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A Politics of Vulnerability: Hauerwas and Democracy

WILLIAM T. CAVANAUGH

The problem with writing a festschrift article for Stanley Hauerwas is that I have had to read what Stanley has written. It is not just that there is a lot of it—God only knows how many of God’s beautiful trees have been cut down to print Stanley’s books. It’s also that I have heretofore known what Stanley thinks mostly by talking to him, and the conversational, dialogical style of Stanley in person belies the stereotype of Stanley as Old Testament prophet raining down jeremiads on the powers that be. Stanley listens, which is a hard thing for a book to do. Stanley is constantly learning. He wants to know what others think, and relishes the free give and take of ideas. Most importantly, he makes himself vulnerable to challenge, and often acknowledges his gratitude to those who have helped him to see what he had missed before.

Would these qualities make Hauerwas a good democrat? The question arises from Hauerwas’s intriguing exchanges with Jeffrey Stout and Romand Coles in recent years. Although Stout’s 2004 book *Democracy and Tradition* is framed in part as a critique of Hauerwas, it articulates a vision of democratic virtue and dialogical engagement that calls forth Hauerwas’s praise. In his endorsement of the book, Hauerwas hails a “fresh conversation” between advocates of democracy and Christians. Stout, for his part, has the lead endorsement on the back of Hauerwas’s

and Coles' 2008 book *Christianity, Democracy, and the Radical Ordinary*: "This book gives me hope. It takes the conversation over Christianity and democracy in a most welcome direction: away from ism-mongering and abstractions, down to earth, where instructive and inspiring examples can be found." Has Hauerwas changed from the anti-democratic figure so thoroughly criticized in Stout's *Democracy and Tradition*?

In this essay, I consider Hauerwas's views of democracy through his engagements with Stout and Coles. In the first section, I consider how the terms "democracy" and "liberalism" operate in Stout and Hauerwas. In the second section, I show how Hauerwas and Stout part company in their construal of political space. In the third section, I show how Coles' radical democracy can help Hauerwas overcome some of the ambiguities in his previous attempts to articulate political space. In the fourth and final section, I show the tensions between Hauerwas's and Coles' articulations of politics. Overall, this essay is an attempt to show that Hauerwas's recent close and sympathetic conversations with two non-Christian democrats has the potential to lead to a more satisfying articulation and practice of a radical Christian politics than we have heretofore had. What follows is not just reporting on these conversations, but my attempt to horn in on them.¹

Democracy and Liberalism

Stout's book is as persuasive a defense of democracy as we are likely to see. It is a carefully reasoned and generous work that derives much of its rhetorical power from Stout's positioning himself between two extremes. On the one hand are liberals like John Rawls and Richard Rorty who would severely curtail the admissibility of religious language in public democratic speech. On the other hand are those Stout dubs "new traditionalists" like Hauerwas, Alasdair MacIntyre, and John Milbank, who see nothing but threats to the integrity of Christianity by the liberal policing of the democratic order. Stout's position is attractive not only because he situates himself in the reasonable middle of this shouting match and tries to carve out a theoretical space for

Christians and other "religious"² people to participate in a secular democracy without compromising their basic theological convictions, but especially because Stout claims that such a reasonable middle already exists and is the majority position. In other words, Stout claims that Hauerwas reacts against a type of liberalism that exists mostly on the pages of books by Rawls, Rorty, and their followers, and not in actual practice. As Stout says of the two sides, "they both hold, as I do not, that the political culture of our democracy implicitly requires the policing or self-censorship of religious expression in the political arena."³ Stout points to the Abolitionists, Abraham Lincoln, Martin Luther King, Jr., Dorothy Day, Rosemary Radford Ruether, and Wendell Berry as evidence that religious speech is not and has never been systematically excluded from public political speech in the U. S. For this reason Stout asks Hauerwas to take a decade off of talking about "liberalism" in American society. Critiques of Rawls' proposals might be useful, but assuming that Rawls' theory of justice actually describes how American democracy works is simply not helpful. At best, Stout would allow the use of the term "liberal society" to describe the "configuration of social practices and institutions" we are currently living with, but there never has been a single "liberal project," and "liberalism" is nothing but an "obsolete ideology" invoked by both critics and defenders who mistakenly thought there was such a "liberal project."⁴

In place of liberalism, Stout prefers to talk about democracy. Stout hopes to meet Hauerwas and others on the ground of tradition by claiming that American democracy is itself a kind of tradition, and not one of the acids of modernity that destroys tradition and virtue. Like MacIntyre, Hauerwas has long accused liberalism of being antithetical to tradition, virtue, piety, and community. Liberalism prioritizes freedom over the good, thus recognizing that the basic unit of society is

2. The term "religious" is problematic because it tends to identify certain kinds of beliefs such as Christianity and Islam as inherently different and less rational than other kinds of belief, such as faith in the market or the nation. For a thorough treatment of the invention and uses of "religion," see my book *The Myth of Religious Violence: Secular Ideology and the Roots of Modern Conflict* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2009) esp. chapter 2.

3. Jeffrey Stout, *Democracy and Tradition* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2004) 84.

4. *Ibid.*, 130.

1. I should acknowledge from the start that when I say what Hauerwas thinks, I sometimes mean what I think Hauerwas ought to think.

the individual pursuing his or her self-interest; "the individual is the sole source of authority."⁵ Liberalism assumes that shared tradition and common goods are not necessary for a social order; all that is required is a system of procedures for adjudicating conflict. As Hauerwas writes, "liberal polity is the attempt to show that societal cooperation is possible under conditions of distrust."⁶ Founders such as James Madison assumed that such a system of limited government could only work amongst virtuous people. Hauerwas argues, however, that such a system lacks the resources necessary to produce virtuous people. "Liberalism thus becomes a self-fulfilling prophecy; a social order that is designed to work on the presumption that people are self-interested tends to produce that kind of people."⁷

Stout wants to empty this critique of its persuasiveness by speaking of democracy as a lively tradition of virtue that produces self-reliance, piety toward "the sources of our existence and progress through life,"⁸ and disciplined, open dialogue with others. Key figures for Stout are Ralph Waldo Emerson and Walt Whitman, in whose writings—unlike those of Rawls and Rorty—questions of character, virtue, and piety are treated with great seriousness. Emerson and Whitman did not see democracy as leading to self-assertion, social fragmentation, and the destruction of piety. On the contrary, Stout shows that the character of the democratic person was of utmost importance to such figures, precisely because certain virtues such as independence of mind are necessary for a democracy to function. The reason that some traditionalists believe that democracy is antithetical to piety is that they define piety as deference to the hierarchical powers that be. What Stout calls "self-reliant piety" is taking responsibility for one's own highest commitments, as something for which reasons can be requested and given.⁹ Authority is not done away with, but it is dispersed into individuals who must earn

it.¹⁰ Part of the appeal of Stout's analysis is that he aims to be more discriminating than Hauerwas, advocating a "surgical" critique of society and its political system rather than issuing broadsides against abstractions like "liberalism."¹¹ Hauerwas himself, as Stout notes, has confessed that he has "grown tired of arguments about the alleged virtues or vices of liberalism,"¹² though he can't quite bring himself to avoid them. Stout wants to bring the conversation down from discussion of political theories like those of Hobbes, Locke, and Rawls, and address instead the concrete reality of American democracy.

I find the social-contract model of political community—and especially its conception of public reason—insufficiently historical and sociological. As a student of religion, I am inclined to approach these topics more concretely. That means beginning with the religious visions and perfectionist projects that have actually mattered to most Americans, and only then constructing a philosophical account of the promise and dangers implicit in our political culture.¹³

From here Stout goes on to examine Whitman's and Emerson's writings, but one wonders why this should count as a more historical or sociological way to proceed. Stout might wish to hold up Whitman and Emerson as exemplars of democratic thought, but it is by no means clear that their projects are those "that have actually mattered to most Americans." Who besides a few scholars reads Whitman and Emerson today? Likewise, Stout's chapter on moral examples is a discussion of some scholarly works on moral examples, and not an empirical examination of American society.

Who can claim to be presenting a more accurate, empirically-based portrait of virtue in American society, Stout or Hauerwas? Stout accuses Hauerwas of painting an idealized portrait of the church while caricaturing American society. The result is an overly sharp dualism between church and world and an inability and unwillingness to engage

5. Stanley Hauerwas, *A Community of Character: Toward a Constructive Christian Social Ethic* (Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press, 1981) 78.

6. *Ibid.*, 81.

7. *Ibid.*, 79.

8. Stout, *Democracy and Tradition*, 30. Stout uses this locution repeatedly, apparently to substitute for "God" or some other such object of piety that would restrict "piety" to "religious" people.

9. *Ibid.*, 30–1.

10. *Ibid.*, 221.

11. *Ibid.*, 59–60.

12. Stanley Hauerwas, *A Better Hope: Resources for a Church Confronting Capitalism, Post-Modernity, and America* (Grand Rapids: Brazos, 2001) 10, cited in Stout, *Democracy and Tradition*, 140.

13. Stout, *Democracy and Tradition*, 21.

with the society at large.¹⁴ Hauerwas has responded to similar charges many times before, by acknowledging the church's failures, giving a type of fall narrative,¹⁵ and distinguishing between *is* and *ought*.¹⁶ Stout makes the same moves in defending democracy. He is capable of quite scathing critiques of American society, but he also appeals to a fall narrative,¹⁷ and to a distinction between *is* and *ought*.¹⁸ It should be said, however, that neither Hauerwas nor Stout employs this distinction between *is* and *ought* consistently. Both make idealized statements about the virtues of the church or the habits of a democratic people that seem to contradict other statements about the dire state of the church or the *demos*.¹⁹

What exactly does the *is*—as opposed to the *ought*—look like according to Stout?

14. *Ibid.*, 154–7.

15. "We have almost forgotten that the church is also a polity that at one time had the confidence to encourage in its members virtues sufficient to sustain their role as citizens in a society whose purpose was to counter the unwarranted claims made by other societies and states" (*Community of Character*, 73–74). Similarly, "My strategy is to try to help us recover the everyday practices that constitute that *polis* called church that are every bit as interesting and exciting as baseball. What we Christians have lost is just how radical our practices are, since they are meant to free us from the excitement of war and the lies so characteristic of the world" (*In Good Company: The Church as Polis* [Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press, 1995] 8).

16. "Theologically the question is not what Christians do think, but what they ought to think given their basic convictions" (*Community of Character*, 108).

17. On the question of character, Stout says "we have largely forgotten how to pose it in Whitman's democratic way. Indeed, we have largely lost sight of the tradition of reflection that Democratic Vistas represents" (*Democracy and Tradition*, 19). *Democratic Vistas* refers to the book published by Whitman in 1871. Stout faults MacIntyre for not recognizing his own indebtedness to a Romantic appeal to a story of ruin and fall (*ibid.*, 135), but Stout is not incapable of employing the same trope.

18. "The so-called democratic societies . . . are in fact severely deficient when judged from the perspective implied by their own best thinking" (*ibid.*, 289).

19. For example, a few sentences after Hauerwas says "Because the church rarely now engenders such a people and community, it has failed our particular secular polity," he writes "For the Christian, therefore, the church is always the primary polity through which we gain the experience to negotiate and make positive contributions to whatever society in which we may find ourselves"; *Community of Character*, 74. Stout, for his part, juxtaposes his indictments of American society with statements like this one: "It is a remarkably widespread and steady commitment, on the part of citizens, to talk things through with citizens unlike themselves. This commitment is there, prior to all theorizing, in the habits of the people" (Stout, *Democracy and Tradition*, 297).

As I survey the day-to-day lives of my fellow citizens, it seems reasonable to fear that we have largely:

- ignored the plight of the poor everywhere;
- permitted the American state to prop up countless tyrants abroad;
- neither adequately prevented nor mourned the civilian casualties of our militarism;
- failed to hold professional elites responsible to the people;
- acquired a habit of deferring to bosses;
- preferred pecuniary gain and prestige to justice;
- ceased to trust ourselves as competent initiators of action;
- retreated into enclaves defined by ethnicity, race, and lifestyle;
- and otherwise withdrawn from politics into docility, apathy, or despair.²⁰

It would be hard for Stanley Hauerwas to outdo this list for devastating indictments of American society. The difference between Stout and Hauerwas is really not in their portrayals of the empirically observable state of virtue in American society. The difference is that, according to Stout, Hauerwas thinks the problem is too much democracy, and Stout thinks the problem is not enough. According to Stout, Hauerwas thinks that democracy undercuts the kinds of tradition and community that make it possible to produce virtuous people.²¹ Stout argues that democracy is a tradition that does produce communities of virtue, even if it is a tradition in grave danger of being lost.

Given the degree of agreement between Hauerwas and Stout on the empirically observable ills of American society, can they not come to an agreement on democracy? Part of the problem is that "democracy" in this discussion is used equivocally. Immediately after Stout gives the above list, he asks "If some or all of these fears are indeed justified, is not our political economy in immediate danger of ceasing in practice to be a democracy in any but a purely formal sense?"²² What "democracy"

20. *Ibid.*, 24.

21. *Ibid.*, 24–25.

22. *Ibid.*, 24.

seems to mean for Stout (despite the centrality of the concept to his book, he never defines it) is not primarily a formal, institutional system of state government, but something like a tradition of virtuous self-reliance, social justice, and free exchange of ideas. It is hard to escape the impression that what counts as "democracy" are the things that Stout likes about American society. At the end of his book, Stout responds to Jean Bethke Elshtain's fear that the streams of religious and ethical virtue that feed American democracy are running dry. Stout responds "we should not imagine the life-giving sources on which we depend as something essentially alien to American democratic modernity. That stream is in us and of us when we engage in our democratic practices. Democracy, then, is misconceived when taken to be a desert landscape hostile to whatever life-giving waters of culture and tradition might still flow through it. Democracy is better construed as the name appropriate to the currents themselves in this particular time and place."²³

If "democracy" means what is life-giving and virtuous in American society, then it is understandable that Hauerwas is happy to endorse Stout's book. Hauerwas is especially open to Stout's presentation of democracy insofar as it illuminates John Howard Yoder's advocacy of a church of dialogue and patient listening to the least members of the community. "It is extremely important to understand that Yoder understood that nonviolence requires the kind of conversation Stout associates with democracy."²⁴ Hauerwas himself in 1981 had endorsed a qualified view of the church as "democratic" in this sense, provided it does not mean that truth is simply unavailable to the community as a whole.²⁵

23. Ibid., 308.

24. Ibid., 229.

25. "The hallmark of [the church], unlike the power of the nation-states, is its refusal to resort to violence to secure its own existence or to insure internal obedience. For as a community convinced of the truth, we refuse to trust any other power to compel than the truth itself. It is in that connection that the church is in a certain sense 'democratic,' for it believes that through the story of Christ it best charts its future. We rejoice in the difference and diversity of gifts among those in the church, as that very diversity is the necessary condition for our faithfulness. Discussion becomes the hallmark of such a society, since recognition and listening to the other is the way our community finds the way of obedience. But the church is radically not democratic if by democratic we mean that no one knows the truth and therefore everyone's opinion counts equally. Christians do not believe that there is no truth; rather truth can only be

The question is what one means by "democracy." "Democracy" is what Stout calls traditions of self-reliant piety, independent thinking, and reasoned dialogue in American society. He has no general name for the kinds of self-interested violence, greed, fragmentation, and despair that he lists as "largely" characterizing American society. Such evils simply appear as an extrinsic force that has somehow gotten mixed up with democracy and threatens to ruin it. Hauerwas calls those latter types of dynamics "liberalism," because he thinks these vices are not unrelated to the prioritizing of freedom (*libertas*) over the good. The problem with Hauerwas's talk of "liberalism" is, as Stout says, "his heavy-handed use of the term 'liberalism' as an all-purpose critical instrument continually reinforces the impression that total rejection is in fact required."²⁶ Nevertheless, the term "liberalism" does allow Hauerwas to identify pathologies in American society that link the things Americans most value and defend with the things that threaten to destroy them. A significant lack in Stout's analysis is that he has no explanation for the coincidence of democracy and the evils of American society that he lists. Stout laments American militarism no less than Hauerwas does, but offers no explanation for how the nation at the center of the democratic experiment came to spend more on its military than all the other nations of the world combined. Hauerwas can point to a connection between liberal universality and the Wilsonian urge to make the world safe for democracy, by military means if necessary. Hauerwas could appeal to George W. Bush's words: "Every nation has learned, or should have learned, an important lesson: Freedom is worth fighting for, dying for, and standing for—and the advance of freedom leads to peace."²⁷ As Colin Dueck's study of American foreign policy has shown,

known through struggle. That is exactly why authority in the church is vested in those we have learned to call saints in recognition of their more complete appropriation of that truth" (Hauerwas, *Community of Character*, 85).

26. Stout, *Democracy and Tradition*, 148.

27. George W. Bush, "Remarks by the President at the 20th Anniversary of the National Endowment for Democracy." Online: <http://www.whitehouse.gov/news/releases/2003/11/20031106-3.html>. Andrew Bacevich's book *American Empire* shows how the impulse to "openness" in politics and markets has provided the ideological fuel for American military adventures from the late 19th century to the present. Andrew Bacevich, *American Empire: The Realities and Consequences of U.S. Diplomacy* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2002). Bacevich's account is given extra weight by the fact that the author, currently a professor of political science at Boston

Americans tend to favor military action "either for liberal reasons, or not at all."²⁸ Likewise, Hauerwas's use of "liberalism" allows him to account for the connection between a society that values freedom above all, and the existence of an enormous, bureaucratic state that oversees and penetrates society at every juncture. Without common goods to which to appeal, legal procedure is necessary to keep self-interested individuals from interfering with each other's freedoms. As Hauerwas puts it, "The bureaucracies in our lives are not simply the result of the complexities of an industrialized society, but a requirement of a social order individualistically organized."²⁹ Stout will rightly object that there is more to American society than self-interest and individualism, and Hauerwas in his more charitable moments would agree. But Stout has not yet offered a way to connect what he identifies as the core of American thinking on public life with the destructive dynamics that he acknowledges so largely characterize American public life.

In this respect, it is Stout's account of democracy that will need to deal with the charge of being too abstract. Hauerwas praises Stout for offering an account of democratic life that is not just state theory, but the almost complete absence of any recognition of the actual role of the state is in fact a weakness in Stout's account. When Stout occasionally mentions the state or nation-state, it is always to criticize its anti-democratic tendencies in favor of more truly participatory forms of political action. But he has not accounted for the existence and growth of the state in the twentieth century, nor does he offer any positive comments about how his ideal democracy would inhabit, oppose, dissolve, or use the state as it currently exists. Hauerwas has wondered why Stout is so worried about Hauerwas's critiques of democracy when in fact they are critiques of the nation-state that both agree is anything but democrat-

ic.³⁰ What Stout is really worried about, however, is that Hauerwas is helping to drain the energy from the religious Left which is needed to oppose the corporate takeover and fragmentation of American democracy.³¹ Stout sees Hauerwas as discouraging participation in democracy. This is true—if democracy is defined in terms of the state. In this sense, Stout, critic of the state's antidemocratic tendencies, seems to see the state as a neutral tool that can be brought back to serve the people. At the very least, Stout has much more work to do to provide a rudimentary account of the relationship between democracy and state, and not simply ignore the state, as if it were an extrinsic factor in considering the failures or hopes of democracy in America, or as if the anti-democratic dynamics of the state were accidental.

The almost complete absence of capitalism from Stout's account is also problematic. It may be that, in his aversion to "ism-mongering," Stout is unwilling to cast aspersions at large abstractions like "capitalism," preferring instead to target specific actions by businesses that are detrimental to society. This type of surgical approach is laudable. The danger, however, is that Stout's account of democracy will be a rarified one, cleansed of any association with free market ideology and practice. It then becomes just a coincidence that democracy and capitalism arose together in the same places at the same times. The plain historical fact is that the ideology and practice of "free" markets is closely related to the ideology and practice of "free" elections. The term "liberalism" allows Hauerwas to make connections between the never-satiated desire of corporations for freedom and the consequent erosion of the real political freedoms of people. Stout's complaints about the corporate erosion of democracy, however fierce, lack teeth because he offers no explanation as to how or why the evils of capitalism happened to get mixed up with democracy.

University, is a retired Army colonel.

28. Colin Dueck, *Reluctant Crusaders: Power, Culture, and Change in American Grand Strategy* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2006) 26.

29. Hauerwas, *Community of Character*, 79. Likewise, Hauerwas writes, "It is now an old, but still compelling, insight that the irony of the American conservative is that the social policies they support in the name of the freedom of the individual necessarily result in the growth of the state. The state becomes the only means we have to perform those functions that liberal values and strategies destroy"; Stanley Hauerwas, *Against the Nations: War and Survival in a Liberal Society* (Minneapolis: Winston, 1985) 124–25.

30. Stanley Hauerwas, *Performing the Faith: Bonhoeffer and the Practice of Nonviolence* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2004) 237 n. 46.

31. "The new traditionalism portrays the religious Left as a mutation of secular liberalism that is infecting the churches like a deadly virus... If the religious Left does not soon recover its energy and self-confidence, it is unlikely that American democracy will be capable of counteracting either the greed of its business elite or the determination of many whites to define the authentic nation in ethnic, racial, or ecclesiastical terms" (Stout, *Democracy and Tradition*, 300).

Stout likewise decries mindless nationalism and militarism, and upholds individual independence and a limited state as his ideal. He defends the freedom of the individual conscience against any attempt to entrust a modern nation-state to define the ultimate object of piety.³² Stout accuses the “neo-traditionalists” of railing against the secularization of liberal society at a time when the secularization thesis of early twentieth-century sociology has been so thoroughly discredited. What Stout overlooks is the critique of civil religion in American society. What many theological critics of America warn against is not the mere absence of “religion” but the presence of idolatry, the replacement of the biblical God with the god of American civil religion. But again, Stout seems unable to give an account of how American democracy happened to get mixed up with a sometimes virulent nationalism. Hauerwas’s appeal to dynamics that he labels “liberalism” allows him to make connections between the nation-state that is limited in theory and that which commands intense and lethal loyalty in practice. Where individual freedoms trump any shared vision of the good, a kind of Romantic attachment to the nation-state as itself the highest good rushes in to fill the vacuum.

The Whole and its Parts

The only kind of nationalism Stout discusses is Black Nationalism, to which the second chapter of his book is devoted. Although he finds Black Nationalism understandable in the light of the historic injustices inflicted on African-Americans, he worries that the kind of separatism advocated by the movement undermines the virtues that are “essential to identification with the civic nation as a whole.”³³ Stout refers repeatedly to “the civic nation,”³⁴ “the democratic community,”³⁵ “the people” and “the body politic” that are threatened with dismemberment.³⁶ According to Stout, “a democratic critic, who serves the people

as a whole, should leave the people whole at the end of the day.”³⁷ It is problematic that “Black Nationalism, like the new traditionalism, reduces the possibility of building large-scale coalitions of the kind needed to achieve large-scale reforms.”³⁸ Stout therefore recommends the approach of James Baldwin, who established an “ironic distance” from both Black Nationalism and his own upbringing in the Christian church, advocating instead a greater sense of individuality in African-Americans.³⁹

Thus does Stout emphasize the civic nation on the one hand and the individual on the other. The ideals of democracy “can achieve political expression only when people learn to think of themselves as individuals while identifying with a broader ethical inheritance and political community.”⁴⁰ Local communities discussing local goods are valuable. “But at the national level it must be the people as a whole, attending to the concerns and well-being of the people as a whole.”⁴¹ Stout hastens to add “The phrase ‘as a whole’ here is not intended to reify the people into something that will itself become the object of mystical attachment or awe.”⁴² He rejects the identification of the civic nation with the nation-state,⁴³ “the massive institutional configuration of the nation-state, of which we should always remain suspicious . . . I am not recommending that we become *preoccupied* with our identities as members of a civic nation.”⁴⁴ He is simply concerned that people will retreat into enclaves and not be capable of identifying with those who are different from themselves. What he does not explain is how the democratic deliberation of “the people as a whole” is to be expressed, if not through the mechanisms of the nation-state.

Stout clearly does not want the ugly side of American nationalism, but he offers no explanation for it, and can only gesture at an ideal “civic nation” as a remedy. Local community is important for Stout; one

32. Stout, *Democracy and Tradition*, 40–41.

33. *Ibid.*, 42.

34. E.g., *ibid.*, 42, 56.

35. E.g., 43.

36. *Ibid.*, 59.

37. *Ibid.*, 59–60.

38. *Ibid.*, 56.

39. *Ibid.*, 50–51.

40. *Ibid.*, 293.

41. *Ibid.*

42. *Ibid.*

43. *Ibid.*, 297.

44. *Ibid.*

of the most interesting and moving parts of his book, in my opinion, is his discussion of his neighborhood and city in the Conclusion.⁴⁵ Nevertheless, "America" is still an important project for Stout, because he needs a whole to which to appeal to keep local kinds of community from becoming ingrown and divisive.

Stout is happy to allow Christians to participate fully as Christians in American society, as long as they accept that they are part of the whole which is American society. As he sees it, the choice for Christians is between a wider embrace of difference in the whole, or a narrow confinement to homogeneity in the part. "But why would I want to confine my *discursive* community to the people who already agree with me on all essential matters?"⁴⁶

The charge of separatism leveled at Hauerwas is of course nothing new. I think the deeper problem for Hauerwas, however, is that he often has implicitly accepted the terms of part and whole that Stout has offered. In his essay "The Politics of Charity," for example, Hauerwas puts the problem in terms of participation or non-participation in society. "For the importance of participation can be appreciated only if there is significant non-participation on the part of Christians. The church must provide the space in society that gives the basis for us to be able to decide to what extent we can involve ourselves in support of our society—in effect, what kinds of citizens we should be."⁴⁷ The idea that the church is a "space in society" sets up the problematic of part and whole to which Stout points. Although Christians are obligated to "have a concern about the societies in which they exist . . . our first object must be to form the church as the society where truth can be spoken without distortion."⁴⁸ This establishing of "the boundaries between the world and the people called Christian"⁴⁹ is for the sake of the world to recognize itself as world, but we must seemingly not hope that the world will be changed, for to do so is to count on our effectiveness. Hauerwas attempts to wean Christians away from the Constantinian

notion that we must be in charge of the whole of history, but in so doing he seems to relegate the church to minority status as a *normative* condition: "What we are offered in Christ is a story that helps us sustain the task of charity in a world where it can never be successful."⁵⁰

In his later work, Hauerwas has tried to address the problems with this position, most notably perhaps in his embrace of a kind of Constantinianism in his 1995 essay "What Could It Mean for the Church to Be Christ's Body?: A Question without a Clear Answer." Upon seeing an entire Irish village called Sneem shut down businesses and turn out to celebrate its children's first communion in the public square, Hauerwas remarks, "If this is Constantinianism, I rather like it."⁵¹ What Hauerwas likes most about it is the physical and visible nature of a Christianity that has not been spiritualized. But what separates Sneem from the Mennonite and Jewish communities that Hauerwas extols is the fact that the *whole* village is there. Hauerwas acknowledges this fact obliquely when he says that he wants to remind American Christians that the church is itself an "imperialistic polity" meant to resist the imperialism of the United States. The church is to be "a body constituted by disciplines that create the capacity to resist the disciplines of the body associated with the modern nation-state." What Hauerwas does not acknowledge is that the snug relationship between church and state in Ireland, currently unraveling, is what makes or made Sneem possible. Through its alliance with the state, the church was able to make many of its own practices obligatory in Irish society, and the church became part of the coercive apparatus of the state in sometimes appalling ways, as the recently released Ryan Report has documented.⁵² Hauerwas is searching for ways to articulate how the church can neither retreat to a part nor rule the whole, but the example of Sneem creates more problems than it solves. The best Hauerwas can do in this essay is to say what the church is not: it is not communitarian, it is not spiritual-

45. Ibid., 287–308.

46. Ibid., 299.

47. Stanley Hauerwas, *Truthfulness and Tragedy: Further Investigations into Christian Ethics* (Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press, 1977) 143.

48. Ibid., 141.

49. Ibid., 140.

50. Ibid., 138.

51. Hauerwas, *In Good Company*, 20.

52. The Ryan Report is the official document of the Commission to Inquire into Child Abuse in Ireland. The Report, released in May 2009, documents thousands of cases of abuse by clergy of children handed over to the care of Catholic religious orders by the state.

ized, it is neither *polis* nor *oikos* (though he calls the church a *polis* in the introduction to the book in which this essay appears).⁵³

Complex Space

If neither of these two essays articulates a satisfactory “position” of the church with regard to politics, it is in part because Hauerwas at his best has not wanted to stake out the church’s “space” in the world. The logic of the cross is an unsettled and unsettling logic, running close to both the “Constantinian” urge to claim Jesus’s Lordship over all creation and the “sectarian” refusal to be implicated in the violence of making sure history comes out right. But Hauerwas has often lacked a way of articulating the complexity of space in such a way as to present a positive account of the church’s political life; church as enclave or church as *polis* are equally unsatisfactory. I find Hauerwas’s book of conversations with the non-Christian “radical democrat” Romand Coles to be the most satisfying articulation of Hauerwas’s politics to date, because Coles gives Hauerwas a way of talking about the church that refuses the oscillation between parts and the whole.

Coles defines radical democracy as “political acts of tending to common goods and differences.”⁵⁴ These acts always exceed our pre-suppositions and institutional forms, and especially exceed state formations, despite the latter’s claim to be the exemplary form of democracy. The term “radical” is used only because “democracy” by itself has been so commonly used as an anti-democratic weapon by the nation-state. In this book, Hauerwas and Coles assume, as does Stout, that the nation-state is to be regarded with suspicion as an imaginary commonly used to block democratic aspirations. Radical democracy, however, goes beyond Stout’s notion that there is a whole, a civic nation, to which democratic aspirations refer. There is not “the people as a whole,” as in Stout’s phrase, but rather “a multitude of peoples enacting myriad forms

of the politics of the radical ordinary.”⁵⁵ There is no simple space in which to organize and adjudicate difference; “democracy has no stable ‘table’ around which differences can be gathered.”⁵⁶ The parts do not simply feed into the whole. For this reason, localism is not encouraged for its own sake, but must always be refracted through complex translocal connections. Drawing on the work of Sheldon Wolin, Coles calls for combining localism with “attentiveness to difference and insurgent publics on a variety of larger scales that oppose the megastate and global capital, and gradually seek institutions of ‘rational disorganization’ that might de-center, disperse, and devolve their gargantuan organizational powers.”⁵⁷ Coles gives a number of examples of how such plural spaces are being generated by worker-owned firms, community coalitions, the Industrial Areas Foundation, Community Development Corporations, and others. The aspiration is much more complex than appeals to the civic nation. Coles acknowledges that “America” has sometimes been used to name radical aspirations, as in some forms of abolitionism, labor organizing, and the civil rights movement. Nevertheless, such appeals to an ideal of America “greatly risk succumbing to the salvific dream of America, and many have, in ways that have gotten very ugly.”⁵⁸ Coles recognizes that “the more dominant ‘America’ is by its own definition a jealous and proprietary secular god that wants to exclude and/or subordinate all other attachments.”⁵⁹ Any attempt to resist and disperse the anti-democratic tendencies of the nation-state will therefore also need to disperse the imagination of one whole national community. Stout, for example, claims that Dorothy Day was concerned for the American project in the same way as Thoreau. But for her, the body of Christ was the whole, not merely a rival *polis*, refracted through local Eucharistic communities of hospitality linked only by loosely organized bonds of charity. This is much closer to Coles’ vision of complex space than to Stout’s insistence on the priority of the whole society.

According to Coles, after speaking on behalf of the grassroots efforts of the Industrial Areas Foundation, Hauerwas told him, “What I’ve

55. *Ibid.*, 8.

56. *Ibid.*, 19.

57. *Ibid.*, 150.

58. *Ibid.*, 339.

59. *Ibid.*, 338.

53. Hauerwas, *In Good Company*, 8. The subtitle of the book is also “The Church as Polis.”

54. Stanley Hauerwas and Romand Coles, *Christianity, Democracy, and the Radical Ordinary: Conversations between a Radical Democrat and a Christian*, Theopolitical Visions 1 (Eugene, OR: Cascade Books, 2008) 3 n. 4.

been trying to do all along is to *make the church worthy* of participating in the kind of political relationships sought by IAF.⁶⁰ Hauerwas might contend that he has been saying the same thing all along, but radical democracy does seem to have given Hauerwas ways of more adequately conceptualizing how the church might enact the politics of Jesus without needing to adopt any position at all vis-à-vis “wider society.” Wider society, America, nation-state, civic nation—all are imaginative projects that oversimplify the complexity of political space. Hauerwas has long been concerned with local forms of church that resist the dominant myths of America. What he has sometimes struggled to articulate is how those forms of church can be seen as doing more than resisting or participating in the dominant society, and how they can be seen as participating in other networks of connectivity that leave the imagination of a dominant society behind. Coles helps Hauerwas see that church is not simply about “smaller politics.” When Hauerwas makes such a contention in the conclusion of the book, Coles quickly urges him to acknowledge that the politics both seek is in fact more expansive than the nation-state, and cites Mennonite cross-border missionary work as an example.

What we are saying, it seems to me, is that specificity and enduring relationships of tending, and a sense for the complexities and nuances of distinct places and histories, are elemental aspects of the kind of politics we endorse. These are most often less difficult in localities. But they can be cultivated in painstaking ways on other scales too. And they should not be conceived as a barrier against larger scales but rather as the sites and practices without which people will likely lack the experiences, relationships, and knowledge necessary to inhabit larger scales without succumbing to “seeing like a state,” or like a Walmart, or like an NGO that has lost receptive contact with people beyond its staff.⁶¹

60. Stanley Hauerwas, quoted in Romand Coles, “Democracy, Theology, and the Question of Excess: A Review of Jeffrey Stout’s *Democracy & Tradition*,” *Modern Theology* 21 (2005) 312.

61. Hauerwas and Coles, *Christianity, Democracy*, 341. “Seeing like a state” refers to the title of James Scott’s book on how state’s simplify and read political space; James C. Scott, *Seeing Like a State: How Certain Schemes to Improve the Human Condition Have Failed* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1998).

If Hauerwas could write like this consistently, the charge of “sectarianism,” which depends on a simple view of political space, might disappear.

The Church and Radical Democracy

This is not to say, however, that Hauerwas need only sign up as a radical democrat and all his problems will be solved. Significant differences remain between Hauerwas and Coles. Coles worries that Hauerwas, in trying to build up the church’s politics, has not done enough to embody habits of receptive generosity. Hauerwas claims he learns from radical democrats, but, Coles asks, what has he really received from them if what he has learned is that Christians were radical democrats all along?⁶² Hauerwas says that the church is at the service of the world and is open to learning from the world, but Coles worries that Hauerwas has not done enough to cultivate a sense of the radical insufficiency of the church. The church seems to have its identity constituted prior to its encounter with the world, instead of being constituted in part by its very encounters with others.⁶³ Hauerwas tries to answer Coles’ worries about lingering Constantinianism by saying, “I have long argued that neither Yoder nor I are ‘sectarians.’ We are rather theocrats. It is just very hard to rule when you are committed to nonviolence. But we are willing to try. ‘Try,’ however, means that politics is always a matter of persuasion.”⁶⁴ Coles, however, does not think that the problems with ruling, of having “handles on history,” go away with renouncing violence. Shopping malls are not violent, but nevertheless seek total rule over human desire for baleful ends.⁶⁵ Again, Hauerwas is not entirely successful in struggling to escape the dichotomy of sectarianism and rule.

Coles acknowledges that Hauerwas, especially in his calls for non-violence and his writings about the mentally handicapped, has stressed the importance of vulnerability, but Coles is concerned that Hauerwas’s vulnerability is sometimes based on a prior conviction that there is a

62. Hauerwas and Coles, *Christianity, Democracy*, 35.

63. *Ibid.*, 35–42, 210–12.

64. *Ibid.*, 22 n.5.

65. *Ibid.*, 39–40.

prior orthodoxy that ensures that we get the story straight. But radical democracy meets the other unsure of what will become of one's story in the encounter. Coles imagines a true encounter between Christians and Native Americans in which one story does not try to incorporate the other. "What if the development of the Christian story ends up being the development of one among other things—say, the Nez Perce/Lakota/Christian story—such that each of these narratives is profoundly *thrown out of joint*, out of narrative structure, even out of an improvisational narrative structure, and what develops comes to be seen as essentially unexpected newness born of an unexpected encounter?"⁶⁶

Hauerwas, however, thinks some account of orthodoxy is necessary. "I have assumed that 'orthodoxy' but names the developments across time that the church has found necessary for keeping the story of Jesus straight. Therefore, rather than being the denial of radical democracy, orthodoxy is the exemplification of the training necessary for the formation of a people who are not only capable of working for justice, but who are themselves just."⁶⁷ Formation and habits are crucial themes in the book, as in all of Hauerwas's work. Hauerwas is worried that without strong communities capable of forming character there will be none of the saints that both Coles and Hauerwas hold up as examples throughout the book. "I emphasize the significance of the church because I fear that the devastated character of the church in our time will be unable to produce the Will Campbells, the Ella Bakers, the Martin Luther Kings, the Bob Moseses."⁶⁸ Although he doesn't say so explicitly, Hauerwas is worried that the radical vulnerability that Coles wants can easily slide into the kind of ironic distance from all traditions that is already the hallmark of the postmodern subject. Christians who enter every encounter with another ready to throw orthodoxy out of joint lack the steadfastness and fierceness of the saints. Saints are those who are entirely vulnerable to the will of God, but those kinds of people are produced in communities that are able to keep the faith steadfastly and pass it down over time, or to put that in terms of of which Hauerwas

might approve, communities of people who have brought the same casserole to every funeral luncheon for the last twenty-six years. Coles recognizes the importance of habit for resisting the tyranny of power, though he tends to situate habit within a kind of fugitive revolution, habituating where things are working better, but disrupting habit where mobilization is called for.⁶⁹ Hauerwas holds habit in high esteem, but backs away from claims of narrative completeness. "So it's not like the gospel is some grand story that helps me get the world straight. It is a story that helps me discover who I should worship."⁷⁰

Worship perhaps marks the most significant difference between Hauerwas and Coles. Coles acknowledges the importance of liturgies for radical democracy—by which he means body practices that express gifts and habituate people to generosity, patience, courage, and so on⁷¹—but worship is not in Coles' vocabulary. Coles is suspicious of the proclamation of Jesus as Lord, fearing that there may be a link between the pre-Constantinian "fidelity to the jealousy of Christ as Lord" and post-Constantinian modes of rule.⁷² Hauerwas, however, insists that we begin and end with the reality of God, and he worries that radical democracy "can become an end in itself, and end to which God becomes an afterthought."⁷³ When Rowan Williams says "Real life in Christ requires us to look death in the face," Coles adds "Real life in radical democracy."⁷⁴ For Hauerwas, however, Christ and radical democracy cannot be symmetrically related, because Christ is the goal and radical democracy is a process.

Coles mitigates his concern with the language of Christ as "Lord" and "Victor" by construing Christ in an anti-teleological way, through a reading of Williams' reading of Mark. According to Williams, Mark undoes any attempts to make Jesus Christ the guarantee of success; "there can be *no* simple assurance of final victory."⁷⁵ Coles takes this to mean that what we see in the incarnation, crucifixion, and resur-

66. Ibid., 43.

67. Ibid., 30.

68. Ibid., 111. In the same vein, Hauerwas writes, "What bothers me a bit about the Wolinian fugitive character of democracy is that I don't know who is going to carry that story across time."

69. See *ibid.*, esp. chapter 6, 113–73.

70. Ibid., 342.

71. Ibid., 323.

72. Ibid., 22.

73. Ibid., 111.

74. Ibid., 193.

75. Ibid., 180. The quote is from Williams, but Coles italicizes the "no."

rection of Christ is “not the *object* of our hope (an ordered and secure topography in the form of his resurrected body) but the vulnerable *way* of radical hope (in which his body is disordered in crucifixion and is disordered in new ways with his resurrection).”⁷⁶ What Coles is trying to do with this distinction between object and way is to deny any sense of closure that would cut off Christian receptiveness to the other. Even a far-off eschatological imagining of peace as harmonious difference does not satisfy Coles, for whom “the radical-democratic ordinary is inherently tensional in a way that not only opposes antidemocratic powers that transcend it, but is endlessly agonistic in relation to itself.”⁷⁷ The church too must be hospitable to conflict if it is to remain penitent and therefore faithful to Christ. Those who want to follow Christ the way must always recognize that Christ is an exile from their own communities. Any eschatological imagining of peace therefore must remain tensional. Peace is not an end state but a peacemaking in and as conflict and tension, forged in generous receptivity.⁷⁸

It is not clear how far a Christian can go with Coles here. Although Coles avoids any appeal to tragedy as a way of resignation to conflict, he is equally wary of comic appeals to history neatly wrapped up in the triumph of Christ. In Hauerwas, however, a comic note does appear in his appeal to rest. “Because we believe that the end has come, through the death and resurrection of Jesus we see what God would have us to be; it means that as Christians, we can live eschatologically. To so live means that we don’t have to live in a way to make sure that God’s purpose comes out all right. We can rest easy in God’s creation . . .”⁷⁹ Rest is as central to Hauerwas’s conception of peace as tension is to Coles’s; because we can rest assured that God has triumphed, we don’t have to try to triumph over others. This is the kind of rest which resists closure; we don’t have to know *how* God has triumphed, how the story will come out.

It is not clear how Coles’ denial that Christ is the object of our hope could allow for the worship of Christ. For Hauerwas, however,

worship is key to knowing, as he puts it, that “God is God, and I ain’t.”⁸⁰ It helps to realize that knowing that God is God, and that Christ is God, is not the same as knowing how God is God. Worship is a posture of ultimate vulnerability, acknowledging the difference between Creator and creature, and therefore the reality of one’s own death. When and where worship has not simply become debased self-worship, it has the potential of awakening a person to his or her radical dependency on the source of being. It is there that a politics of vulnerability begins. But the other side of the vulnerability of worship is the confidence that some One is ruling the universe, and peace is not accomplished by human striving. Hence the words of the Psalm: “Be still, and know that I am God” (Ps 46:10). It is God who “makes wars cease to the end of the earth” (Ps 46:9). Violence is a function of forgetting that God is God, and I ain’t.

Conclusion

Stanley Hauerwas has tended to avoid democratic language largely because of the way it has been associated with imperialism and with identifying the will of an elite with the will of the people. Jeffrey Stout and Romand Coles have done a great deal to rescue the language of democracy from the nation-state, and associate it with virtues of dialogical engagement and receptive generosity. Hauerwas’s engagements with Stout and Coles have allowed him to find common ground between the political aspirations of non-Christians and the politics of Jesus that he has long sought. Insofar as “democracy” indicates the rule of the *demos*, however, a gap remains between democrats and those who believe that God rules. The good news, however, is that to worship the God who rules in the Crucified One can and should make Christians vulnerable to those who don’t.

76. Ibid., 180–81.

77. Ibid., 171.

78. Ibid., 186–89.

79. Ibid., 342.

80. Ibid.