A pre-eminent theological ethicist grapples with the church, the state, the state of the church, and the responsibility of the religious community.
Faith Fires Back

A CONVERSATION WITH STANLEY HAUERWAS

For Stanley Hauerwas, 2001 was quite a year. Hauerwas, Gilbert T. Rowe Professor of Theological Ethics in the Divinity School, became the first American theologian in four decades to deliver the prestigious Gifford Lectures at the University of St. Andrews in Scotland. The Hauerwas Reader, devoted to “one of the most widely read and oft-cited theologians writing today,” was issued by Duke Press. Time magazine named him “America’s best theologian.” The university and the Board of Higher Education and Ministry of the United Methodist Church bestowed on him Duke’s Scholar/Teacher of the Year Award. And, in a public validation of sorts, Oprah honored him with a television appearance.

A graduate of Yale Divinity School and Yale’s graduate school, where he earned his Ph.D., Hauerwas did his undergraduate work at Southwestern University in Georgetown, Texas. He taught for two years at Augustana College in Rock Island, Illinois, before joining the faculty of the University of Notre Dame, where he taught from 1970 until 1984. He joined the Duke faculty in 1984.

This fall, in the inaugural Duke Magazine Campus Forum, Hauerwas had a public conversation with William T. Cavanaugh Ph.D. ’96. Cavanaugh, one of Hauerwas’ former graduate students, teaches at the University of St. Thomas in St. Paul, Minnesota. This year, he is a visiting fellow at Notre Dame’s Kellogg Institute for International Studies. The moderator for the event was Dean of the Divinity School Gregory Jones M.Div.’85, Ph.D.’88, who was also taught by Hauerwas. Jones began by noting that “all this public recognition is but the fruit of many long years of hard intellectual work, creative scholarship, and sustained engagement.” Hauerwas, he said, is a deeply committed teacher whose abundant intellectual energy and abiding concern with lives lived virtuously have been impressed on generations of students.

What follows is an edited transcript of the conversation.

On achieving prominence as a public intellectual

You’re an academic, but you’re more than just an academic. You have a keen pastoral sense, and you do a lot of things whose academic world—now in the media, but before that just talking to little churches here and there. And your writing style is really less academic as well. Can you say a little about that?

If I were any of my colleagues at Duke, I would be very tired of “Hauerwas.” In fact, I am very tired of “me.” I have no idea how I have suddenly become famous, but I am not happy about it. Indeed, when a theologian, particularly in the kind of world we live in, becomes famous, you have an indication that a mistake has been made. Our subject after all is God.

Of course, to be a writer is an invitation to narcissism. How to escape narcissism is very difficult. The very effort to escape only increases our self-fascination. My only hope is having friends who remind me what I am supposed to be about. Indeed, friendship is very important not only for my life but in how I think about ethics. In the Nicomachean Ethics, Aristotle says that for the upbringing of children as well as for living well, we need a society of good laws that teach us to desire the right goods rightly. But when such practices are absent, we must depend on friends. That seems to me to describe our situation very well.

Which is why one of the tasks I have undertaken is to change how we think about the moral life. I have tried to redirect attention to the importance of the virtues as well as the narratives that make the virtues intelligible for understanding “ethics.” Of course, such an emphasis I thought necessary to recover how Christians should think about their lives.

It is so difficult in America for Christians to imagine what it might mean for them to be Christian. We have lost the first-order speech necessary to shape our lives. I have tried to help Christians recover our speech habits by writing little books for laymen. I wrote a little book with [Dean of the Chapel] Will Willimon—who said he was going to make me famous—called Resident Alien, which created a readership I would not normally have as an academic. It turns out Christians were surprised to be told they are odd.

Will and I have tried to follow that book with short books on the Lord’s Prayer and the Ten Commandments. These books try to de-familiarize those extraordinary texts in the hopes Christians can appreciate the radical character of our faith. I have even written a little book called Prayers Plain Spoken to try to show that, when we pray, about the worst thing we can do is try to be pious. I hate prayers that begin, “Oh, God, we just ask you...” About the worst thing Christians can do is try to protect God when we pray. Read the Psalms. You do not have to protect God. That is why God is God and we are not.
You're also famous pedagogically. One of the famous pedagogical tricks that I like is not explaining things, letting the audience figure it out.

I do not know if not explaining is a "trick," but I do try to say some things in a way that invites resistance and further reflection. I think I learned the importance of that way of working from Wittgenstein. Wittgenstein teaches you that the unsaid must remain unsaid. You only discover what must be left unsaid by thinking hard about what you have learned to say. I also try to develop epigrams that have been forced on me by positions I have taken whose implications I slowly come to understand.

For example, I say, "The first task of the church is not to make the world just. The first task of the church is to make the world the world." I know that sounds offensive to most people, Christian and non-Christian. Of course, I want it to be offensive. I am trying to challenge the assumption that Christianity is acceptable in modernity as long as it supports moral and political causes most people assume anyone should support—e.g., democracy. Such a view assumes that God can be entertained as a possibility as long as we keep it to ourselves. So I try to remind Christians by such an epigram that—as Augustine maintained—the church's first political task is to worship the true God truly.

**On the aesthetics of religion**

It occurs to me, the way you're talking, that your attention to aesthetics is underappreciated. You have a very keen aesthetic sense. You're constantly thinking about the attraction of it, and that it's got to be an attractive message that moves people into it by its beauty, in a sense. And oftentimes its beauty comes in its brokenness.

Beauty is the heart of goodness and the moral life. I learned that originally from Plato and later from Iris Murdoch. I do not write about "aesthetics," but rather I try to remind us of the beauty we no longer notice because we have lost the wonder to the everyday. I have recently written a piece for the Catholic Liturgical Society, "Suffering Beauty," in which I suggest that just to the extent beauty calls us beyond ourselves we "suffer."

The Catholics had asked me to speak about liturgy as moral formation, but I thought that very way of putting the matter was a mistake. Liturgy is not something done to provide moral motivation. The liturgy is how the church worships God and how from such worship we become a people capable of being an alternative to the world. That is why the language of the liturgy is so important. Nothing betrays the love of God more than the inelegance of the language Christians use in their worship. Some Christians seem to think we can attract people back to Christianity if we try to compete with TV, but when you do that you have already lost. The only result is that Christian worship becomes as banal and ugly as the rest of our lives.

I think it would be terrific if on entering a church people would think, "This is very frightening." God, after all, is frightening. Recently, I had a debate about the interpretation of the Bible at Southeastern Seminary in Wake Forest. One of my graduate students, a Roman Catholic, went with me. When we entered the church where the debate was to be held, she said, "Wow, is this someone's living room?" So "fundamentalists" want to make people feel at home—a home, moreover, that looks more like the living rooms of the 1950s. It is no wonder you are tempted to put an American flag in such "sanctuaries," because at least the flag adds some color. Unfortunately, the colors, at least when they are part of the same piece of cloth, are not liturgically appropriate.

**On the modern church**

One of the things that makes it hard for a lot of Christians to swallow your message is that you say the church doesn't have a social ethic, it is a social ethic. How do you deal with the division between what is and what ought to be?

God's given us all the time we need to patiently help our congregations be what they can be. That's the way you want people formed, because that's the way the Spirit operates. If you help people discover the violence in their lives, though, don't expect to be honored. One of my favorite epigrams is that Christians are not nonviolent because we believe our nonviolence is a strategy to rid the world of war, even though, of course, we want to make the world less violent. But rather, Christians are nonviolent in a world of war because we cannot imagine anything else as faithful followers of Christ.

**On September 11**

If you were a pastor of a church right now, what would you be saying after September 11?

People say that September 11 forever changed the world. That is false. The year 33 A.D. forever changed the world. September 11 is just one other terrible event in the world's continuing rejection of the peace God made present through the Resurrection. And therefore, how Christians narrate this event will be different than how other people narrate this event.

Christian willingness to kill other Christians in the name of national loyalty is surely one of the assumptions many Christians assume is not to be questioned. Yet no assumption has contributed more to the accommodation of Christianity to secular ways of life than the presumption that Christians have no problem with war. For Christians to be nonviolent is not just another political position, but rather at the very heart of what it means to be Christian, of what it means to be human. I believe God created all that is with the desire to be nonviolent. We are not meant to be killers. That is why we have to be trained to kill. God wants us to be in love with God and with one another in a manner that our differences challenge our self-imposed desires. Christians in America have difficulty responding to September 11 as Christians because we are more American than we are Christian.

The current identification of God and country is very troubling. Let me be as clear as I can be—the God of "God and country" is not the God of Jesus Christ. Yet this is not a development that began with September 11. One of the issues before American Christianity is whether the God we worship is the God of Jesus Christ.

American Christians simply lack the disciplines necessary to discover how being Christian might make them different. For example, after the Gulf War, people rightly wanted to welcome the troops home, so they put yellow ribbons everywhere including the churches. Yet if the Gulf War was a "just war," that kind of celebration was inappropriate. In the past when Christians killed in a just war, it was understood they should be in mourning. They had sacrificed their unwillingness to kill. Black, not yellow, was the appropriate color. Indeed, in the past when Christian soldiers returned from a just war, they were expected to do penance for three years before being restored to the Eucharist. That we now find that to be unimaginable is but an indication how hard it is for us to imagine what it might mean for us to be Christian.

The current outpouring of patriotism, I think, is an indication of how lonely we are today. We are desperate to be part of some common endeavor. I am often called a
communitarian, but I think that is a mis-
taken description. I am not for a redis-
covey of community as an end in itself. Such a
rediscovery can be as dangerous as it can be
good. Rather, I try to help myself and
others rediscover what it might mean if the
church constituted our primary loyalty.

A lot of us have heard you say these sorts of
things before. We were sort of surprised when
you appeared in The New York Times and
you said that we ought to think of this as a
police action. Two questions: First of all, when
you say “we,” are you now making policy rec-
ommendations? The second question is how do
you, as a pacifist, think about “police action”
as opposed to “military action”?

If I said “we” in The New York Times, it
just means I wasn’t thinking, and I was on a
linguistic holiday.

Now, I’m not going to let you off the hook that
quickly, though, because clearly the church
does not undertake police actions in that sense.

Right. When I used the “we,” I identified
with those who would assume the perspec-
tive of the nation-state. I am a pacifist,
but I gladly try to help those who say they
want to fight a “just war.” But the “just
war” tradition is as demanding as pacifism.
For example, it is by no means clear on
just-war grounds that you can fight a just
war against terrorism. Let me be clear. The
people that attacked the World Trade
Center clearly wanted to terrorize Amer-
cans. They wanted quite clearly to frighten
us, quite literally, to death. But it is not
clear to me, if you are a just warrior, that it
is helpful to call how you respond a “war
on terrorism.” What they did was murder.
If it is murder, on just-war grounds, you do
not want to kill the perpetrator. You want
to arrest the murderers.

The question then becomes, what kinds of
forms of international cooperation do
you need to develop to be able to arrest
whoever you think has been responsible for
this? You may not be the arresting agent
yourself. I raise this consideration to help
those committed to just war be imaginative
in terms of their own commitments.

“War” is not just “there” if you are seri-
ous about just war. Just war is an attempt to
create the institutional form prior to a war
occurring so that, if it occurs, it will be
more likely that war will be just. Now, if a
war is not just, what is it? In several inter-
views about September 11, I said, “Well,
you know, if the World Trade Center was
terrorism, so was Hiroshima and Nagasaki.”

There were no great military targets there,
and even worse than Hiroshima and
Nagasaki was the firebomb raid on Tokyo.
It was awful; we killed more people in the
firebombing of Tokyo than in Hiroshima
and Nagasaki combined. And when I made
that point, reporters said, “Well, that was
war.” To which I responded, “Well, you
know, you can murder in war.”

I want to know on what grounds you use
the honorific description “war” if a war is
not just. We think you can distinguish war
from murder—what are the presuppositions
that allow you to think that you can do
that? And there’s a very important issue of
whether just war is basically a series of
exceptions from a general stance of nonvi-
cence, or whether it assumes that it’s always
about justice in a world of war.

That latter presumption assumes war is
never an attempt to establish a world free
of war, because if you want justice in the
world as we know it, you’ve got to be ready
to kill somebody. I respect that position,
but then I want to know, what do you
mean by the word “justice”? How can you
have justice? What kind of justice are you
talking about in international conflicts?
Those things need to be explored, and
they’re not being explored. What I think
sometimes happens is that we get a military
and a State Department whose policies are
shaped by geopolitical consideration of real-
list foreign policy, and then they want to
fight a just war. It’s too late. It’s too late,
because you’ve already let yourself be led
into the world in a way in which you say
the first responsibility of the president of
the United States is to protect the United
States’ self-interest. And what I want to
know is how the United States’ self-interest
is determined by justice.

[A member of the audience asks:] I’ve been
reading your book, Resident Aliens, and it’s
really cool. I only got through like maybe the
first couple chapters, but—

You hear that? It was called “cool”!

[Another member of the audience asks:]
What’s the point of defending a society that’s
built on spending? We’ve been terrorized by
Madison Avenue for how long, through the tele-
vision and such?

Be careful with that kind of language.
You’ve been manipulated by Madison
Avenue—I’m not sure you’ve been terror-
ized. And it’s very important to get the
description right. As a response to
September 11, for academics to roll out all

the things that they’ve thought have been
wrong with America and American foreign
policy—is the word I’m close to is “duplicit-
tous.” It is morally inappropriate. Nothing
that America has done in the world justi-
fies, excuses, or explains September 11.

It is therefore all the more important for
us—and this is the use of the word “us”—
to try to understand why it is that many
people in the world find it satisfying that
this has happened to America. On
September 11, America was dragged kick-
ning and screaming into the world. We think
of ourselves as global, but our globalization
has remained safe within the boundaries of
our ocean, and now the reality of the world
has been brought home. We’re mad as hell
because we didn’t really want to deal with
this kind of world on an everyday basis. It’s
a very important moment for national self-
examination, and I would like to be as
helpful to that as I can as a Christian. If
you are a pacifist, you don’t want to with-
draw—you want to be as helpful to your
neighbor as you can.

On the church, marriage, and sexuality

[Another member of the audience asks:]
Talking about the unity of the church, how
might that apply to the current debates con-
cerning homosexuality in the United Method-
ist Church, in the Presbyterian USA church, and
the Reconciling Congregations movement with-
in the United Methodist Church?

The problem with debates about homo-
sexuality is they have been devoid of any
linguistic discipline that might give you
some indication what is at stake. Meth-
odism, for example, is more concerned with
being inclusive than being the church. We
do not have the slightest idea what we
mean by being inclusive other than some
vague idea that inclusivity has something
to do with being accepting and loving.
Inclusivity is, of course, a necessary strategy
for survival in what is religiously a buyers’
market. Even worse, the inclusive church is
captured by romantic notions of marriage.
Combine inclusivity and romanticism and
you have no reason to deny marriage
between gay people.

When couples come to ministers to talk
about their marriage ceremonies, ministers
think it’s interesting to ask if they love one
another. What a stupid question! How
would they know? A Christian marriage
isn’t about whether you’re in love.
Christian marriage is giving you the prac-
tice of fidelity over a lifetime in which you

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on investment. Though Kurzberg's work is also now supported by the Red Cross and the American Cancer Society, she still maintains that "when you need a lot of money, the government is the best place to get it."

For his part, Williams believes that we have entered "the heroic age of biomedical science," and that Duke is well positioned to be driving some of the advances. "These transforming events are disruptive and sometimes challenge our sense of right and wrong," he says, "but these decisions will not be left to science alone. We need to govern ourselves in a wise manner and inform the public about the potential for discovery."

Continuing the conversations about the ethical implications of such technological breakthroughs is the most crucial element, says religion historian Joyce. Duke's interdisciplinary approach to the dialogue is part of a relatively new trend. "It is helpful to get a perspective on how recent these concerns are. Some critics have suggested that the U.S. is a society adrift downward, not being sensitive to moral and religious issues."

Joyce argues to the contrary that the last twenty-five years have been unique in the increasing attention being paid to the intersection of medicine and ethics. "In the past, men of science made decisions based on scientific criteria," she says. "So much of what was done in medicine in the past was done out of sight. People were not aware of the sterilization of developmentally disabled people or the choice some doctors made not to treat severely ill infants. Medical information today, she suggests, is more widespread than ever.

"Technology is so often seen as this sterile agent of modernity," she adds, "but the opposite is true." As an example, she cites the cell-phone calls and e-mail messages sent from the World Trade Center at the time of the September 11 attacks, which made the disaster all the more human and real to us.

"What is difficult about our situation now," says Joyce, "is the pace of research. Developments in the past were much more incremental and spaced out over time. Bringing our religious beliefs to bear on these issues both humbles us and forces us to confront the limits of our power and finitude and to induce a constructive discomfort."

And this discomfort, Joyce would argue, is ultimately healthy.