-)Christendom," focuses primarily on questions of political theology and contains chapters by Robert Louis Wilken, Arne Rasmusson, Robert N. Bellah, Emmanuel M. Katongole, and Robert W. Jenson. Wilken's "A Constantinian Bishop: St. Ambrose of Milan" is a very helpful account of the way Ambrose offers a performative example of how to conceive of the intersection of church and state. In contrast to Wilken's primary consideration of early church history, Rasmusson's "The Politics of Diaspora: The Post-Christendom Theologies of Karl Barth and John Howard Yoder" deals with the relationship of church and state as it is developed in the twentieth century in the thought of Barth (in his responses to World War I and II) and Yoder (in his insightful appropriation of Barth). Rasmusson argues that Yoder's "diaspora theology" is crucial for the development of alternative imaginations for social/political/ecclesial existence. Bellah's essay "God and King" takes up Hauerwas's critique of liberalism, but argues that the link between Protestantism and liberalism "long precedes the twentieth century and is, in fact, constitutive of them both" (113). The essay concludes with a consideration of the American "liberal empire" as expressed in the rhetoric of George Bush. Bellah suggests that if we are going to understand the vocabulary being deployed in Bush's political speech then we have to situate it in the context of evangelical "Millennialism" (128). Extending the discussion of the trends in evangelicalism but applying it to a different cultural context, Katongole's "Hauerwasian Hooks and the Christian Social Imagination: Critical Reflections from an African Perspective" challenges the supposed requirement of the church's relevance to the world and, instead, calls for a new realist perspective that "acknowledges that the world, as it is, is the product of stories" (152). Katongole expresses concern about the story that Pentecostalism continues to gain prominence in Africa. While Katongole focuses on the importance of stories, Jenson's essay, "Christian Civilization," goes further and analyzes the way stories are presented. Jenson asks whether a decidedly Christian "high culture" is possible, and if so what it might look like.

Part Three of the volume, "A City on a Hill . . . and the Church(es)," includes essays by Bernd Wannenwetsch, H. Tristram Engelhardt, Jr., George Lindbeck, and Neville Richardson. Wannenwetsch's essay is a direct consideration of what a political theology should look like given the distinction between the Celestial City and the Earthly City as presented in Revelation 21. By focusing on characteristics of earthly cities that are absent in the Heavenly City, Wannenwetsch claims that in Heaven we find "belonging without exclusion," "glory without foundation," and "worship without religion." As a contrary picture of the city, Wannenwetsch offers a very helpful reading of "the GREAT CITY" in Nietzsche's *Thus Spoke Zarathustra*. Englehardt's essay is the only essay of the entire volume that provides a decidedly critical consideration of Hauerwas's actual thought. While others might challenge certain Hauerwasian trajectories, Englehardt explicitly accuses Hauerwas of having an underdeveloped (and overly Protestant) account of both community and also the church. Lindbeck's chapter "Ecumenisms in Conflict: Where Does Hauerwas Stand?" can best be summarized by Lindbeck himself: "Inevitably I find myself wondering where those who share Hauerwas's principles should stand on the issues that divide ecumenists and on which Hauerwas has not expressed himself. This essay speculates on the answer to this question" (214). After tracing the history of ecumenism in the twentieth century, Lindbeck suggests that there are really two competing contemporary positions: the "insider" view (represented by Michael Kinnamon) and the "outsider" view (represented by the "Princeton Proposal"). Lindbeck concludes that Hauerwasians should clearly support the latter position. Richardson's essay "What's Going on in the Church in South Africa?" is an extended consideration of the status of the church in South Africa a decade after the demise of apartheid. Richardson believes that Hauerwas can be a helpful resource for thinking both of the call of the church in is response to apartheid and also for forming a post-apartheid theological vision for South Africa.

The final part of the book, "Practicing Theology . . . and Learning from the Other," has contributions from Nicholas Lash, Harry Huebner, and Peter Ochs. As an example of how we can learn from people and texts that are not normally considered of theological importance, Lash's "'An Immense Darkness' and the Tasks of Theology" is an extended, decidedly theological, reading of Joseph Conrad's *Heart of Darkness*. He claims that his "hunch" is that Conrad's book has not been read theologically because of "the assumption that the subject matter of theology is religion, rather than all things whatsoever in relation to the mystery of God, their origin and end" (259). Given that the locus of learning is usually understood to be the university, Huebner puts forth an argument in favor of the reality of a Christian university in his "Learning Made Strange: Can a University Be Christian?" Huebner's contention is that the key to a Christian university is that it would literally "make speech strange." "Unless learning itself is first of all made strange by gospel speech, which is something quite different from the speech of the

dominant culture," he argues, "the likelihood of education taking place under the Lordship of Christ is not high" (282). Huebner concludes by providing a list of ways in which this "making strange" would occur in the commitments of the university itself. He claims that the Christian university must stand for the following five claims: 1) Jesus is the norm (299), 2) Jesus as teacher (300), 3) Ecclesiology precedes pedagogy (302), 4) Pedagogical humility/patience/nonviolence (304), and 5) The mystery of God (306). One of the key challenges to dialogical engagement is the interaction between language games. In his essay "Abrahamic Hauerwas: Theological Conditions for Justifying Inter-Abrahamic Study," Peter Ochs analyzes Hauerwas's "fathering" of the "Radical Traditions" book series in order to investigate the way in which the post-liberal movement in theology is consistent with intracommunal dialogue. Ochs's essay is an attempt to offer a "theological justification" for the necessity of such dialogue from within Hauerwas's own commitments.

Having summarized the contents of the volume, let me make a few comments/criticisms before concluding. First, at the risk of sounding like a disciple of my own discipline, almost all of the essays in the volume would be strengthened if they contained a more prominent engagement with the philosophical literature concerning the various debates under consideration. I recognize that there is an important point being made across the volume as a whole that theology should not answer to philosophical criteria, but, instead, should operate according to its own standards. Yet, without the appropriate philosophical framework being set, the essays repeatedly feel almost like what Wittgenstein describes in the *Philosophical Investigations* concerning a wheel that has come free of its gears and is no longer able to make productive contact with the mechanism that it is supposed to move. To be brief, let me target this critique on the social/political dimension of the book's focus. Although most of the essays advocate a transformed praxis, without actually speaking to/with the political philosophers that they hope to challenge, one wonders whether such transformation is actually likely to occur. A shot in the dark is more likely to be effective if it is still aimed in the general direction of the target instead of just fired randomly. As it stands now, these essays tend to signify as being random rather than intentionally directed towards particular points, conceptions, terms, and ideas that have been developed by and continue to be primarily located in a discourse that speaks in the wake of such theorists as Locke, Hobbes, Rawls, and Sandel.

Such an engagement might take the following shape: Part One could draw support from trends in postmodern philosophical articulations of the self and the other—e.g., Levinas's notion of passivity and Derrida's sustained reflections on friendship. The socio-political concerns of Part Two and Three could be significantly more persuasive if they featured a confrontation with mainstream political philosophy—

either as a critical lens or a lens to critique. Hence, an opportunity is missed when Wannenwetsch and Rasmusson both gesture towards positions that are reminiscent of Derrida's conception of the "democracy to come" and yet fail to discuss his contribution to contemporary thought; Bellah's essay deals with questions of religion in the public square that have been addressed by such thinkers as Robert Audi, Christopher Eberle, and Nicholas Wolterstorff and yet none of these thinkers are considered; Katongole, Lindbeck, and Richardson all raise questions having to do with pluralism and such theorists as Seyla Benhabib and Iris Marion Young remain untapped critical resources for such discussions.

Second, in an attempt to facilitate thematic cohesion across the volume as a whole, let me suggest that the reader should consider the essays by Jensen and Wannenwetsch as best being read in conversation with the primary concerns of the other essay's section. So, Jensen is best considered in conversation with Part Three and Wannenwetsch in conversation with Part Two. The rationale for this is that Jensen's essay on a Christian "high culture" is really more a question of how the church should locate itself in the marketplace of ideas and economies of production, whereas Wannenwetsch's, alternatively, is primarily a consideration of the polis. To this reader at least, the former is more directly focused on the church while the latter is more directly concerned with the question of politics. This adjusted placement also makes sense given that Lash's essay in Part Four is really an example of what a Christian high cultural practice of literary criticism might look like.

Third, while lacking the space to consider each essay in detail, let me offer a quick reply to one essay in particular: Katongole's consideration of the Pentecostal "story" in Africa. The main problem that I want to highlight is that, whether intentionally or not, Katongole limits the way in which different stories can occur. Although he notes that "different stories do . . . shape different worlds" (152), he fails to allow for the possibility that stories can be fluid even within themselves. In other words, why is it the case that Pentecostalism is unable to allow new stories to emerge? Can't Pentecostals be critical of the way in which their own stories are being told? Moreover, being critical of the dominant political and cultural expression is not to eliminate the possibility of recognizing those aspects that should be championed and celebrated, but simply to recognize that this celebration cannot cover over the need for continued critique. Further, why is it that being relevant to the world is seen to be so problematic? Isn't the real point that Truth and Goodness are always of the highest relevance to the world and that Christianity is called to this witness and testimony?

Finally, perhaps the most successful way to read and interpret the volume as a unified text is to locate recurring themes that appear throughout it. I find that

there are two overarching themes that serve to bridge potentially unrelated papers: passivity and imagination. Many of the authors attempt to rethink autonomy while stressing the importance of being claimed by both the other person and also God. Building on the way Hauerwas situates the role of witness as central to the practice of theology, this being-claimed is positioned throughout the book as inaugurating an ethico-religious task. Although exactly what this task looks like continues to remain sketchy by the book's close, it will inevitably involve an expanded and alternative imagination of the social order and political practices in which the believer and the Christian community finds itself.

In conclusion, I mentioned at the beginning of the review that I was unsure about the "transformative" impact of reading this volume. Perhaps a more accurate statement would be that, precisely in its being joyful and frustrating, the volume serves as an invitation to both personal and social transformation. However, we can still hope that those who respond to this invitation will do so by offering more substantive arguments and not quite so much celebratory rhetoric.

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