

## THE CHURCH IN THE WORLD OR THE WORLD IN THE CHURCH? A REVIEW ARTICLE

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Stanley Hauerwas and William H. Willimon. *Resident Aliens: Life in the Christian Colony*. Nashville: Abingdon, 1989.

Stanley Hauerwas' sparkling verbal fireworks aim to illumine Church-and-society issues that urgently call for attention. He disclaims any intention to do systematic theology, a disavowal in which he notably perseveres, only to leave in midair some important questions of epistemology and ontology. But none of us can afford to ignore Hauerwas' reflections on the growing confusion over social ethics, and some of his emphases call for applause.

On the positive side we may range his rediscovery of the evangelical emphasis that the Church as a new society lives in the larger world as a colony of heaven obedient to the crucified and living Lord. He rejects as ill-conceived both the modernist social gospel that sought to "christianize society" and the recent fundamentalist New Christian Right that sought to "rechristianize America." The Church's mission, he holds, is not to remedy existing social structures in order to achieve an improved society or world order. The Church has no mandate to guarantee durability to a culture that skews God's significance for society or refuses to acknowledge him a public role. The Church is to recover her role as an alternative political community. Her mission is not reducible to personal evangelism that gathers together a complex of isolated individuals, important as evangelism is, or reducible to reconstruction of the world order.

Hauerwas joins those who believe, as I do also, that the primary social concern facing Christians is to be crystal clear about the nature and mission of the Church. In evangelical context the Church is a transnational, transcultural, transracial community of regenerate sinners who as the people of God are shaped by the Scriptural revelation and seek to obey Christ Jesus in word and life. The Church's legitimate concerns must therefore not be taken captive by secular society. Consequently it is understandable why politically-tilted churches lose more and more members who instead of political activism want first and foremost a personal relationship with God. "The most important political service the church does for any society," Hauerwas says in his earlier book *Christian Existence Today* (1988), "is to be a community capable of developing people of virtue" (p. 13), especially the virtues of forgiveness, hope and peace.

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Christian obedience, as Hauerwas sees it, requires squaring all our ethical decisions and deeds—personal and official—with the sermon on the mount. It means disavowing any responsibility for structurally reshaping non-Christian society and trying to do ethics for the world. It excludes moral defense of constitutional democracy or of any other form of world government. Yet Christians are obliged to “work to make their societies less prone to resort to violence” (p. 15). Christian nonviolence is made crucial for the epistemological status of Christian belief. This means espousing pacifism, an issue that Hauerwas needs to join with those who opt for military deterrence in a sinfully flawed society as a preferred alternative. Hauerwas does not deny the place of the coercive state as part of God’s order and yet seems not to cope with the fact that no community can wholly escape coercion. Even Jesus spoke approvingly of eviction of an impenitent brother from the church and treatment of him as a pagan (Matt 18:17). I do not believe that all manifestations of violence are defensibly Christian or that all manifestations of nonviolence are authentically Christian. Nor am I persuaded that the sermon on the mount exhaustively details all of Christian ethics.

One may overlook Hauerwas’ confusion of churchly support for political democracy with an unwitting distortion of kingdom-of-God credentials and ask whether theonomy then remains the only politically acceptable option for the Christian community. Most evangelical friends of democracy do not confuse democracy with the kingdom of God but welcome its limited role for government and its emphasis that the ground of religious freedom and of other human rights transcends national determination.

What one misses in Hauerwas is a clear indication of why Christians must live responsibly in two communities. He rejects social withdrawal from the public arena and argues for selective service with an emphasis on priorities. But what is to stimulate Christians governed by the sermon on the mount to move beyond interpersonal concerns to shared public concerns? And is not truth—universally valid truth—a concern as fundamental to the Church’s public involvement as are forgiveness, hope and peace? In any case the Church has a mandate for public evangelism. What in Hauerwas’ view is her mandate for public involvement? If selective service is a matter of secular prudence screened through Christian values, what relation, if any, does public involvement hold to the coming of God’s kingdom? Is public involvement only optional? Or ought Christians to be involved to the limit of their ability and competence, and if so, why?

Precisely as the true Church the Christian community is to be reminded that she must not hide her light or withhold her salt from the world. She is to warn the world, as I see it, that law and justice have their ultimate ground and defining source in the transcendent will of the self-revealing God, is to proclaim to the world the universal criteria by which Christ will judge men and nations at his return, is to encourage society to judge itself anticipatively by the divine commandments that threaten impenitent humanity, is to exemplify in her own ranks what faithful obedience to the Lord of the Church and of history implies, and is to exhibit to the world the

blessings of serving the true and living God. It is specially noteworthy that when writing to the Christians at Rome the apostle Paul declares that rulers are God's priests for human good and that we merit their commendation by a regard for the social commandments of the Decalogue (Rom 13:3-4, 8-10). Our permanent citizenship may be in heaven, but even while we live on earth with renewable visas we need not simply do as the Romans do. We have adequate reason for socio-cultural involvement. The price of withdrawal is more than that of being ruled by strangers and barbarians; it also yields the initiative unprotected to those who ought to be on the defensive not in the eschatological future only but in the present also, and it is to neglect to supply oil to lamps lit by the Light of the World. It is to leave unfulfilled the duties inherent in dual citizenship, articulated by Jesus even in the sermon on the mount: "Render to Caesar what is Caesar's." As Tom Atwood of *Policy Review* somewhere remarks, one desirable way of loving one's neighbor as one's self is to promote good public policy.

One final but important comment: Hauerwas speaks often of the Biblical story and of its center in Jesus and his death and resurrection. He confesses the "trinitarian nature" of God. But his exposition of the "story" or tradition or heritage is unsystematic and often indeterminate. How much of the story is factual history? What universal validity is to be affirmed of its truth-claims? Precisely how are the atonement and resurrection of Jesus to be conceived? No story, however adventurous, can assuredly capture the mind even of the regenerate Church without more precision about its epistemic and ontological realities.

If I were to add one further comment, it is this: Hauerwas in *Resident Aliens* zealously differentiates the Church from the world, the believing community from its secular milieu. Yet the distinction between the faithful Church and the pseudo-church or apostate church is not as carefully drawn. In the ecumenical brotherhood and sisterhood that readily welcomes unto its often nebulous witness to the world even the ramblings of Rudolf Bultmann and Gordon Kaufman, is there no line anywhere that decisively separates theological sheep from goats, or only an intellectual purgatory from which all delinquents and runaways eventually emerge into an all-inclusive homecoming? If the latter, why should Church and world be so insistently contrasted? And if not, should not the ecumenical bull be taken by the horns? In the effort to treat the distinctiveness of Christ's Church with new precision, should we not expect in Hauerwas' index some applauding reference to the Protestant Reformation and its implications for our own day? Is the universality of the Church overstated because of the notion that the Church has no fortified theological position and the assignment of a secondary status to doctrinal belief? I agree with Hauerwas that the Bible comes to us through the Church, yet not that it is from the Church. Here I consider Calvin's comment still sound: that Rome speaks—and Hauerwas it seems to me also—as if the daughter gave birth to the mother, rather than the mother to the daughter.