

Christianity and Liberalism: A Call for Change from Stanley Hauerwas

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The fundamental call of Christianity is a call to surrender control of one's life to the lordship of Jesus Christ. In surrendering, one acknowledges life as a gift from God. Since the Enlightenment, Christianity as a whole has moved away from acknowledging life as a gift. The Enlightenment project to provide a completely rational basis for morality has infiltrated the Christian ranks, making our religion incapable of speaking to a secular world. The church needs to once again surrender ourselves to the forming power of the gospel of Christ, which enables us to recognize life as a gift, for as Christians, we should recognize that only through the power of the gospel do we find true freedom.

Stanley Hauerwas, a professor of theology at the Duke University School of Divinity, offers a challenging critique of modern liberalism, the foundational philosophy of American government. His critique exists throughout his works, but I will focus on arguments found in the following texts and essays: *After Christendom?*, *A Community of Character*, *Resident Aliens*, "Preaching as Though We had Enemies," and "Honor in the University." In characterizing his project, it will be important to clarify to some extent the subject of Hauerwas' critique, namely modern liberalism. His arguments against liberal definitions of freedom and justice will be presented, in an effort to set the stage for explaining why the church should abandon the liberal presuppositions it has adopted over time. Hauerwas' alternative vision of the church as a community with a craft-like notion of morality formed by the gospel will be presented, followed by a critique provided in Martha Nussbaum's, "Recoiling From Reason?" Finally, I will explain how Hauerwas can escape Nussbaum's criticism, and conclude that Hauerwas' project is largely successful and convincing. What is Modernity?

In an essay entitled, "Preaching as Though We Had Enemies," Hauerwas suggests that modernity's goal was to produce a people without a specific story. He writes:

...the project of modernity was to produce people who believe they should have no story except the story they choose when they have no story. Such a story is called the story of freedom and is assumed to be irreversibly institutionalized economically as market capitalism and politically as democracy.¹
In other words, modernity is what taught us that freedom means having no specific story or viewpoint. This 'freedom' is fostered by the institutions of democracy and market capitalism which give us a 'free' choice over what we consume and who governs us.

In terms of ethics, Hauerwas thinks the goal of modernity since the enlightenment has been to create a morality that is autonomous. He quotes Charles Taylor who describes the enlightenment goal to, "achieve the fullness of disengaged reason and detach ourselves from superstitions and parochial attachments."² The type of reason Taylor describes is supposedly autonomous, and is free from any sort of prejudice or preconceived notions. The foundational principles on which the United States is built presuppose our ability to

achieve autonomous reason such as Taylor describes. Our basic assumptions about morality and ethics appeal to a universal reason or common sense. These presuppositions about reason and its application to morality constitute what we call liberalism in America. Based on this definition of liberalism, Hauerwas can be said to attack any ethical theory which attempts to speak from a neutral standpoint, claiming an autonomous reason as its method and criterion of understanding.

Hauerwas against Modernity and Liberalism

The Marketplace of Ideas

Hauerwas provides many arguments to support his claim that liberalism is a bankrupt theory. In an essay entitled "Honor in the University," Hauerwas criticizes the modern university for assuming to be a market place of ideas. The assumption behind the university is that a student can come to the marketplace to find out about the various options and theories and then is able to choose "freely" which theory he or she would like to adopt. This means the teacher's role in the University is to present objectively the options available, leaving the student to make up his own mind.

Hauerwas thinks this assumption behind the modern University is false. He is often quoted as claiming that he wants his students not to make up their own minds, but to think just like he does. First, students don't have minds worth making up in the first place. Students don't even understand the importance of the ideas in question, nor do they have a good set of criteria to determine good theories from bad ones. The University thus leads students to choose an idea based on whether or not they like it. It produces consumers of ideas, who think they are free to choose ideas just like they are free to choose a Panasonic or Sony radio.³ The situation in the University is likened to the surrounding society, which tells us that freedom means being able to choose our own beliefs.

This definition of freedom, which tells us that we are free when we can autonomously choose those beliefs that are meaningful to us, Hauerwas thinks is a false account of what it means to be free. Hauerwas quotes a social critic Solzhenitsyn, who writes about our liberal democracy that "every citizen has been granted the desired freedom and material goods in such a quantity and of such a quality as to guarantee in theory the achievement of happiness."⁴ Democracy makes freedom an end in itself, assuming that such personal freedom, restrained only by that which might infringe on others' freedom, is sufficient to make people happy. However, "one psychological detail has been overlooked: the constant desire to have still more things and a still better life and the struggle to obtain them imprints many Western faces with worry and even depression."⁵ In other words, the pursuit of free choice that the University, and liberalism, gives us does not really make us free, because human nature is such that we are seldom satisfied with what we have.

Making freedom a commodity means that we will seldom be satisfied with the amount we have, and will always pursue more, in the hopes of finding happiness. That this liberal notion of freedom makes us happy is ultimately a lie, because instead of gaining freedom, we are made slaves to our own desires. Hauerwas writes that as Christians, "we have

learned that freedom cannot be had by becoming 'autonomous' - free from all claims except those we voluntarily accept - but rather freedom literally comes by having our self-absorption challenged by the needs of another."⁶ In other words, true freedom is freedom from our self-absorbed desires. This type of freedom is only achieved in a community where we can be challenged by others.

In addition to a false definition of freedom, both the University and liberalism face another problem. By teaching students to make up their own minds about the various ideas available, the University has presupposed that the student should be free to choose. In other words, while claiming to be objective in presenting ideas, the University has imposed a choice on its students. Hauerwas writes, "I can think of no more conformist message in liberal societies than the idea that students should learn to think for themselves."⁷ The "freedom" to choose presupposes that students, as well as Americans, know what they should choose. The assumption that without training, one can make up his own mind about what is good, is a false one. Hauerwas thinks training is essential because, "training involves the formation of the self through submission to authority that will, if done well, provide people with the virtues necessary to be able to make reasoned judgment."⁸ Through proper training, we are equipped with the necessary tools for then discerning why what we learned is good.

Liberalism puts theory before practice in the assumption that on reflection, we can determine what is best for us. Liberalism creates people who think that being able to choose freely will lead to happiness, but really this just leaves us at the will of our desires, as slaves. We cannot know what is good to choose until we have been formed and given the tools necessary for making such a judgment. By giving up the liberal "choice", we actually become free, because we are then able to be trained in the virtues necessary to see why certain ideas are better than others, irrespective of our desires.

Hauerwas thinks that the church is in a similar situation to the University, in that, like the University, it has adopted a voluntaristic conception of what it means to be a Christian. The church presupposes that one can be a Christian independent of Christian training.⁹ The church has become like the secular society with its assumption that to be free is to be able to choose. Hauerwas notes that once this position is established, any alternative cannot help but appear as a negative authoritarian alternative. In the next section, I will present Hauerwas' critique of the church's adaptation of deeply problematic assumptions.

Liberalism and Christianity

According to Hauerwas, the United States, being founded on the presumptions of liberalism, has given Christians a false sense of security, and has furthermore undermined the need for faith within the Christian tradition. The way in which our country is constructed necessarily relegates Christianity to the realm of the private, by regulating conduct, which is public. Hauerwas describes the way this occurred by referring to a column written by George Will about a Supreme Court decision to uphold a law prohibiting the use of peyote by the Native American Church.

A central purpose of America's political arrangements is the subordination of religion to the political order, meaning the primacy of democracy. The founders, like Locke before them, wished to tame and domesticate religious passions of the sort that convulsed Europe. They aimed to do so not by establishing religion, but by establishing a commercial republic - capitalism. They aimed to submerge people's turbulent energies in self-interested pursuit of material comforts.

Hence, religion is to be perfectly free as long as it is perfectly private-mere belief - but it must bend to the political will (law) as regards conduct. Thus, Jefferson held that "operations of the mind" are not subject to legal coercion, but that "Acts of the body" are. "Mere belief," said Jefferson, "in one god or 20, neither picks one's pockets nor breaks one's legs."

Jefferson's distinction rests on Locke's principle (Jefferson considered Locke one of the three greatest men who ever lived) that religion can be useful or can be disruptive, but its truth cannot be established by reason.¹⁰ Hence Americans would not "establish" religion. Rather, by guaranteeing free exercise of religions, they would make religions private and subordinate.

The founders favored religious tolerance because religious pluralism meant civil peace - order. Thus [Judge] Scalier is following the founders when he finds the limits of constitutionally required tolerance of "free exercise" in the idea that a society is "courting anarchy" when it abandons the principle stated in the 1879 ruling: "Laws are made for the government of actions." If conduct arising from belief, not just belief itself, is exempt from regulation, that would permit "every citizen to become a law unto himself."

Scalia's position is not only sound conservatism, it is constitutionally correct: It is the intent of the founders.¹¹

Hauerwas argues that the world described above, where religious actions are subordinate to the law of the land, is what most Christians assume to be the right form of government. Christians have thought that our task should be to make such a system work, because it is a system which promotes civil peace. As a result, Christian theologians have, "increasingly construed the Christian moral life in the language of love and justice,"¹² or the language of liberalism. In other words, in order to take action on private Christian beliefs, Christians thought it necessary to translate their convictions into the public language of liberalism, namely peace and justice. Therefore, Christianity as such has become functionally atheistic. The question became: Why should we have God as reason for morals, when we have universal reasons which don't presuppose any particular tradition, and therefore don't create the (potentially violent) conflict that Christian morals do?

It is Hauerwas' project to show that "the epistemological assumptions that underwrote the liberal commitment to individual rights - the private-public distinction, the harm principles - have become problematic."¹³ Hauerwas gives evidence for this fact in part by

citing liberals like Rorty and Stout who, "no longer believe in the justification of liberal democracies based on the philosophical strategies of the Enlightenment." [14](#) Rorty writes:

Unfortunately the Enlightenment wove much of its political rhetoric around a picture of the scientist as a sort of priest, someone who achieved contact with nonhuman truth by being "logical," "methodical," and "objective." This was a useful tactic in its day, but it is less useful now. [15](#)

While quoting Rorty does not prove Hauerwas' case that liberalism is a bankrupt theory, Rorty's denial of the Enlightenment presuppositions about neutrality and objectivity begin to show that even modern liberals acknowledge the failures of Enlightenment liberalism.

Hauerwas thinks that liberalism fundamentally opposes the church, because it attempts to define virtues apart from a context which makes sense of those virtues. "Freedom" and "justice" are words we all use, with the assumption that we all agree about what they mean. But it is often not clear what we mean when we talk about "justice" and "freedom." For Christians, "freedom" and "justice" are defined by the story of Jesus, providing a necessary context in which these terms make sense. In the next two sections, we will begin to see why Christians must reject the liberal definitions of justice and freedom.

Against Freedom?

Hauerwas thinks that because freedom of religion exists in our country, Christians have thought it their job to support the state, who in turn protects its freedom. This presumption is false, because it means the church is defined by the state, and the conflict between the two is swept under the rug of peace and tolerance. He writes, "I am not convinced that freedom of religion has been good for church or society in America. It has tempted Christians in America to think that democracy is fundamentally neutral and, perhaps, even friendly toward the church." [16](#)

Liberalism opposes the church because it holds as basic the autonomous individual who is supposedly capable of determining right and wrong through unaided rational reflection. In contrast, Christians hold as basic the practice of living in a community formed by the power of the gospel of Jesus Christ. Christians, unlike liberals, realize that only through the forming power of the gospel manifest in the church, do we become truly free. We become free from the tyranny of our desires.

Hauerwas makes the point that because of the Christian accommodation to the principles of liberal democracy which provide freedom of religion, "we have failed to notice that we are no longer a people who make it interesting for a society to acknowledge our freedom." [17](#) In other words, the church has become an institution which is basically liberal and democratic. It looks no different than the society around it, because we have become more concerned with the functionality of our convictions in society than with the truth about them. We have forgotten that "[t]he question is not whether we have freedom of religion to preach the gospel in America, but rather whether the church in America preaches the gospel as truth." [18](#)

There is a competition for loyalty between the state and the church, and freedom of religion is a subtle temptation because it tempts us into thinking we are safe because of the legal mechanisms in place by the state. Because we think it is the church's task to support the state, we have lost the critical skills formed by the gospel, to discern when we have, "voluntarily qualified our loyalty to God in the name of the state." [19](#) Hauerwas thinks it is the case that Christianity today has given its loyalty to the state, in the name of religious freedom, and forgotten the true freedom found in God, as evidenced by the church's adoption of the basic principles of Enlightenment thinking.

Against Justice?

The current emphasis on justice among Christians springs not so much from an effort to locate the Christian contribution to wider society as it does from Christians' attempt to find a way to be societal actors without that action being colored by Christian presupposition. [20](#)

Because of the relegation of religious convictions into the private realm, Christians have assumed that in order to take action they must provide "reasonable" justifications for their actions that are not necessarily Christian. General appeals are made to universal notions of justice such as a person's rights to a happy life. After all, everyone is for justice and peace. But the crucial problem with this view is, whose justice prevails? It is not clear that widespread agreement exists about what justice is, or what implications it has in societal action.

"Justice" has become a word that people use to enforce their notion that a certain set of circumstances is bad and needs correcting. People say that the fact that humans are starving is unjust and, we should do something to make the world a more just place. Yet one can find no reason given as to what is bad about the situation, or what we should do about it. Hauerwas thinks the case may be that the starving people have been victims of injustice, but they may just be victims of bad luck.

Furthermore, general appeals to justice often result in conflicting social strategies, which leave out the Christian witness on the matter at hand. For instance, many claim that since modern society oppresses the poor and women, they should be given more power, thus making things more just. Yet the appeal for the poor involves egalitarian presuppositions, while the appeal for women has libertarian presuppositions. The two are in competition, because "If you want to create a social order where everyone is provided with as much liberty as is compatible with liberty for all, it is very unlikely you will be able at the same time to sustain egalitarian social policies." [21](#)

Behind this search for universal justice is the Enlightenment assumption that there is a concept of "justice qua justice" which corresponds to an account of "rationality qua rationality". In contrast, Hauerwas contends that any account of justice is dependent on a tradition. For example, Alasdair MacIntyre argues that in order to understand (much less criticize) Aristotle's account of justice, it is necessary for us to try as much as possible to discard the standpoint of modernity. In order to understand justice in Aristotle's terms, we must understand the tradition from which his concept was born. It does no good to take his definition of *pleonexia*, a vice in contrast to justice, out of context by equating it with what we call greed, which many have done. "Greed" is the name of one motive for

activities of acquisition, while pleonexia names a disposition to engage in a certain activity for its own sake. Calling pleonexia greed puts Aristotle's words in the context of modernity, where they mean something different than the original intent, and from within Aristotle's tradition. [22](#)

Ultimately, Hauerwas argues that Christians have forgotten that apart from the story of Jesus, we cannot even understand "justice" or "peace." He writes:

The church really does not know what these words [justice and peace] mean apart from the life and death of Jesus of Nazareth....It is Jesus' story that gives content to our faith, judges any institutional embodiment of our faith, and teaches us to be suspicious of any political slogan that does not need God to make itself credible.²³

In order to make sense of justice and peace, Christians must have a context in which to talk about the significance of those ideas. For Christians to be Christians, we must offer the world what only we can offer. That is, we must understand justice and peace in light of the story of Jesus, recognizing that, "genuine justice depends on more profound moral convictions than our secular polity can politically acknowledge."²⁴ Any attempt to appeal to a neutral position on justice is to deny what makes Christians what we are. It is to deny the Gospel of Christ.

"Justice," as defined by the story of Jesus, looks radically different from the liberal assumptions about what justice is like. Jesus suffered and died a death which most would call unjust. He was accused of numerous crimes which he did not commit, and was ultimately crucified by the Roman government to appease the Jews who radically opposed His message. He received no trial, and when questioned did not even give a defense. Were any American citizen to endure such unfair treatment, we would undoubtedly condemn such treatment in the name of upholding justice.

As Christians we believe that what happened to Jesus was a part of God's larger plan to fulfill ultimate Justice. In living a sinless life, Jesus was worthy to die for the sins of the rest of the world. Through his death, God's justice was upheld, and we receive the benefit, and the burden, of living our lives in recognition of God's love and justice, to which we owe our lives.

The Statement of the Problem is the Problem

Because religion has been privatized in America, the church's main function has also been private. Hauerwas notes that the primary role of the church has been a community of care.²⁵ Pastors are good at "providing the kinds of services necessary to sustain people through the crises in their personal lives, but this simply reflects the fact that the church has become the privatized area of our culture."²⁶ Hauerwas thinks the church has mistakenly thought that its primary role is to be a community of care.

Friendliness and generally nice people who essentially avoid conflict for the sake of peace characterize such a community. The result is that such a church lacks the ability to build itself in a community which is capable of standing against the powers it confronts.²⁷ He writes

The very way we have learned to state the problem is the problem. The very fact that we let the issue be framed by terms such as individual and community, freedom and authority, care versus discipline, is an indication of our loss of coherence and the survival of fragments necessary for Christians to make our disciplines the way we care.[28](#)

It is very difficult for a community of care to tell its members that the discipline of the church must transform their lives, as they are willing, because of our liberal notions of freedom and individuality. We (the liberal church) seek to be cared for, but do not want to be judged so that we might have to change our lives. Yet changing our lives is exactly what Hauerwas thinks should be the primary role of the church.

In his paper, "Honor in the University," Hauerwas defends the premise that the most compassionate thing you can do as a Christian is to turn someone in for cheating.[29](#) Most people would not turn someone in for cheating because they assume that that person is really only hurting himself. Hauerwas thinks this argument rests on the type of individualism found in our liberal assumptions which basically tell us that we can do what we want to as long as we do not hurt anybody else and we play by the rules fairly. In contrast, a Christian owes it to those who cheat, to turn them in. One isn't protecting himself, but is rather reminding those who cheat that they have betrayed what they care about in being at an institution of honor. The consequence is excommunication, but for Christians "excommunication is the most gracious act the church ever performs. Without excommunication how would you ever know that you are leading a life that cuts you off from the community of grace?"[30](#) In the University, expulsion reminds a student that he is living a life which contradicts the principles of the institution. The University shows them they need help, and reminds them what the University is all about, just as excommunication from the church reminds people that they are leading a life which needs to be fixed.

The Alternative Vision

Laying Bricks

In order to understand the disciplined community which Hauerwas thinks the church should be, we should examine the process of learning about how to lay brick. This will provide us with an appropriate analogy for what it means to be saved, or what it means to be a Christian. First, to learn how to lay brick, one cannot just be told what or how to do it, but rather one must learn a myriad of skills that are necessary to lay a brick. One must learn to build a scaffold, mix the mortar, hold the trowel, etc. To be told how to do these things is not enough, but one must practice laying brick day after day.[31](#)

The craft is not just a set of skills to be learned, it also involves a language which both forms and is formed by the skills. You must learn to "frog the mud," which involves creating a trench in the mortar that will create a vacuum to suck the brick down so that it virtually lays itself. The language involved is not just incidental to the craft, but is a central part of the practice of laying brick. You cannot lay brick without learning how to

talk "right."³² The language of a craft also reveals the history behind it, so that you are not just learning a new skill, but are being initiated into an entire history.

All of the necessary parts of learning to lay brick require a master craftsman who teaches the craft to the apprentice. This notion is in opposition to the modern democratic presuppositions. Hauerwas writes: "It is assumed we each in and of ourselves have all we need to be moral. No master is necessary for us to become moral, for being moral is a condition that does not require initiation or training."³³ Hauerwas suggests that the most formative situations left in society are where people learn to play a sport, to quilt, to cook, or to learn to lay brick, because these situations require the acknowledgement of authority based on a history of accomplishment.

However, brick layers are increasingly scarce, making their services more expensive. As a result, many highly functional but ugly glass buildings have been built, to the extent that people are beginning to forget what true brick buildings were like. Hauerwas likens this situation to what has happened to our understanding of morality. The cheap and easy glass buildings are much like the kind of morality we want: fast and functional. Cheap and easy morality has led to less and less masters of morality, and we've eventually forgotten what the craft-like morality really is.³⁴

Hauerwas pulls heavily from Alasdair MacIntyre in his account of morality as a sort of craft. MacIntyre argues that the moral good is not readily available to just any intelligent person, regardless of their point of view. "Rather, in order to be moral, a person has to be made into a particular kind of person if he or she is to acquire knowledge about what is true and good."³⁵ In other words, any account of morality which does not involve an account of some sort of conversion is unintelligible.³⁶

Like in the bricklaying example, one enters the tradition in order to learn the intelligence and virtue necessary for the craft. One does this by submitting as an apprentice to the direction of a master of the craft. The apprentice learns the acknowledged standard of what is good, both in his own circumstances, and the overall, unqualified good. The unqualified good informs both the master and the apprentice about the telos of their craft, which is the perfect good. The apprentice not only learns the practice of the craft, but his sense of what he thinks he should learn is also formed by the practice. That is why Hauerwas makes the claim, "there can be no knowledge without appropriate authority," because knowledge comes from submitting to a master who imparts to us what we should know.³⁷ The absence of a master means we cannot even begin to learn what we should know; we do not know where to start without the master.

When we view the moral life like a craft, we can see why we need a teacher to help us actualize our potential. The teacher, having been where we have not, is able to tell us what intellectual and moral habits we must acquire in order to become good participants in the craft. These standards come from the community of the craft, and are justified historically, as they emerge from criticisms in the past. For instance, good brick layers hold the trowel a certain way because through time that has improved on the craft's predecessors.³⁸

The teachers themselves do not necessarily embody the notion of a perfect good, but instead derive their authority from the tradition's concept of a perfect good which is the telos for that craft. The teacher's role is to help us understand that telos, as he is also striving for it. Hauerwas contends that the craft is never static. A master gains his status and authority because he embodies the best so far in his craft. But furthermore, the master must know how to continue on, producing works which are closer to the perfect telos. He must also be able to challenge others to go on, and must teach them the skills necessary to do so.³⁹

Bricklaying and the Church

The first thing that the craft analogy reminds us about the church is that Christianity is not a combination of beliefs about God along with a certain behavior. Hauerwas writes, "We are not Christians because of what we believe, but because we have been called to be disciples of Jesus."⁴⁰ This discipleship does not primarily entail a sort of new self-understanding, but rather first involves becoming a part of a new community with a different set of practices. We do not hold certain beliefs which entail certain types of actions. Instead, we learn how to live, how to lay brick, and in the process we gain what is necessary to learn what it means to live well. The practice of living well comes before the theory behind it.

Central to the Christian tradition is learning to worship. It is through the act of worship that our lives become engrafted into the story of God. Worship, for Christians, is the activity to which all the other skills are ordered. Through worship we can acquire the skills necessary to discover and acknowledge that we are sinners. This means that as Christians, worship is morality.⁴¹ Worship gives us the tools to see how we've fallen short of our telos. Like bricklaying, worship requires training and practice. One cannot begin to see what a terrible bricklayer he is until he tries it out, just as one sees how far he has to go to worship God when he first tries to do it. Yet through that practice of worship, one actually gains the skills necessary to be a better worshipper, much like through the practice of bricklaying, one learns the intricacies and quirks of laying brick. It can not be mastered intellectually, but can only be learned through practice.

The type of Christian life Hauerwas is developing here is antithetical to modern theology which suggests that sin is a universal category, the knowledge of which is available to anyone. It is assumed that "people might not believe in God, but they will confess their sin."⁴² Thus, sin is an unavoidable aspect of the human condition. Hauerwas thinks that such a theology is odd to a people who have been taught that to confess sin involves being trained by a community that has learned how to point out those aspects of our lives that are in opposition to being disciples of Jesus. ⁴³

For example, Hauerwas writes, "We cannot learn to confess our sins unless we are forgiven," because prior to forgiveness we cannot know our sin.⁴⁴ "It is the great message of the gospel that we will only find our lives in that of Jesus to the extent that we are capable of accepting forgiveness."⁴⁵ Accepting forgiveness however, is not easy, because we are submitting to the power and control of God. Such a submission makes the type of

Christianity Hauerwas promotes deeply at odds with modern assumptions about autonomy. The notion that we would allow our lives to be defined by a narrative given to us rather than created by us, is in direct opposition to the spirit and ideals of modernity. Modernity tells us that we can determine the meaning of our own existence as self-created individuals. Christianity tells us our lives must be shaped in a community formed by the gospel, a story foreign to liberal notions of individuality and autonomy.

Life as a Gift

At the heart of Hauerwas' alternative vision of the church is learning a story which helps us recognize our life as a gift. He writes, "It is from the story that we gain the skills to recognize the gift on which our life depends."⁴⁶ In other words, as Christians we learn a story which helps us to live truthfully to the way things are.

For the truth is that since we are God's good creation we are not free to choose our own stories. Freedom lies not in creating our lives, but in learning to recognize our lives as a gift... The great magic of the Gospel is providing us with the skills to acknowledge our life, as created, without resentment and regret. Such skills must be embodied in a community of people across time, constituted by practices such as baptism, preaching, and the Eucharist, which become the means for us to discover God's story for our lives.⁴⁷ Through the practices of the church tradition (e.g. baptism, preaching, Holy Communion) we come to discover and accept the story we have because of God. This process is what being a Christian is all about.

As discussed above, Liberalism calls freedom the ability to choose one's own beliefs and morality, so long as we do not impinge on the rights of others to do the same. This "freedom" is not freedom at all, because it makes us slaves to our desires. Christians who are formed by the story of Christ have learned that to deny the self in this sense is a great freedom, because we can then get to our real task which has nothing to do with our desires, and everything to do with God.⁴⁸

Hauerwas claims that the primary social task of the church is to be itself.⁴⁹ When we live our lives as disciples of Jesus, recognizing they are a gift, we live out the truth. "For if the doctrines of Christianity were practiced, they would make a man as different from other people as to all worldly tempers, sensual pleasures... it would be as easy a thing to know a Christian by his outward course of life as it is now difficult to find anybody that lives it."⁵⁰ In other words, one who truly lives out the Christian life cannot help but be in conflict with the modern world which is fundamentally opposed to such a life. Our task now as Christians is not to ignore that conflict, but to accept it and live in that conflict. For how will the world know they are the world unless the church presents the living alternative?

Recoiling from Reason?

Hauerwas' Debt to MacIntyre Criticized

Much of Hauerwas' theory about the nature of traditions and the learning of morality as a craft comes from Alasdair MacIntyre's work. In an attempt to provide a worthy criticism

of Hauerwas' project, I will show how criticisms of MacIntyre may also apply to the project discussed in this paper. The major criticism comes from Martha Nussbaum's article, "Recoiling from Reason," which provides a critical analysis of MacIntyre's work in *Whose Justice? Which Rationality?*.

Much like Hauerwas, MacIntyre argues that the language of contemporary ethical debate is hopelessly disordered. ⁵¹ "Lacking the firm guidance of shared agreements about moral standards, lacking even a common moral language, we argue past one another... hurling at our opponents uprooted fragments of once vital ethical traditions."⁵² One then naturally wonders if a new shared language of morality would exist only in local communities, or if there would be reasons for preferring some traditions over another. Critics doubted that MacIntyre could combine his view that all argument occurs inside traditions with his claim to be able to justify a single tradition as rationally superior to others. ⁵³

MacIntyre argues that when two traditions are in conflict, one usually establishes itself as superior to the other and gains acceptance from the defeated. The winning tradition does this by explaining how to solve the problems that came up in the other view, while showing how to incorporate the good points left over in the defeated tradition. ⁵⁴ In this way, competing traditions can hold rational discourse and the side with the best theory can be rationally determined, based on universal notions of logical argumentation.

Yet in his account of why the Catholic, Thomistic stance is the superior tradition, he relies on the doctrine of original sin. Basically, this doctrine says that man is morally deficient, that when given the chance man will not do the right thing. This disobedience manifests itself most often as sexual desire. Nussbaum argues that to an Aristotelian (representing a competing tradition) the entire idea would seem ludicrous. Aristotle says that a person who did not find sexual relations pleasant would not be fully human.

The disagreement that would persist between the Catholic and the Aristotelian traditions would mean that the criteria for superiority would not be met. The winning tradition (Catholic Thomism) has not convinced the defeated position why theirs is rationally superior. This is essentially due to the fact that an appeal to the authority of the church over an individual is made.

Only an institution such as the Church - and not some mere reasoner like Aristotle, sitting disenfranchised and powerless as a resident alien in Athens - could succeed in rationally justifying a set of beliefs as MacIntyre finally understands that task. It is not enough to bring forward good arguments. "Political acknowledgement" of the arguments is also required.⁵⁵

In other words, it seems that the church must serve as the political acknowledgement over an individual by its authority over secular rulers. Nussbaum makes the charge that this sort of justification is not rational. If to win an argument Catholic Thomism has to beat dissenters into line with its authority because of original sin, then we have moved from the realm of rational discourse between competing traditions. Indeed, not even the doctrine of original sin is rationally based, but was originally used as a rationale for the exercise of church authority.⁵⁶ If such is the case, then one may suspect that "MacIntyre is in the grip of a world view promulgated by authority rather than by reason." ⁵⁷

Nussbaum goes on to show that MacIntyre's (and thereby Hauerwas' also) pessimism about reason is unjustified by giving an example of people from different traditions who through secular, rational debate, make progress towards a convincing picture of the good life. Her example comes from Aristotle himself.[58](#)

First, Aristotle did not believe that rational debate in which he took part was based on a set of fundamental agreements. He tells us in the beginning of the *Nicomachean Ethics* that while all humans agree that their goal is eudaimonia, "as to what eudaimonia is, they are at odds."[59](#) Despite lacking consensus about the good life, Aristotle believed he could still provide a reasoned justification for his own account.

Second, Aristotle does not stay within his tradition, but considers arguments from various other traditions. His list of the virtues is intended to be internationally based on the common experiences of mankind.[60](#) Third, Aristotle does not expect universal agreement. Many people are not well-educated, or are not in a position to understand rationally what Aristotle is trying to say. This lack of understanding is due not to a defective will or sin, but is due rather to bad politics. [61](#)

Finally, Aristotle begins his description of each virtue with a characterization of some sphere of shared human experience. Aristotle goes through each of the spheres of human activity, giving a general account of what it means to live as a human with both limitations and abilities. "The story he tells should, he thinks, be intelligible to any human being who hears it, despite differences of language and culture."[62](#)

All this said, Nussbaum thinks she has shown that it is plausible to pursue a reasoned account of the good life which would fit all humans, universally. This means MacIntyre's and Hauerwas' pessimism about rationality is unjustified, and their project against liberalism is weakened tremendously. Furthermore, if Nussbaum is right, then much of Hauerwas' critique of the modern church may be ill founded.

Hauerwas' Reply

It seems that Nussbaum's main concern with the theory that MacIntyre and Hauerwas hold about rationality and competing traditions centers on her contention that a Christian tradition-based conception of rationality will lead to irrational coercion and manipulation. If an individual voluntarily commits his life to be formed by the church, then the issue of coercion is reduced, for the individual willingly accepts the church's authority. But as the church enters into dialogue with competing traditions, Nussbaum's fear is that the church will use its authority as an irrational means of persuasion, by coercing its enemies into believing what it does. This fear is not ill-founded, for certainly the church has used coercive tactics in the past. Hauerwas' likely reply would use the model of debate among rival traditions which I have laid out above. I will show that while liberal notions of autonomous reason are certainly bankrupt, liberal ideas about pluralism and tolerance can be incorporated into the sort of view that Hauerwas promotes.

In terms of theories on political schemes and governments, let us distinguish four different approaches. The first is the authoritarian regime, of the sort that Nussbaum fears the church could become. Citizens are involuntarily made subject to the authority of a ruler, or government. At the other end of the spectrum is the liberal democracy, where freedom of the individual and rational autonomy are praised. Certain foundational principles independent of any particular tradition exist to govern the society, allowing one to pursue his or her own good, so long as it does not interfere with the right of someone's else's pursuit of the same freedom.

An alternative to both of these theories is the type of system Aristotle describes in his *Nicomachean Ethics*. In this ideal society, all free adult citizens agree to be members of the tradition and agree to be shaped by that tradition's story. Each person in the society agrees on the fundamental goods for the tradition, and there is little room for differences in opinion on fundamental goods. Nussbaum characterizes MacIntyre's project as very similar to this sort of classic Aristocracy. The difficulty Nussbaum has with classical Aristotelianism is the lack of a plurality of points of view, due to the authority of the tradition in determining the goods for the rest of the society. As described in the *Nicomachean Ethics*, a truly healthy polis would allow debate on fundamental goods but would uphold a conception of the good life in which the virtues, rather than wealth or power, would be constitutive of the good life. This uniformity of agreement on the fundamental goods opposes liberal notions of autonomous reason and plurality that lead us to think we can define for ourselves our fundamental goods.

The final alternative could be called liberal Aristotelianism, and it is the theory that both MacIntyre and Hauerwas seem to promote as the right way of approaching a pluralistic society, without accepting rational autonomy. As a Christian, Hauerwas recognizes that coercion is not an appropriate means of persuading someone to accept one's own tradition. Recognizing that the church is a political alternative to liberalism he writes:

[B]y taking seriously its task to be an alternative polity, the church might well help us to experience what politics of trust can be like... . The problem in liberal societies is that there seems to be no way to encourage the development of public virtue without accepting a totalitarian strategy from the left or an elitist strategy from the right. By standing as an alternative to each, the church may help free our social imagination from those destructive choices.⁶³

In Hauerwas' view, the church stands as a political alternative to totalitarian and elitist strategies, both of which rely on some form of coercion or manipulation for survival. In contrast to coercive methods, the church stands (or should stand) as a community built on trust. Our witness in a surrounding pluralistic society is in a large part as a community of trust. Therefore, for the church to abuse its authority through coercive acts would mean its failing to be a community of trust.

The church would become the type of community which Hauerwas ultimately argues against. The church can remain a community based on trust and simultaneously acknowledge competing traditions as relevant voices in an ongoing debate. For instance, Christians can challenge the liberal definition of freedom, while supporting and embodying respect for other traditions. The important thing in Hauerwas' view is to recognize that a conflict does exist. There is a tendency in liberalism to think that there

are no real conflicts, because individuals are "free" to define themselves, and therefore virtually any statement that one does not agree with can be rejected on the grounds of self-definition. Instead, Hauerwas calls us to recognize the conflicts, and as Christians to stay true to our uniquely Christian convictions. His vision of the church, therefore, can support respect and tolerance of other traditions, and still maintain a critical attitude towards competing traditions. The church can acknowledge a pluralistic culture, maintaining respect for other traditions, without recognizing autonomous reason and without compromising its Christian convictions about the ultimate truth of competing traditions.

It is clear that coercion also presents a problem for secular political strategies, in societies where Enlightenment influence encouraged the ideal of autonomous reason. On a small scale, the modern University coerces its students to "choose" between ideas, as if it were a marketplace. Hauerwas' arguments against the University's false notions of choice and freedom can be found in more detail above on page five. On a larger scale, many devastating wars have been fought since the Enlightenment that were not based on religious convictions. If the Enlightenment sought to prevent religious wars, it at least in part succeeded. Yet it failed to cure secular violence, for people still kill each other, even though their reasons are no longer mainly religious. Nazi Germany fought for the Aryan nation, The United States fights for democracy, and the result is still coercion via violence. So while the church may be susceptible to coercive tendencies, it is clearly a problem that all humans face, not just Christians.

Conclusion

In conclusion, Nussbaum is right to fear the coercive tendencies of authoritarian government and of coercing a classical Aristotelianism on a pluralistic society. Yet coercion is a problem which faces humanity as a whole, not just Christians. Hauerwas' vision of the church adequately shows that the liberal ideals of tolerance and respect for other's beliefs can be incorporated into the church's stance on competing traditions. In following MacIntyre's model of competing traditions, Hauerwas can show how the good points of liberalism are sympathetic to the Christian tradition and can easily be incorporated into it, thus making Hauerwas' stance consistent and ultimately convincing.

End Notes

1 "Preaching as Though We had Enemies," Stanley Hauerwas, 4.

2 After Christendom? Stanley Hauerwas. This is a quote from Charles Taylor, 27.

3 "Honor in the University," Stanley Hauerwas, 26.

4 Community of Character, 75. Hauerwas quotes Solzhentisyn. Emphasis added.

5 Ibid, 75. Another quote from Solzhentisyn.

6 After Christendom?, 54.

7 Ibid, 98.

8 Ibid, 98.

9 Ibid, 98.

10 Will's interpretation of Locke may be less than accurate, as it seems odd for Locke to say that one would hold any belief without a rational defense or proof of why that belief is true. However Will's point about the subordination of religion in America is still clear, and any debate over his interpretation of Locke is irrelevant to this main point.

11 George Will's quote found in After Christendom?, 30.

12 After Christendom?, 31.

13 Ibid, 31.

14 Ibid, 33.

15 Ibid, 32. A quote from Rorty.

16 Ibid, 70.

17 Ibid, 71.

18 Ibid, 71.

19 Ibid, 71.

20 Ibid, 58.

21 Ibid, 47.

22 Ibid, 49-50. Paraphrased from Hauerwas' description of MacIntyre's account of Aristotle's justice.

23 Resident Aliens, Stanley Hauerwas and William Willimon, 38.

24 Community of Character, 74.

25 After Christendom?, 95.

26 Ibid, 95.

27 Ibid, 93.

28 Ibid, 99.

29 "Honor in the University," 31.

30 Ibid, 31.

31 After Christendom?, 101.

32 Ibid, 101.

33 Ibid, 102.

34 Ibid, This paragraph is indebted to many of the ideas found on page 102.

35 Ibid, 103.

36 Ibid, This paragraph is indebted to many of the ideas found on page 103.

37 Ibid, This paragraph is indebted to many of the ideas found on page 105.

38 Ibid, This paragraph is indebted to many of the ideas found on page 105.

39 Ibid, This paragraph is indebted to many of the ideas found on page 106.

40 Ibid, 107.

41 Ibid, 108.

42 Ibid, 109.

43 Ibid, This paragraph is indebted to many of the ideas found on page 109.

44 Ibid, 109.

45 Ibid, 109.

46 Community of Character, Stanley Hauerwas, 148.

47 "Preaching as Though We Had Enemies," Stanley Hauerwas, 4.

48 Ironically, denying the self in this way is actually in favor of the self, because through a life of worshipping God, the self is fulfilling the purpose for which it was created, and is thus happier.

49 Community of Character, 10.

50 Ibid, 150. Hauerwas is quoting William Law, A serious Call to a Devout and Holy Life, (55).

51 "Recoiling from Reason," Martha Nussbaum, 30.

52 Ibid. Part of Nussbaum's synopsis of MacIntyre's work in a previous work, After Virtue.

53 Ibid, 39.

54 Ibid, 39. This paragraph is indebted to the ideas of Nussbaum found on this page in her article.

55 Ibid, 40.

56 Nussbaum refers here to Elaine Pagels's book which reveals how Christians did not originally see "original sin" until later when the church made it doctrine (40).

57 Ibid, 40.

58 Ibid, 40-41.

59 Ibid, 41.

60 Ibid, 41.

61 Ibid, 41. This paragraph is indebted to Nussbaum's ideas on the noted page.

62 Ibid, 41. This paragraph is indebted to Nussbaum's ideas on the noted page.

63 Community of Character, 86.

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