Hauerwas: Why I'm a Reluctant Convert to his Theology

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I

This issue of *The Conrad Grebel Review* is devoted largely to lectures given by Stanley Hauerwas at Conrad Grebel University College in Waterloo and at Toronto Mennonite Theological Centre on March 14-15, 2002. The overall theme of the series was "Bonhoeffer, Yoder, and political ethics." In Toronto Hauerwas lectured on "Bonhoeffer as a political theologian," and was responded to by Fred Shaffer (a Knox College doctoral student in theology), Pamela Klassen (religious studies professor at the University of Toronto), and Craig Carter (Dean of Tyndale College, Toronto). This first lecture, together with responses by Shaffer and Klassen, appear below. Hauerwas repeated this lecture in Waterloo and gave a second lecture there, "Bonhoeffer on truth and politics," which also appears below. Hauerwas is at his most delightful and outrageous when he departs from his text, allows his mind to spin into tangential ramifications of what he has just said formally, or talks more informally and unguardedly in question-and-answer situations. One such occasion was a noon-hour meeting with faculty and friends of Conrad Grebel University College and the University community. There we encountered a rich, extemporaneous Hauerwas reflecting about his life and thought and the various personalities and movements that have influenced him. This discussion appears in edited and shortened form below.[1]

In his first lecture, Hauerwas says that although "This is the first essay I have ever written about Bonhoeffer, . . . it is certainly not the first time I have read him." In fact, he says, "I first learned what I think from reading Bonhoeffer (and Barth)." The other thinker who had an equally important influence on him is John Howard Yoder. Bonhoeffer's *The Cost of Discipleship*,

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he contends, prepared the way for his later reading and reception of Yoder's *The Politics of Jesus*. The reason that Hauerwas did not write on Bonhoeffer earlier was to avoid being identified either with what he considered a misinterpretation of Bonhoeffer's later *Letters and Papers from Prison* by the "death of God" theologians of the 1960s or with Joseph Fletcher's reading of Bonhoeffer's *Ethics* as a form of "situation ethics." Hauerwas is now, finally, acknowledging "a debt long overdue."

Another reason Hauerwas hesitated so long to publicly appropriate Bonhoeffer's theology was that as a pacifist he had difficulty understanding, let alone accepting, the German theologian's involvement in the conspiracy to kill Hitler. The first part of Hauerwas's lecture is a wonderful summary of the life of Bonhoeffer leading up to his conspiratorial activities, his arrest for "subversion of the armed forces," and finally his death by hanging on April 9, 1945 on Hitler's personal order. The greatness of Bonhoeffer lies in the fact that his life and thought, faith and action, theology and politics could never be separated. We may disagree with his final choices, but his martyrdom, if one can call it that, followed ineluctably from how he had lived and from what he had taught and written. What makes Bonhoeffer's theology so congenial to Mennonites, and so similar to Yoder's thought, is his ecclesiology. Departing from traditional Lutheran two-kingdom theology, Bonhoeffer (and Hauerwas) makes the church as Christ's concrete, visible community of discipleship the keystone of his whole theology. Already in his first book, *Sanctorum Communio*, Bonhoeffer describes the church in theological-sociological terms as Christ's ongoing presence in history. His theology was a frontal attack against the Protestant liberal (including the Pietist) accommodation of the church to the world—its attempt to justify Christianity to the present age.

It is when Bonhoeffer attempts to offer a positive theology of social and political institutions (as "orders of preservation" or "mandates" rather than the prevalent Lutheran "orders of creation") that Hauerwas contends Bonhoeffer does not go far enough in distinguishing himself from Lutheran two-kingdom thinking, although he was probably moving in that direction when he proposed an "Outline for a Book," which he never got to write because of his premature death.

While the first lecture leaves us thinking that in the end Bonhoeffer's life may have been more politically engaged than his theology, Hauerwas's

second lecture attempts to rectify this by exploring a theme rarely considered in Bonhoeffer studies: lying, deception, and truth in politics. Hauerwas's thesis is that when in the political process compromise rather than truth-telling (especially in democratic regimes) becomes the primary end, then "politics abandons the political realm to violence." One of the most significant political contributions that the Christian church can thus give to society is the witness to truth and the refusal to lie. What Bonhoeffer found most disturbing about his experience in America in 1930-31 was the tendency to subordinate truth-telling to upholding fairness and community. Tolerance of diverse opinions, rather than confessional and creedal truth claims, becomes normative, a tolerance which leads to indifference and finally to cynicism and violence, despite its rhetoric of peace. Without truth-telling there can be no peace or justice in any social order, and for both Bonhoeffer and Hauerwas, "Only the peace of God [in which forgiveness of sins is the essence] preserves truth and justice."

This is no "situational ethic." Joseph Fletcher had it wrong. True, Bonhoeffer did say that the particular context has a bearing on what it means to tell the truth in a given situation, but what he tried to convey is that truth is never an abstraction; it must always be a living truth that is true to concrete reality. As such, telling the truth requires skill and must be learned, an insight that is consistent with Hauerwas's narrative understanding of the church as a community of spiritual and moral formation (a virtue ethic that depends on developing habits of right thinking and acting within the context of a community). The caveat is that since the Fall, being truthful sometimes requires secrecy and reticence. When public language becomes debased, as in National Socialist Germany, and the various orders of life get confused (family, labor, nation, state, church), words become untrue. Therefore, speaking the truth in such an age of "organized lying" (Hannah Arendt's term) means ultimately witnessing to the truth by living it, and "living the truth" requires the existence of "a community . . . that has learnt to speak truthfully to one another," one that knows "that to speak truthfully to one another requires the time [and patience] granted through the work of forgiveness." This is the church as Jesus Christ present in history.

II

I have undergone three conversions in my life, and the third of them has brought me — reluctantly — to the distinctive Barthian "'natural' theology" of Hauerwas.

1) *Conversion One.* My first conversion followed very closely the pattern Hauerwas describes in his autobiographical reflections printed below. Hauerwas's experience as an evangelical Methodist in the American South and mine as an evangelical Mennonite in Southern Manitoba must have been quite similar, except that my attempt to get saved by answering the altar call in numerous revival meetings, conducted by both Mennonite and non-Mennonite evangelists, took place against the backdrop of a religious, cultural, and ethnic minority group that lived on the periphery of mainstream culture.

This minority group had lived in relatively well-defined communities for almost 500 years with its own language (my first language was low German), its own schools (private schools where the German language and religious education was part of the curriculum), its own culture (music festivals where young people were nurtured in both religious and folk music); a mixture of Dutch, German, and Russian cuisine celebrated in its cookbooks; village life with house-barns where people performed rituals that come with such small rural communal existence; and its own religious tradition (going to church on Sunday, listening to sermons both in German and English, learning the catechism with its 200-odd questions and answers as a condition for baptism as a 16-year-old upon a personal confession of faith — a catechism and confession that was orthodox in all its basic tenets with additional weight on a transformed life of discipleship, including the rejection of all participation in war and violence). Church was the most important, but not the only, aspect of this people's existence.

Although a personal confession of faith had been central to the Mennonite religious experience, a more individualistic, subjective American evangelical emphasis on personal conversion was something relatively new, and it came hand-in-hand with assimilation and the "liberalizing" of Mennonite language, education, culture, and theology, playing a significant role in the break-up of Mennonite communal existence. This highly personal, existential experience of salvation — like Hauerwas, I could never get it quite right — left a profound

imprint on how I think about God, Christ, and the Holy Spirit. It is something which I still value deeply and wish I could pass on to my children in one form or another. It was the primary impulse that led me to study theology at college. Later, however, I realized that what I learned at university in the form of liberalism (the historical critical method, Feuerbach, Freud, Marx) — which I now considered to be a radical critique of my earlier "evangelical" experience — was in many ways the logical outcome of the subjectivism and experientialism of revivalism, and ultimately a threat to all traditional, communal authority structures.

2) *Conversion Two.* Discovering the historic communal roots of my own tradition was the beginning of the second conversion. It was only the beginning, and partial at that, for the Anabaptism that I first discovered thought of our sixteenth-century historical and theological forebears as the harbingers of modernity and democratic liberalism. For Harold S. Bender, the fundamental democratic assumptions of the modern world — freedom of conscience, separation of church and state, voluntarism in religion: presuppositions "so basic in American Protestantism and so essential to democracy" — are ultimately "derived from the Anabaptists of the Reformation period, who for the first time clearly enunciated them and challenged the Christian world to follow them in practice."[2] Most recently Mennonite Islamic scholar David Shenk has argued even more strongly: "As a minority movement, the Anabaptists shattered the state church system, and opened Europe to pluralistic cultures and religious freedom. A century later the philosophers of the Enlightenment picked up these Anabaptist themes of personal freedom and choice and applied them to the philosophical foundations for modern democracy. But it was the Anabaptists who led the way in transforming Europe forever. By insisting on adult baptism they were blazing the way forward for the global commitments today to human rights, religious freedom, and pluralistic culture. The 'powerless' and persecuted Anabaptists practiced freedom of religion within Christendom, thereby beginning the process that has resulted in transforming Christendom into societies where freedom to believe or not to believe is a deeply held commitment."[3] For Shenk, this liberal, democratic understanding of pluralism is a happy historical development essential to inter-faith dialogue.

This second conversion was completed with my discovery of the "poverty of liberalism," by reading neo-Marxist critical theorists of the Frankfurt

School but, most decisively, by my encounter with the person and thought of the late Canadian Christian philosopher George P. Grant. There I found the first powerful, intelligent defence of the classical conservative vision, including both Greek Platonic-Aristotelian and Judeo-Christian thought, both of them having more in common with each other than with either modern or postmodern thought — namely, that there is an eternal horizon within which history and human action takes place and receives its meaning and moral import. Although I have come to see the shortcomings in Grant's historical pessimism, his analysis continues to influence my critical reading of contemporary theology, including that of Barth, Yoder, and Hauerwas. They still strike me in some ways as too liberal, and too western. Grant has also influenced my reading of Anabaptist sources and Mennonite history.[4] Reading Grant has convinced me not only of the poverty of liberalism but the inadequacy of all forms of historicism, including certain forms of narrative that appear to make time as history the primary theological category. Essential to the classical vision is a realism that holds to the reality of invisible universals — an invisible eternal horizon, whether comprehended in terms of Platonic ideal forms or in the dynamic relations of the immanent Trinity, which is the transcendent basis of all historical particulars. In my view, contemporary theologies that collapse the immanent and economic Trinities fall into a historicism in which inevitably not all historical moments can be considered equidistant from God. For me, such equidistance is a *sine qua non.* This is why I am a *reluctant* convert to the "natural theology" of Hauerwas.

3) *Conversion Three.* I am a reluctant convert to Hauerwas's natural theology for both formal and material reasons. Formally, I love the freedom with which Hauerwas does theology. He pays little heed to the niceties of academic and church life, loves to burst the bubbles of established arrogance and presumption, without ever sparing himself — all in the service of what he considers to be theology's fundamental task: to give witness to Jesus Christ and his church. His most strident critique is aimed at the pretensions of neutrality found in modern liberalism and pluralism, with its not-so-hidden assumptions about universal reason, freedom, democracy, equality, peace, and justice that are in fact linked to violence. He is a fearless, aggressive, and militant pacifist, one of the few dominant American theologians to speak out clearly against the "war on terrorism" presently conducted by his own country. I admire the freedom and courage with which he witnesses to the Gospel of peace and nonviolence.

III

Materially, I'm a reluctant convert to the substance of Hauerwas's theology. Hauerwas has written innumerable occasional articles, authored, co-authored, and edited many books,[5] but his most recent monograph, his 2001 Gifford Lectures *With the Grain of the Universe: The Church's Witness and Natural Theology*, is where one has to turn in order to wrestle with the depth of his theology.[6] In the introductory chapter Hauerwas says he will be proposing a theologically-based natural theology. This is a surprise for those who had thought that he, along with Barth and others, was against all natural theologies. In fact, Hauerwas claims Barth and even Thomas Aquinas as allies in his proposal. The natural theology that Hauerwas develops claims that theology knows and witnesses to the way things really are. Hauerwas relies heavily on Yoder's way of doing theology, including Yoder's assertion that "It is that people who bear crosses are working with the grain of the universe . . . . One does not come to that belief by reducing social processes to mechanical and statistical models, nor by winning some of one's battles for the control of one's own corner of the fallen world. One comes to it by sharing the life of those who sing about the Resurrection of the slain Lamb." There can be no deeper reality than cross and resurrection, and this reality is known only theologically — that is, in the revelation of Christ.

Another surprise is that Hauerwas parts company here with his philosophical compatriot Alasdair MacIntyre, for whom philosophy is independent of theology and helps to prepare the way for it. Aquinas, says Hauerwas, would not recognize such a natural theology, in which philosophical reason creates an apologetic foundation for subsequent "confessional" claims. The rest of the book shows how two previous Gifford lecturers, William James and Reinhold Niebuhr, had it wrong, and a third, Karl Barth (along with Aquinas), had it right, and ends with a conclusion in which Pope John Paul II and Yoder find themselves in the same camp. Here we have another instance of the wonderful freedom with which Hauerwas theologizes and breaks conventional stereotypes.

William James seeks to make a case for religion psychologically and phenomenologically for people living within modernity, "an expression of pietistic humanism" for which Hauerwas has little sympathy. Hauerwas does have

some affinity for James' pragmatism in which "will" and "belief" are "shaped by passion-formed habits," and the world and existence has an "unavoidable moral character." But James's understanding of the religious sensibility as "primordial" and of fundamental theological claims as "over-beliefs" gives Hauerwas much trouble. Essential Christian doctrines, like the Trinity or Creation, are of no value in James's apologetics. For James, our religious experience, not the objective reality of that to which our experience refers, is critical. Prayer, for instance, is the soul of religion, but whether God exists or not is irrelevant; what is important is the subjective experience of prayer. The truth of theological ideas, in James's pragmatic account, depends entirely on their relation to other ideas and their functional value in concrete life. God is real because he produces certain effects. This particular critique by Hauerwas is exceptionally important, because the narrative school of theology, of which Hauerwas is a member, has sometimes been interpreted as making truth claims dependent on internal coherence, self-referentiality, and livability. This misunderstanding of his theology Hauerwas strongly disavows later on in the volume.

According to Hauerwas, William James displaces Christianity with American liberal democracy: James "thinks democracy is not just a social and political arrangement but the very character of the emerging universe." Not the cross and resurrection but modern, liberal, democratic values are the "grain of the universe." What is most chilling about this prospect, and what some Mennonites have not realized who claim that Anabaptism is the forerunner of essential aspects of modernity, is that democracy as envisioned in the American experience needs violence to sustain itself. Hauerwas persuasively shows how the privatized religiosity that James espoused and identified with liberal democracy pushes Christianity to the edges and in effect condones violence. James thought that the coercion and violence necessary to sustain a democracy — for example, the freedom to overcome poverty and accumulate and protect capital — could also be relegated to the edges of society. If Hauerwas is correct, then Mennonites who claim that they and their Anabaptist forebears are the harbingers of modern liberal values find themselves supporting a strange antinomy: lauding the dominant assumptions of modernity while rejecting the violence intrinsic to it.

In Hauerwas's view, Reinhold Niebuhr's 1939 Gifford Lectures, *The Nature and Destiny of Man,* are "but a Christianized version of James's account

of religious experience." Niebuhr believed that Christian claims must be validated by science and experience — that is, tested by generally accepted empirical and rational norms, and by their ethical ramifications. He was a great preacher, but his congregation was "a church called America." He too was a Jamesian pragmatist, one who tests the truth of theological ideas by whether and how they work. Religious supernaturalism and metaphysics (ancient creeds and dogmas) are not objectively true; their truth as permanently valid myths (Niebuhr's version of James's over-beliefs) resides only in their ability to illumine human experience. Theology is "first and foremost an account of human existence," and talk about God is "but a disguised way to talk about humanity." Hauerwas puts Niebuhr, James, Troeltsch, and contemporary Chicago ethicist James Gustafson in the same camp when he describes them as sharing the view "that there is no purpose other than the purpose that humans are able to impose on purposeless 'nature.'"

The one doctrine that was so central to Niebuhr's anthropology and that allegedly distinguished him from Protestant liberalism was that of "original sin." On this basis Niebuhr tries to develop a natural theology. "Niebuhr's project," says Hauerwas, "is to provide an account of the human condition that is so compelling that the more 'absurd' aspects of 'orthodox Christianity' — such as the beliefs that God exists and that God is love — might also receive a hearing." Hauerwas does not question Niebuhr's deep faith in the God of Jesus Christ, but in the end "the revelation that is required for us to know Niebuhr's god is but a reflection of ourselves." Christ's death on the cross reveals God's love in a way that transcends history; his life and death are symbolic for the divine *agape*, "the perfection of love as self-sacrifice." But it is a cross and a self-sacrificial love that characterizes human existence as such and is our destiny. For Niebuhr God, even when described in trinitarian terms, is little more than the name for the human need to believe in the ultimate unity and coherence of reality transcending the world of chaos.

The critical consequence of this is how it affects Niebuhr's ethics: one has to accept the way things are because that's the way they have to be. Niebuhr's view of justice as "the most equitable balance of power" was a perfect match for the world following World War II. While the Christian love of God and love of neighbor are not counsels of perfection for a few but the ideal for all, because of sin, self-sacrificial love is never possible when a third

person is involved, where justice requires the balancing of interests, best negotiated in a democracy. Like James, Niebuhr "assumes democracy, and in particular American democracy, is the political system that most perfectly exemplifies 'justice' so understood." Justification by faith is the heart of Niebuhr's ethics. Loosed from its Christological basis, it frees humans to act in a fallen world. The church as an alternative community, while perhaps a sociological necessity, was never an epistemological or ethical necessity for him. In the end Niebuhr was "a theologian of a domesticated god capable of doing no more than providing comfort to the anxious conscience of the bourgeoisie." Hauerwas is even more critical of Niebuhr than of James because Niebuhr, like a Trojan horse, enters the inner sanctum of Christian theology and debases its very language explicitly to support a world of violence.

The hero of *With the Grain of the Universe* is Karl Barth. In a remarkable twist of argument, Hauerwas presents Barth as the true rationalist and natural theologian, one who represents a frontal attack against the irrationalism so prominent in his time. Barth becomes the stellar apologist for how the world is to be understood, and differs dramatically from James and Niebuhr. Hauerwas, though, is not an uncritical Barthian. Barth is not sufficiently catholic in his view of the church and never adequately explains "how our human agency is involved in the Spirit's work." Barth correctly saw that when theology is done as liberals do it, including James and Niebuhr, then Feuerbach is right. Feuerbach claimed that Christian doctrines are but expressions of human experience — projections and wish-fulfillment. Christians can counter Feuerbach only by claiming that God was objectively, historically, and specifically revealed in Jesus Christ. General revelation can never be the basis of special revelation, but special revelation (divine grace in all of nature as manifested in Christ) must always be the starting point for general or natural theology.

Although Hauerwas seeks to let Barth speak for himself, he makes Barth look like the founding member of the recent narrative school of thought associated with thinkers like Hans Frei and Hauerwas himself. Barth's *Dogmatics* is a compelling "story" that can only be narrated, not a system of thought that can be described; it is a "nonfoundationalist" account (there is no place outside of theology from which one can begin to do theology). I can't help wondering, however, whether Barth would not have considered some directions taken by postmodern non-foundationalists like George Lindbeck as

the logical outcome of modernity. Hauerwas indirectly recognizes this when he points out the surprising similarity between the Thomistic understanding of *analogia entis* (the analogy of being) and Barth's *analogia fidei* (analogy of faith). Barth's *Dogmatics* is a great theological metaphysics and ontology that is intrinsic, not extrinsic, to theological speech. At the heart of this natural theology is ethics — not a reduction of theology to ethics as in postmodernity but ethics grounded in the very trinitarian character and activity of God. Christian ethics is neither self-justifying, self-referential, nor a disguised form of humanism, but a *witness* to "the God who is the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit." This witness, and any rational argument that accompanies it, is itself the work of the Holy Spirit. This witnessing happens in the context of believing communities, of which the martyrs are the most powerful evidence.

Hauerwas concludes his *tour de force* with a tribute to the influence of John Howard Yoder, and makes the surprising claim that Yoder and Pope John Paul II have much in common. He in effect "catholicizes" Yoder. It is this move that finally makes me a "reluctant convert" to Hauerwas's theology, for it is the catholic element that I had always found missing in Yoder and his followers. Now I have reluctantly to re-think this assumption. For Yoder, as for the Pope, nonresistance and non-violent love are grounded in the very character of God as revealed in Christ. "The relationship between the obedience of God's people and the triumph of God's cause is not a relationship of cause and effect," says Hauerwas, "but one of cross and resurrection." For John Paul II, Jesus Christ and the cross too are the center of history and the universe. In fidelity to this Christ he calls on states not to make war, not to kill, and he offers the church as an alternative to the world of violence and to the "culture of death."

Hauerwas contends that the Pope is even more radical than Yoder: "Yoder's position . . . pales in comparison to the stance John Paul II takes toward philosophy in his encyclical *Fides et Ratio,* though just how radical the pope's stance is may not be apparent immediately." The Pope honors philosophy as a discipline but forcefully argues that philosophical truths must be tested by the truths of revelation, "for the latter is not the product or consummation of arguments devised by human reason but comes to us as the gift of the life of Jesus Christ. That gift gives purpose to the work of reason by stirring thought and seeking acceptance as an expression of love." In the remarkable denouement of the Gifford lectures, Hauerwas appears to be

suggesting that Athens and Jerusalem converge in a grand natural theology after all — a christology-based natural theology of the Alexandrian type.

Good, but how is this natural theology to be mediated historically? This is precisely where Bonhoeffer had problems with Barth. For Barth special revelation was pure "act." Bonhoeffer thought this act was mediated historically through the "being" of the church. For all his emphasis on the centrality of the church, it is not clear how, for Hauerwas, ecclesiology in its actual concrete, *institutional* form is a witness to the kind of natural theology he envisions. What distinguishes Pope John Paul II and Thomas Aquinas from Karl Barth and John Howard Yoder, surely, is their doctrine of the church and its mediating role in the world. In this regard we are left wondering at the end of the Gifford lectures. A serious consideration of this issue would lead us into the world of pneumatology in addition to christology, and into the differences between the Eastern and Western understanding of the role of the Spirit in the church, the world, and the cosmos, with profound ramifications for how we perceive natural theology.

Notes

[1] For a more detailed account of his lectures, see my "Provocative theologian lectures on Bonhoeffer," in *Canadian Mennonite* (April 22, 2002): 29.

[2] Harold S. Bender, *The Anabaptist Vision* (Scottdale: Herald Press, 1944), 4.

[3] David Shenk, "Pluralistic Culture and Truth." Unpublished paper presented at the "Shi'i-Muslim and Mennonite-Christian Dialogue," Toronto Mennonite Theological Centre at the Toronto School of Theology, October 24-26, 2002. Used with permission.

[4] For more on Grant's influence on my thought, see my *Mennonites and Classical Theology: Dogmatic Foundations for Christian Ethics* (Kitchener: Pandora Press, 2001), Part I.

[5] For an excellent selection of his writings and a comprehensive bibliography, see *The Hauerwas Reader: Stanley Hauerwas*. Edited by John Berkman and Michael Cartwright (Durham and London: Duke University Press, 2001). [See review in this issue.]

[6] *With the Grain of the Universe: The Church's Witness and Natural Theology.* Being the Gifford Lectures Delivered at the University of St. Andrews in 2001 (Grand Rapids: Brazos Press, 2001). Quotations in this section are all from this book.