Response to Stanley Hauerwas, "A Worldly Church"

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BY PETER J. CASARELLA

Responding to a thinker with the originality of Stanley Hauerwas is no small feat, but the idea of engaging the Rahnerian side that he shares with the reader in the present essay presents me with an altogether new challenge. I would like to highlight this and other points in his essay, which took me by surprise and to respond to these surprising points by raising two questions that they bring to mind.

I. Stanley Hauerwas’ Rahnerian Side and Other Surprising Discoveries

One of Professor Hauerwas’ central claims in his essay is expressed conditionally; namely, he tells us that “if a good in common can be located to sustain a common morality, we will need the church.”¹ Thus, he acknowledges that locating the common good in the midst of our current global age is no simple matter. In support of the need for this acknowledgement, Hauerwas cites Karl Rahner as well as Alisdair MacIntyre. Contrary to the common perception of Rahner as a Catholic defender of a quasi neo-Kantian, universal morality, Hauerwas brings to light Rahner’s nascent post-colonialism. Hauerwas documents his staunch insistence that the new globalization being faced by a now diasporic Catholic Church will require greater attention to the plurality of vernacular languages being spoken.² Hauerwas rightly intuits that this insight is not just about liturgical reform, but about the very nature of the common good. According to Hauerwas, MacIntyre, for his part, buttresses Rahner’s claim that distrust of a moral framework, which presupposes or builds upon globalized homogeneity, is warranted. He is willing to draw assistance from MacIntyre, notwithstanding what Hauerwas identifies as MacIntyre’s overly immanentist conception of history.³ Interestingly, neither Hauerwas nor MacIntyre dismisses the notion of the common good. Rather, MacIntyre’s skepticism as conveyed by Hauerwas is directed towards chimerical attempts to locate a common morality apart from the concrete practices of local communities.⁴ Hauerwas, for his part, expresses a parallel caution regarding Cardinal Angelo Scola’s invocation of a system of ethics based on the triad of formal concepts: desire, recognition, and communion.⁵

¹ Professor of Catholic Studies, DePaul University.
² Stanley Hauerwas, A Worldly Church: Politics, A Theology of the Church, and the Common Good, ante, p. 448 (emphasis added).
³ Id. at 450-51.
⁴ Id. at 452.
⁵ Id.
What else took me by surprise? In Hauerwas’ presentation, it is Rahner—not Maclntyre and not the pope—who invokes St. Benedict as a model Christian ethicist, and it is Maclntyre who is not urging any retreat from large-scale local governments, nation states, or market economies. Hauerwas’ point is, thus, fairly modest and offered in very generous terms. Contrary to what liberal theorists of democratic politics sometimes suggest, Hauerwas argues that “plain people,” dedicated to truthfulness and versed in the practical dictates of reason itself, need to garner and share their virtues on a scale that is recognizable human—namely, in terms sustainable by local communities that are conversing plainly and freely within their own locality.\(^6\) The modest point seems to be that no politics can ever be either effective or truly representative of the common good without a consideration of the local variability that co-determines character formation—which is in some sense distinct from the formation of a local identity.\(^7\) Acknowledging discursive localities does not engender relativism. Hauerwas states, “standards of natural law, such as those articulated by Thomas Aquinas, make possible [the] ability [of discursive localities] to learn from and with each other.”\(^8\)

Hauerwas underscores the necessary tension that must exist between the church as an expression of local politics—what Rahner calls “diversity of the regional liturgies”—and the church as a community commissioned by Christ to spread the Gospel to all the nations.\(^9\) Any natural law ethic—here, the target of Hauerwas’ criticism is a recent defense of natural law by Joseph Boyle\(^10\)—that bifurcates the location of a common morality from the witness of the church will ultimately fail to gain any traction in a world in which diverse vernaculars for articulating moral norms are increasing. Advocates of a global society, Hauerwas concludes, would do well to consider the way in which Christians, who are committed to the church, have already grasped an account of the oneness of the world through the story that begins with God’s creation of the world.\(^11\) Through Christ, God’s own story engages a community of disciples in the very struggle of human existence. To that degree, the common morality practiced by the Christian community known as the church can never be understood as a merely sectarian reality. That, so far as I can tell, is the basic argument of Hauerwas’ presentation.

II. My Response: The Relevance of Catholicity and of a Universality of Language

My first point in response is to affirm the Catholicity of Hauerwas’ approach to Christian ethics. He has stated as much in his recent writings, but this claim might be seen as contradictory or even disingenuous for a thinker saddled with the sectarian

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\(^6\) Hauerwas, \textit{supra} note 1, at 454.
\(^7\) \textit{Id.}
\(^8\) \textit{Id.}
\(^9\) \textit{Id.} at 458.
\(^10\) \textit{Id.} at 461.
\(^11\) \textit{Id.}
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However, on the basis of his essay here and his other writings, I am convinced not only that he intends to be Catholic but also that his approach to Christian ethics is Catholic.

These days Catholicity is in the eye of the beholder. Let me explain what I mean by the term and how it applies to Hauerwas’ ethics. In a 2008 Amnesty International Lecture at Oxford, Pentecost: Learning the Language of Peace, Hauerwas had this to say about Catholicity:

The Christian word for universality is Catholic. Indeed that way of putting the matter can be misleading because it gives the impression that catholic is but another way to say universal. But Catholic is not the name of a logical category or a philosophical position. It is the name of a people sent into the world to discover places and people whose difference is a necessary condition for self-recognition. What the people called ‘Catholic’ have to offer is the patience and humility learned through the story called ‘Gospel’ that teaches us how to live at peace when we are not able to write the history of mankind.

Catholic is a term that was used prior to the rise of Christianity in Greek mathematics as a logical category. Still, Catholicity as it applies to ethics should not be separated from the witness of the people sent into the world with a mission to spread the Gospel. Ideally, these people are recognized by their commitment to Christ and, inter alia, by a form of hospitality that stands in marked contrast to the xenophobia that grips many individuals and even local communities. In this sense, the living witness to a Catholic ethics surely needs the church as its self-examining standard bearer. To this degree, the notion of catholicity espoused by Hauerwas—the reborn Rahnerian—is exactly that of Gaudium et Spes: the living communion of the church is a humble witness to greater solidarity in the world.

My second point relates to the following assertion by Hauerwas: “Such politics [i.e., MacIntyre’s account of the common good] requires a shared culture in which the citizens share at least one language.” Hauerwas quickly clarifies that he is not critiquing multilingual societies nor advocating a Romantic nationalism—“[s]uch politics cannot be identified with a Volk.” In other words, the single common language is the condition for the possibility of a discourse that allows individuals to share their rival narratives about authority and order in the polis. Without it, their capacity to be a polis seems to be called into question. In the recent Amnesty International Lecture, Hauerwas unpacks the idea of what he means by a single language. In short, the Gospel of Jesus Christ offers a witness to peace that through the Wittgensteinian Thomism of Herbert McCabe can be seen as an illumination of

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12 Id. at 447, 447-61.
13 Stanley Hauerwas, Pentecost: Learning the Language of Peace, Remarks at the Amnesty International Lecture at Oxford University (Feb. 20, 2008).
14 SECOND VATICAN COUNCIL, GAUDIUM ET SPES (On the Church in the Modern World) 3, 6.
our shared bodily natures. It should be noted that John Paul II, in *The Redeemer of Man*, also spoke about the Incarnation as a new language and that Pope Benedict XVI has recently revived the language of a performative deed to describe the event of Jesus Christ.

III. Conclusion

I would like to conclude by commenting in further detail on my second point in response to Professor Hauerwas. My question in connection to this second point concerns the need to recognize the pitfalls of a “Christological narrowing” (Hans Urs von Balthasar) when it comes to articulating the single language needed to sustain the polis. Given that we are embodied in multilingual societies, this language is going to be translated into distinct vernaculars even when its source is the embodied Gospel. That much is acceptable in Hauerwas’ Vatican II ethics. But I believe that his reliance on a Christian discourse as the overarching grammar for these vernaculars is theoretically questionable. To illustrate the problem, I will conclude by making two relevant observations. First, Pope Benedict, in *Truth and Tolerance*, draws upon Hans Jonas’ principle of responsibility as a source for a common morality. I know that Hauerwas has expressed a healthy skepticism about the overly European caste to the pope’s defense of public reason; however, I still think that Pope Benedict’s appeal to a philosophical principle of responsibility makes his plea for tolerance in the midst of—what he has famously termed—a dictatorship of relativism much more compelling and universal than one based solely on a distinctively Christian ethic. Second, counter to Hauerwas’ criticism of Cardinal Scola’s moral methodology, I find Cardinal Scola, at least in his reliance on Hans Urs von Balthasar’s use of the smile of a mother, to be convincing and to provide a helpful clue overlooked by Hauerwas in his constructive effort at a Worldly Church.

For von Balthasar, the smile is body language. Once the newborn can perceive a visage, that child connects a voice known already with a face, and that appearance is an epiphany. The smile is supposed to teach us that there are natural analogues for the revelation of Jesus Christ built into the very structure of the cosmos. The smile conveys to the child a personal message about what the child has been given. The child has an elementary experience of gratitude, for in that brief moment the child knows that she is welcome.


19 POPE JOHN PAUL II REDEMPTOR HOMINIS [THE REDEEMER OF MAN] § 8 (1979); POPE BENEDICT XVI, SPE SALVI [IN HOPE WE WERE SAVED] ¶ 2 (2007) (teaching “the Christian message was not only ‘informative’ but ‘performative’”).


22 HANS URS VON BALTHASAR, My Work: In Retrospect 114 (Brian McNeil trans., 1993).