

# HAUERWAS V. HAUERWAS V. HAUERWAS

Review of *Sanctify Them In the Truth: Holiness Exemplified* by Stanley Hauerwas

J. Budziszewski

*First Things* 98 (1999)

In one sense this is a postmodern book. I don't mean precisely that it propounds postmodernism; rather I mean that it is the kind of thing one would expect all books to be if postmodernism, despite itself, were true. For according to postmodernists, there is no such thing as an author who keeps his identity beneath his changing masks; signs like "author" and "self" merely "name our attempt ... to name the play of the languages that speak through us." And that is something like what one finds in *Sanctify Them in the Truth*: Not one Hauerwas, but a succession of Hauerwasses, different every few pages, sometimes different on the same page. "I do not write to encourage anyone ever to think that they 'have gotten Hauerwas,'" says one of them (I don't know which, but he speaks on page 7). "I write to make those who read me work at least as hard as I have worked."

In this he has succeeded. There are just too many of him; I cannot make him say where he stands. At least one of him would chide me for even trying, as I know because he chides himself in the same way: After criticizing another writer for lacking confidence in the modern "self" but having no alternative, he remarks, "I worry that my attempt to make [him] say where he stands is itself a modernist stance."

But that cannot be the end of the story. After all, the Hauerwasses of other chapters make other writers say where they stand -- Thomas Aquinas, Martin Luther, John Wesley. Besides, the Hauerwas of one chapter says there is such a thing as personal agency (and in that sense, apparently, a "self") after all. He defines agency retrospectively rather than prospectively, as the set of skills by which "we" make "our" past our own. Well, then: If "they," the Hauerwasses, cannot be blamed for trying to make "their" past their own, then neither can I. In trying to make them all part of the same story, I am only being faithful to the standards which constitute the practice of criticism.

It is just that I cannot do it. I can make them part of the same story all right, but there is a knot in the plot-line that cannot be untied unless at least one of the Hauerwasses gives in.

The three Hauerwasses who figure most prominent in the narrative I call Messrs. A, B, and C. Mr. A is a historicist, but not a relativist. I like him and am greatly in his debt for what I have learned from him. It is not an egoistic intrusion for me to say so, because according to Mr. A one never fully understands something until he has imagined what

difference it makes in his own life. My life is shaped largely by trying to come to terms with what the New Testament calls the "law written on the heart" and philosophers call the "natural law" -- something that might not be thought to lend itself to description in historical terms at all, because it is the same for everyone in every time and place, its core consisting of foundational moral principles we *can't not know*. As a natural lawyer, I approach life with the assumption that although what we call sin is plainly factual, what we call moral ignorance is rarely what it appears to be; the heart conceals its own inscription.

How would Mr. A converse with a natural lawyer? Though not quite convinced by the idea of natural law himself, he is sympathetic to it. Even so he would remind us that what we can't not know must be mediated to us by tradition. If we can't not know it (I may ask), then why must it be mediated to us? Mr. A would answer the question with another. Have I not confessed that knowledge comes in many kinds and levels? Why, yes. Have I not in fact insisted that it can be not only acknowledged but also denied, not only grasped but yet in pieces? Yes indeed. Then do you not see (he would continue) that a man needs to be *told* what he already knows even to know that he knows it -- that he needs to be *practiced* in what he knows even in order to appropriate it?

And if that is so, then see what follows: The stories and ritual performances which more or less adequately explain to a man what he already knows, and which more or less adequately rehearse him in his own nature, are anything but redundant. They make a difference we might never have dreamt from the bare formula "written on the heart." To be sure, they do not matter in the same way they would matter if there were nothing written there, for in such a world tradition would be all there is. But they do not matter less, only differently.

Of course I might protest that in their way, natural lawyers have known these things all along. Like Alasdair MacIntyre, Mr. A has retold in the lingo of "narratives" and "traditions" what the older thinkers had already explained in the lingo of "habituations" and "connaturality." Indeed, Mr. A admits as much himself, calling theology and philosophy disciplines in which there is "nothing new to learn" because all of the "data" are in; the problem, he says, is not to get more but to understand what we have got. Viewed that way, Mr. A performs a service just by bringing the background into the foreground and pushing the foreground into the background. The lighting is all rearranged, so we see old things as though new.

Mr. B is a Methodist preacher of the old school. At the same time both "evangelical" and "Catholic," he not only "stake[s] out strong positions" but takes responsibility for them. Defining preaching as "proclamation" of truths which may be just as "painful" for the preacher as for the congregation, he nevertheless declares that the church "stands joyfully under the authority of the Word," of the Scriptures, adding that the creeds are "normative boundaries" for Christian reflection on the high matters which they address.

Most distinctive about Mr. B is his insistence on a trio of denials. First, he denies

that Christianity is a generalized account of things, which can be understood apart from the story of the call of Israel and the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus Christ. The aim of Mr. B is to write about Christian ethics in a way that would be "unintelligible" if these things did not happen or the God of Jesus did not exist. Second, he denies that Christian doctrine is head knowledge dissociated from the way people actually live in the community which God has called into being. If a doctrine like the Trinity or the Incarnation has no purchase on things like whom we sleep with or how we make our money, then Mr. B says we do not understand it. Third, he denies that bodily actions can be "spiritualized" -- subjected to "infinite redescription" -- as though they had no meanings besides those we give them. Although the stories which shape us are inexhaustible and can be told in different ways, that does not mean that we can tell them in any way we please. If I try to tell the story in such a way that lust is "love" or the piling up of wealth is to the "glory of God," then I am lying.

Mr. B gets along well with Mr. A and makes good use of his teachings. In the first place it turns out that what we can't not know is truly and adequately mediated to us not by just any tradition, but by the very Word of God; the narrative of God's dealings with His people is the sole context in which the writing on the heart makes perfect sense. In the second place it turns out that sacred story itself must be mediated; it becomes real to us as it is heard in the lectionary, enacted in the liturgy, and embodied in ethical practices like Christian marriage. The hope of the church is to come to live again like peasant Catholics, our bodies shaped and our habits determined "in such a way that the worship of God is unavoidable."

At last we come to Mr. C, whose relation to Messrs. A and B is most charitably described as that of an "evil twin." What makes Mr. C possible is that the most striking formulations of Messrs. A and B are not merely vigorous but equivocal. They can be read in the way I have been describing, but they can also be read in a radically different way.

For example, the book does not actually say that we do not fully understand doctrine until it is embodied in the practices of the church (the view I attribute to Mr. B). Rather it offers the more elusive remark that doctrine cannot be "separated" from the practices of the church. This idea can be taken to mean that doctrine *has* no meaning until it is embodied in the practices of the church, and that turns out to be the meaning that Mr. C prefers. As if that were not enough, the idea is further radicalized by his claim that the only way to identify the practices of "the Church" is to see what goes on in "actual churches." The remark sounds innocent, even tautologous, until one realizes that Mr. C explains neither how to know when a practice has been perverted, nor how to tell what counts as church. The problem is not that he is an evangelical Catholic, but that he is neither evangelical nor Catholic.

The upshot of this sort of thing is that although Mr. C seems to resemble Messrs. A and B, and even reminds us what they say, he actually takes back everything they teach. Rather than standing joyfully under the authority of the Scripture, he relativizes it; rather than rejecting infinite redescription, he practices it; perhaps most surprising of all, rather than

emphasizing the embodiment of Christian practices he ignores the body altogether. That is "spiritualizing" with a vengeance.

All three tendencies come to a head in his discussion of homosexuality. Pivotal to the discussion is a second-hand story about some friends of a friend who are said to be sexually active lesbians. Mr. C posits that they are "virtuous" and "committed" Roman Catholics, but of course that massively begs the question. In a footnote he admits that their description as good Catholics "must be complex," but "ask[s] in the name of charity that their story be accepted in good faith." This merely compounds the fallacy. Charity can ground an appeal for mercy toward sin, but it cannot ground an appeal not to regard something as sinful.

As to the problem of relativizing Scripture, Mr. C alludes to the orthodox hermeneutical principle that "the more obscure texts should be read in the light of the less obscure," but gives it a decidedly unorthodox meaning. The two "texts" that he has in mind are evidently what St. Paul says to the early church in Rome, and what the two lesbians say to his friend's church in North Carolina. Mr. C would have us understand that when Paul says "No" his meaning is obscure, but when the lesbians say "Yes" their meaning is plain. The upshot is that Scripture stands under the authority of what we do, rather than what we do standing under the authority of Scripture.

As to the problem of infinite redescription, Mr. C hopes that we can make "disagreement" less "intractable" by engaging in a "thick description" of the Christian life, its virtues, and the practices which these virtues make intelligible. If he supposes that disagreements over competing thick descriptions will be less intractable than disagreements over whether Paul's "No" means "No," I think he will be disappointed. In the end he does not provide a thick description of homosexual relations anyway, but only a thin analogy, complaining "I do not see why we cannot view" gay link-ups as something like marriage.

The tradition, of course, provides several reasons why. In the first place, conjugal union is achieved through the complementarity of the man and woman, not their sameness -- the sexual reinforcement of identicals merely unhinges them. In the second place, conjugal sex cooperates with the fertility of our bodies rather than opposing it. Mr. C. completely ignores the former point. The second he sidesteps, on grounds that procreation is merely a special case of the church's duty of hospitality to strangers. The best commentary on this point comes from a Christian mother who instantly exclaimed, "But babies aren't strangers!" Just so.

As to the problem of spiritualizing, it is enough to say that only with the greatest reluctance does Mr. C. admit that homosexuality has anything to do with sex at all; for precisely this reason he does not even like the term "homosexuality." Preferring to speak of the practice of marriage as though it were ungendered, he would have us think of husbands and wives as just "friends." Let us face it: Not every kind of friendship is improved by being sexualized, and the "friendship" of sexual polar opposites is unique. If Mr. C cannot

grasp that point, I would like him to try a "thick description" of the practices that constitute emergency room care when homosexuals must be treated for doing things that manifestly violate their bodily design. He might also read the footnote in which Messrs. A and B compliment Pamela Hall for her insight that in the narrative of Scripture, Thomas Aquinas finds "a history of what happens to human beings when they thwart the teleology of their natures."

The best thing that could happen would be for Messrs. A and B to get together and convert Mr. C. I don't know what would happen in the story next, but I think it might be spectacular.