

# Stanley Hauerwas: Against Secularization in the Church

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In May 2007, theologian Stanley Hauerwas addressed a packed audience at Princeton Theological Seminary.<sup>1</sup> Frowning behind his glasses, Hauerwas began his talk by firing a volley of uncomfortable questions: “How many of you worship in a church with an American flag? I am sorry to tell you your salvation is in doubt. How many of you worship in a church in which the Fourth of July is celebrated? I am sorry to tell you your salvation is in doubt. How many of you worship in a church that recognizes Thanksgiving? I am sorry to tell you your salvation is in doubt.” And so the speaker went on, to the consternation and amusement of his audience, ending his accusations, less than two weeks before Mother’s Day, with the timely question: “How many of you worship in a church that recognizes ‘Mother’s Day’? I am sorry to tell you your salvation is in doubt.”<sup>2</sup>

These words seem characteristic, not merely of Hauerwas’s polemical style and fondness for hyperbolic metaphors, but also of the American context in which the theologian operates. Hauerwas is an American theologian, engaged in American debates, and always addressing American audiences or, as I shall argue, American Christians who, in Hauerwas’s assessment, better know how to be American than how to be Christian. This is not just an incidental circumstance. If he identifies himself, tongue

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1 I should like to thank the conference organizers for their kind invitation to deliver this address and the audience, including in particular Ariaan Baan, Gerard den Hertog, Kees van der Kooi, Rinse Reeling Brouwer, and Hans G. Ulrich, for their stimulating feedback. Thanks also to Bart Wallet, my friend and comrade in matters pertaining to ‘Yale’ and ‘Duke’ theology, and my colleagues at the Center of Theological Inquiry, Princeton, for introducing me to Hauerwas’s work.

2 Quoted from the published version of this lecture: S. Hauerwas, ‘Why Did Jesus Have to Die? An Attempt to Cross the Barrier of Age’, in: *The Princeton Seminary Bulletin* 28 (2007), 182.

in cheek, as a Southerner (“I’m from Texas”), he is not merely stating a biographical fact, or putting himself in a kind of underdog position, but articulating a commitment to particularities of time and place, that is, a commitment to Christian service in the *hic et nunc* in which he considers himself to be called.<sup>3</sup>

This commitment to time and place explains the perhaps surprising ease with which Hauerwas writes in the first person singular, shares personal stories, tells about edifying experiences, and engages in self-criticism. It reflects his conviction that his task is not to adopt a position, and try to keep it consistent over time, but to engage in a journey and encourage others to do the same. (One recalls his aphorism about Christianity: “It’s not a religion, it’s an adventure.”)<sup>4</sup> This is why Samuel Wells, in what is still the best available introduction to Hauerwas’s theology, can portray his work as a series of stages, corresponding to different phases in Hauerwas’s life and characterized by such keywords as character, story, community, and performance of the church’s story, respectively.<sup>5</sup>

Nonetheless, there is something like a ‘Hauerwas project’,<sup>6</sup> a set of questions that runs like a thread through his multifaceted oeuvre, or a theological agenda that the author pursues throughout his writings. What I want to do in this paper is to identify what I regard as one of the most striking features of that agenda. With examples from key articles and books from various stages in Hauerwas’s theological trajectory (including, for this occasion, the Princeton lecture with which I began), I shall argue that Hauerwas is first and foremost a theologian who calls the church to faithfulness and, as a corollary of this, warns against dilution of the church’s witness through ‘secularization’, in the sense of surrender to narratives that promise inner-worldly fulfillment. In doing so, I shall highlight perhaps the most outspoken Barthian element in Hauerwas’s theology: his fierce opposition to cultural powers that prevent the church from being faithful to the gospel.<sup>7</sup>

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3 S. Hauerwas, ‘A Tale of Two Stories: On Being a Christian and a Texan’, in: *Christian Existence Today: Essays on Church, World and Living in Between*, Durham: Labyrinth Press 1988, 25-45.

4 S. Hauerwas, ‘Christianity: It’s Not a Religion: It’s an Adventure’, in: *The Hauerwas Reader*, J. Berkman & M. Cartwright (eds), Durham & London: Duke University Press 2001, 522-535.

5 S. Wells, *Transforming Fate Into Destiny: The Theological Ethics of Stanley Hauerwas*, Eugene: Cascade Books 1998. My repeated references to this work in the pages that follow reveal how much I am indebted to Wells’s fine study.

6 R.W. Jenson, ‘The Hauerwas Project’, in: *Modern Theology* 8 (1992), 285-295.

7 See T.J. Gorringer, *Karl Barth: Against Hegemony*, Oxford: Oxford University Press 1999.

# I

Calling Hauerwas “an American Barth”, as Stephen H. Webb once did, arguably obscures as much as it illuminates.<sup>8</sup> Nonetheless, much of Hauerwas’s writings have, indeed, if not a lingering Barthian flavor, then at least an unmistakable affinity with the sort of Barthianism that was in vogue at Yale Divinity School at around the time when Hauerwas was enrolled there as a student in the 1960s. With the Swiss theologian Walter Zimmerli, for instance, he took some classes on Old Testament prophecy, declaring afterwards that by the time the course was finished, he could not distinguish anymore “between the prophetic word and Karl Barth.”<sup>9</sup> More decisive, however, in terms of the influence it exercised on Hauerwas, was that branch of Wittgenstein-inspired Barthianism that one may associate with Hans Frei, George Lindbeck, and the postliberal experiment at Yale. Although Hauerwas studied only with Frei, not with Lindbeck, there is no doubt that he was profoundly influenced by what both of these men, each in their own way, hoped to achieve with help of Barth and Wittgenstein: a recovery of a distinctive Christian discourse that did not translate its vocabulary into more fashionable idioms – explaining sin in terms of tragedy, or redemption in terms of human welfare, for example – but sought to safeguard its integrity by emphasizing the irreducibility of Christian language. As Hauerwas recalls in his memoirs: “I thought I saw connections between Barth and Wittgenstein just to the extent that they refused to ‘explain’”.<sup>10</sup>

From Barth and Wittgenstein, as interpreted at Yale, Hauerwas also inherited a firm distrust of systematics – that is, a distrust not of systematic theology as such, but of the idea that theological reflection amounts to making ‘propositions’ about ‘objects’ which can be ‘systematized’ into ‘positions’. If Hauerwas prefers the essay over the monograph, with the effect that most of his books consist of collected articles, this is not just because he mostly writes occasional pieces, solicited for particular occasions, but also because he is afraid of premature closure and the illusion

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8 S.H. Webb, ‘The Very American Stanley Hauerwas’, in: *First Things* 124 (2002), 15. For Hauerwas’s engagement with Barth, see T.V. Cioffi, ‘Stanley Hauerwas and Karl Barth: Matters of Christology, Church, and State’, in: B.L. McCormack & C.B. Anderson (eds), *Karl Barth and American Evangelicalism*, Grand Rapids & Cambridge: Eerdmans 2011, 347-365.

9 S. Hauerwas, *Hannah’s Child: A Theologian’s Memoir*, Grand Rapids & Cambridge: Eerdmans 2010, 50.

10 S. Hauerwas, *ibid.*, 60.

of control that closure so easily brings. More importantly, he fears that ‘positions’ exchange the exhortative language of the gospel – “Do not be conformed to this world, but be transformed by the renewing of your minds” (Rom. 12,2) – by an object-language that seeks intellectual mastery instead of personal transformation, or mere description instead of conversion.<sup>11</sup>

If Hauerwas’s attentiveness to the formative role of language testifies to his Wittgensteinian leanings, it were, again, Frei and Lindbeck who taught Hauerwas the importance of narrative. While Frei was concerned with what he called “the Biblical narrative”, understood as that overarching story of creation, fall, redemption, and restoration found in Scripture,<sup>12</sup> Lindbeck claimed narrative as a vehicle for what he called a “cultural-linguistic” approach to Christian doctrine. Narrative provided him with an alternative to both propositional object language and expressivist talk of religious experience, both of which, for reasons that must remain unnamed here, Lindbeck suspected guilty of betraying the distinctiveness of Christian discourse.<sup>13</sup> What Hauerwas took from this was that Christianity is not in the first place a belief or a feeling, but a story – a narrative about God’s covenant with Israel, about the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus, and about a church whose members, in turn, seek to conform their stories to God’s story. “Narrative is thus the shape of the Christian life which seeks to conform to the character of God’s salvation.”<sup>14</sup>

All this was, as Hauerwas might put it, “a long way from Pleasant Grove”, the Texan town where Stanley had grown up in a Pietist religious environment marked by Baptist and Methodist influences.<sup>15</sup> Yet, if the Mennonite tradition seemed to fade away for a moment, it returned robustly in the work of John Howard Yoder, the Mennonite theologian whom Hauerwas encountered when *The Politics of Jesus* (1972) had just

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11 See also S. Hauerwas, *With the Grain of the Universe: The Church’s Witness and Natural Theology*, Grand Rapids: Brazos Press 2001, 10: “Any theology that threatens to become a position more determinative than the Christian practice of prayer betrays its subject. At best, theology is but a series of reminders to help Christians pray faithfully.”

12 H.W. Frei, *The Eclipse of Biblical Narrative: A Study in Eighteenth and Nineteenth Century Hermeneutics*, New Have & London: Yale University Press 1974.

13 G.A. Lindbeck, *The Nature of Doctrine: Religion and Theology in a Postliberal Age*, Philadelphia: Westminster John Knox Press 1984.

14 S. Wells, *Transforming Fate Into Destiny* (ref. 5), 42.

15 S. Hauerwas, *Hannah’s Child* (ref. 9), 17.

been sent to the press.<sup>16</sup> What Yoder taught Hauerwas was that the life of the church cannot be captured in language or narrative alone. Following Yoder, Hauerwas began to consider the church as a political body, that is, as a community that not only preaches a political message, but actually embodies a politics. Hauerwas's often-repeated line that "the church does not have a social ethic; the church is a social ethic" is hardly imaginable without this Yoderian background.<sup>17</sup>

But how, then, does the church embody a Christian ethics or politics? Although Hauerwas's interest in virtue and character predates the appearance of Alasdair MacIntyre's *After Virtue* (1981), this Catholic philosopher made a profound impact on Hauerwas's reflection on the church, especially in the years that both taught at the University of Notre Dame. If Hauerwas followed Yoder in emphasizing virtues of peace, hope, and patience, it was MacIntyre who put Hauerwas on the Aristotelian track, offering him philosophical resources for understanding character formation as depending on communities in which people acquire habits and virtues by imitating the examples of others. If Hauerwas almost single-handedly placed virtue ethics on the theological agenda, this was made possible at least in part by MacIntyre's recovery of virtue ethics in the philosophical realm.<sup>18</sup>

## II

If this may suffice as a quick sketch of Hauerwas's theological background, one key influence must be singled out and discussed in slightly greater detail in order to grasp why the virtuous life of the Christian community has become such an important theme for Hauerwas. Readers of *The Nature of Doctrine* will recall Lindbeck's argument that the crusaders' battle cry, "Christus est Dominus", is untrue "when used to authorize cleaving the skull of the infidel (...). When thus employed, it contradicts the Christian understanding of Lordship as embodying, for example, suffering servanthood."<sup>19</sup> With arguments too subtle to be briefly

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16 S. Hauerwas, *ibid.*, 117.

17 S. Hauerwas, *The Peaceable Kingdom: A Primer in Christian Ethics*, Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press 1983, 99.

18 A. MacIntyre, *After Virtue: A Study in Moral Theory*, Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press 1981.

19 G.A. Lindbeck, *Nature of Doctrine* (ref. 13), 64.

summarized here, Lindbeck argues that the expression “Christus est Dominus” is not true under all circumstances, as a simple propositional model might have it, but only if supported by a lived, embodied reality in which the Lordship of Christ becomes concretely visible. If, as Lindbeck claims, the right use of language “cannot be detached from a particular way of behaving”, then the only way to assert the truth of “Christus est Dominus” is “to commit oneself to a way of life” consonant with it.<sup>20</sup>

Although Lindbeck opens a philosophical Pandora’s box by making his point in terms of truth, I take the gist of his argument to be twofold. One is that, in Lindbeck’s cultural-linguistic approach, truth does not consist of correspondence between propositions, but of conformity between stories. If the life story of a crusader does not reflect the Lordship of Christ, in what sense, then, can this crusader be said to hold “Christus est Dominus” for true? Although he might acknowledge the truth value of this statement in some abstract manner, detached from the lived reality in which he is supposed to follow Christ, there is no way in which the soldier’s life story testifies to that truth by conforming to the narrative pattern of Jesus’ life, death, and resurrection. And if this is the case, how then can that crusader defend the truthfulness of his claim vis-à-vis competing battle cries? This brings us to what I take as Lindbeck’s second point. Although the truth of the Biblical narrative cannot be proven – Lindbeck makes short work of all attempts in that direction – Christians can witness to this truth by allowing their lives to be transformed by it. They can witness to the truth of “Christus est Dominus” by entrusting their lives to Him, by praising His name, by affirming His Lordship in worship and prayer. There is, in other words, no better way to testify to the truth of the Biblical narrative than to engage in what Lindbeck calls “activities of adoration, proclamation, obedience, promise-hearing, and promise-keeping which shape individuals and communities into conformity to the mind of Christ.”<sup>21</sup>

I will not delve into the intricacies of this argument, but should like to suggest that Hauerwas’s stress on the church’s performance of God’s story is best understood against the background of this postliberal attempt to conceive of the church as a witness to the truthfulness of the Biblical narrative.<sup>22</sup> As Hauerwas states it explicitly in *Against the Nations* (1985):

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20 G.A. Lindbeck, *ibid.*, 64, 66.

21 G.A. Lindbeck, *ibid.*, 68.

22 See also S. Wells, *Transforming Fate Into Destiny* (ref. 5), 58.

It is important (...) that Lindbeck (or I) not be interpreted as emphasizing the distinctiveness of Christian convictions as an end in itself. There is no virtue in that. Rather it is our (or at least my) conviction that we must attend to the distinctiveness of our language, and to the distinctiveness of the community formed by that language, because it is true.<sup>23</sup>

Hauerwas follows Lindbeck's lead, moreover, in identifying the church as a "context of inquiry for the testing of that narrative, (...) crucial for the intelligibility of the story that Christians have to tell."<sup>24</sup> He agrees with Lindbeck that such stories are recognizable as Christian narratives to the extent that their grammar converges with that of the Biblical narrative. If 'faithfulness' is a matter of 'intertextuality', as both Lindbeck and Hauerwas hold,<sup>25</sup> then such intertextuality is not a matter of quotations, allusions, or story lines. 'Narrative coherence' rather takes place on the grammatical level, that is, on the level of standards on what can and cannot be properly said about God, the world, the self, and the church.<sup>26</sup> Narrative coherence occurs when human lives are lived in acknowledgment of such Biblical grammatical rules as that God is the creator of this world, that humans live in the world in order to praise their creator, and that the creator is also the redeemer, who shall restore all things so as to bring the world to its completion.

Hauerwas seems to move beyond Lindbeck, though, in portraying the church not merely as a witness *to* the story, but simultaneously also as a participant *in* the narrative. "To be sure, like Israel, the church has a story to tell in which God is the main actor. But the church cannot tell that story without becoming part of the tale."<sup>27</sup> In so far as the church anticipates the peaceable kingdom promised in Scripture, it not only *refers* to God's promises, but also *shows*, provisionally but nonetheless concretely and historically, that the story is true because God's promises are being fulfilled.<sup>28</sup> Hauerwas, in other words, does not position the church in juxtaposition to the Biblical narrative, but as an actor in the midst of

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23 S. Hauerwas, *Against the Nations: War and Survival in a Liberal Society*, Minneapolis [etc.]: Winston Press 1985, 5.

24 S. Hauerwas, 'The Church as God's New Language' in: *Christian Existence Today* (ref. 3), 61.

25 G.A. Lindbeck, *Nature of Doctrine* (ref. 13), 113-124.

26 G.A. Lindbeck, *ibid.*, 81.

27 S. Hauerwas, 'The Church as God's New Language' (ref. 24), 53-54.

28 See also S. Hauerwas, *With the Grain of the Universe* (ref. 11), 210-212.

this narrative. The Biblical narrative is at least in part a story *about* the church, to which the church is called to live up.

What I hope this little foray helps explain is that Hauerwas's concern about a church living out what it believes does not stem from, say, a desire to do what Jesus did or from an attempt to imitate the New Testament church (an obvious pitfall for a critic of 'Constantinianism'). Neither should Hauerwas be mistaken as advocating Wesleyan perfectionism in some kind of moralist key.<sup>29</sup> His point of departure rather is the question how to testify to the truth of the Biblical narrative. As a true postliberal, he considers such testimony to require narrative coherence – life stories that are being shaped by the Biblical narrative, or Christians who find their place in the Biblical story (to borrow Craig Bartholomew's and Michael Goheen's felicitous phrase).<sup>30</sup> Narrative coherence occurs, not when people fill out a questionnaire about religious beliefs ("Yes, I believe in an afterlife"), but when their life stories witness, in word and deed, that human life is a gracious gift for which praise and thanks be offered to God.

### III

This explains why much of Hauerwas's work on the church's language and practices is carried out in what Rowan Williams, in his typology of theological activity, calls a celebratory style: a style of adoration, affirmation, and proclamation, characterized by "an attempt to draw out and display connections of thought and image so as to exhibit the fullest possible range of significance in the language used."<sup>31</sup> An example

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29 Pace J. Stout, *Democracy and Tradition*, Princeton: Princeton University Press 2004, 320-321 n. 2. Admittedly, Hauerwas makes little effort to explain how his notion of character formation can be prevented from deteriorating into some kind of perfectionism. For this reason, one might wish him to spell out in greater detail to what extent Christian witness to the truth of the Biblical narrative is constrained by the brokenness of the present world (cf. below, ref. 64). However, if it is true, as I argued above, that Hauerwas's interventions are invariably addressed to specific audiences in specific situations, one might argue that perfectionism is not a danger to which Hauerwas's audiences are most likely to succumb and that, accordingly, warnings against moral perfectionism do not need to rank highly on Hauerwas's list of priorities. To state this more bluntly: Hauerwas's worry is *not* that his readers become perfectionists, or that they forget the sinful condition of this present world; his concern is that they tend to be so enamored by this world that they show little to nothing of what it means to be the church.

30 C.G. Bartholomew & M.W. Goheen, *The Drama of Scripture: Finding Our Place in the Biblical Story*, Grand Rapids: Baker Academic 2004.

31 R. Williams, 'Prologue', in: *On Christian Theology*, Malden: Blackwell 2000, xiii.

of this *modus operandi* can be found in *The Peaceable Kingdom* (1983), which tries to spell out as concretely and distinctively as possible what it means for the church to be a servant community, to anticipate God's peaceful kingdom by eschewing violence, and "to welcome the stranger as the very presence of God."<sup>32</sup> It tells the church what narrative coherence might entail by showing in some detail how Christian faithfulness might look like in practice. It is this celebratory style, with its preference for thick descriptions instead of minimalist accounts, that distinguishes Hauerwas's ethics from quests for common denominators, such as found in ethics centered around golden rules or human rights. Hauerwas's conviction that narrative coherence must be lived out in concrete historical detail makes him a 'maximizer' instead of a 'minimizer' or, in Williams's terminology, a 'celebrator' instead of a 'communicator'.<sup>33</sup>

This celebratory style is even more apparent, not only in what Hauerwas calls his "sermonic illustrations", but also in his hagiographic illustrations – stories about Christian holiness as embodied and exemplified in individuals such as Dietrich Bonhoeffer and communities such as L'Arche in France.<sup>34</sup> It is here that Hauerwas sounds most like a passionate preacher who seeks to remind his audience of what the church believes, of what it takes to lead a Christian life, and of the differences that Christian faith makes for, say, romantic love ("You always marry the wrong person") or getting children ("What we are about as Christians is the having of children").<sup>35</sup> Precisely to the extent that Hauerwas agrees with the postliberal view that Christian witness to the gospel requires narrative coherence, he needs the anecdotal evidence of hagiographic biography, or stories that concretely illustrate how such coherence might look like in practice. So, again, what may seem an eccentric preference for story telling is, in fact, a function of a theological program focused on narrative coherence.

I should like to argue that the same is true for what might be called the reverse side of this program: Hauerwas's stern admonitions against

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32 S. Hauerwas, *Peaceable Kingdom* (ref. 17), 146.

33 S. Hauerwas, *ibid.*, 60-61.

34 S. Hauerwas, *Performing the Faith: Bonhoeffer and the Practice of Nonviolence*, Grand Rapids: Brazos Press 2004; S. Hauerwas, 'Timeful Friends: Living with the Handicapped', in: *Sanctify Them in the Truth: Holiness Exemplified*, Nashville: Abingdon Press 1998, 143-156.

35 S. Hauerwas, 'The Radical Hope in the Annunciation: Why Both Single and Married Christians Welcome Children', in: *Hauerwas Reader* (ref. 4), 513, 517.

what he perceives as compromising Christian faithfulness. If Hauerwas has acquired a reputation for his sometimes sharp polemics and often unparliamentary language, this is because Christian edification, in his view, not merely requires celebration, but also criticism. If not 'critical' in Williams's technical sense of the word, large parts of Hauerwas's work nonetheless aspire to that label, given that they seek to criticize all that which prevents the church from living out the story of the gospel. Accordingly, Hauerwas is not only a celebratory, but also a critical theologian. He has a sharp eye for what compromises Christian faithfulness as well as a sharp pen, which he does not hesitate to wield with sometimes startling ferocity against what he perceives as a dilution or watering down of the church's faithfulness.

In his aforementioned Princeton lecture, for instance, Hauerwas raises a voice of protest against an Episcopal church service attended by the American president, in which the congregation was invited to stand and say the pledge of allegiance to the American flag. If a flag in a church building is already a thorn in Hauerwas's flesh, a pledge of allegiance in a Christian worship service arouses his indignation even more:

When you have the President of the United States claiming that the "God" of the Pledge of Allegiance is the God Christians worship, you know you have a problem. (...) The Trinity is not some further specification of the generalized god affirmed in the pledge, but the Trinity is the only God worthy of worship. The Christian pledge is not the Pledge of Allegiance, but rather is called the Apostles Creed. That a church service, that a priest in that service, would include the Pledge of Allegiance is a sure sign that Christians no longer know how to recognize idolatry.<sup>36</sup>

Such protests against a pious blending of Christian faith and American civil religion have become a Hauerwas trademark, especially in the United States. Although I shall argue in a moment that it is misleading to reduce his theology to a "critique of all things American",<sup>37</sup> the pervasiveness of American civil religion and the ease with which it clothes itself in Christian rhetoric certainly ranks high among Hauerwas's concerns. Throughout his work, he argues that the primary task of the church "is not to *make* the world the kingdom, but to be faithful to the kingdom."

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36 S. Hauerwas, 'Why Did Jesus Have to Die' (ref. 2), 183-184.

37 S.H. Webb, 'The Very American Stanley Hauerwas' (ref. 8), 15.

If Christians want to serve American society, they better do so “by showing to the world what it means to be a community of peace” than to expect such peace to be brought about by a secular nation state.<sup>38</sup>

As far as I can see, there are three issues at stake here. One is about communal practices that shape the meaning of language. If American Christians are citizens of the United States as well as members of the church, Hauerwas’s question is which of these two communities they allow to determine what it means for them to be live in hope, to yearn for peace, or to seek the welfare of the city. American Christians would be unfaithful if “the Word is captured by practices and narratives that are more constitutive of that entity called America than that community called Church.”<sup>39</sup> A second point, on the specificity of Christian language, follows from this. Who is the God invoked in that pious formula on the American dollar bill, “In God we trust”, or in public school prayers? If such formulas and prayers must be acceptable to people living in different stories, which in turn are being shaped by different communal practices, then such formulas and prayers “cannot help but give a distorted view of God.”<sup>40</sup> Diffuse talk about God, religion, spirituality, moral values, and so forth should be avoided, finally, because it leads the church away from what Hauerwas perceives as its key priority: witness, not to the truth of some religious proposition, but to the truth of the Biblical narrative, in all its particular detail. Witness is specific or it is not.

#### IV

Although Hauerwas, in his American context, often identifies American civil religion as the most dangerous threat to such Christian witness, there are, of course, plenty of other narratives that fit badly with the Biblical narrative. In order to correct the stereotypical image that Hauerwas is primarily ‘bashing America’, it may be pertinent to observe that his targets also include other stories that, in his assessment, run the risk of

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38 S. Hauerwas, *Peaceable Kingdom* (ref. 17), 103.

39 S. Hauerwas, *Unleashing the Scripture: Freeing the Bible from Captivity to America*, Nashville: Abingdon Press 1993, 43.

40 S. Hauerwas, ‘A Christian Critique of Christian America’, in: *Christian Existence Today* (ref. 3), 171. See also S. Hauerwas & W. Willimon, ‘Why *Resident Aliens* Struck a Chord’, in: *In Good Company: The Church as Polis*, Notre Dame & London: University of Notre Dame Press 1995, 55, commenting on a prayer written for a National Day of Prayer in support for the war in Iraq: “Such a prayer sounds Christian. But it is idolatrous and pagan, the same sort of prayer Caesar always prays to Mars before battle.”

interrupting the church's performance of the Biblical story. Take, again, his Princeton lecture:

There is no question that love between the persons of the Trinity is at the very heart of the Christian faith, but I think nothing is more destructive to the Christian faith than the current identification of Christianity with love. (...) God, in such a view, becomes that great OK who tells us that we are OK and therefore, we are taught that we should tell one another we are OK.<sup>41</sup>

If this passage is directed against a view of love that draws on Hollywood movies more than on Scripture, Hauerwas is also particularly worried about romantic idealizations of the family. If, for instance, a conservative non-profit organization in the United States presents itself as a guardian of "Biblical truth and traditional family values", Hauerwas is among the first to argue that nineteenth-century bourgeois family values have repressed the radical challenge to familial kinship implied in Jesus' disquieting question, "Who is my mother, and who are my brothers?" (Matt. 12,48). The church, says Hauerwas in a typical one-liner, "is a more determinative community than a marriage."<sup>42</sup> Or, as one of his students puts it, in an elegant study on marriage and singleness: "Water is thicker than blood." Nothing determines more who Christians are and to whom they belong than the water of baptism.<sup>43</sup>

Likewise, Hauerwas urges the church to resist the 'culture of choice' that has been created by a capitalist economy that seems bent on refiguring the world through the lens of consumer choice. It thereby stimulates, in Hauerwas's judgment, "the alleged voluntary culture that forms our lives separate from worship."<sup>44</sup> This capitalist narrative turns out to be so powerful that it has become almost impossible to conceive of alternatives, with the effect that Christian language about human beings who are chosen before they can choose has lost much of its comprehensibility. "We lack the practices, and hence the imagination, that could make such a narrative intelligible."<sup>45</sup> Of course, in Hauerwas's assessment, churches

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41 S. Hauerwas, 'Why Did Jesus Have to Die' (ref. 2), 184.

42 S. Hauerwas, 'Radical Hope' (ref. 35), 514.

43 J.M. Bennett, *Water is Thicker than Blood: An Augustinian Theology of Marriage and Singleness*, New York & Oxford: Oxford University Press 2008.

44 S. Hauerwas, 'In Defense of Cultural Christianity: Reflections on Going to Church', in: *Sanctify Them in the Truth* (ref. 34), 163.

45 S. Hauerwas, 'No Enemy, No Christianity: Preaching between 'Worlds'', in: *Sanctify Them in the Truth* (ref. 34), 197.

make things even worse by describing denominational affiliation in terms of individual choice or by confusing pastoral care with customer satisfaction policies. Ministers are not supposed to please their congregations, says Hauerwas; they rather ought to help them repent from their sins and grow in Christian discipleship. The church is a non-voluntary community, if only in the sense that it should “make me do what I would otherwise not choose to do and then to learn to like what I have been forced to do.”<sup>46</sup>

The examples could be multiplied, but I trust a pattern has become visible. Hauerwas, the pacifist, sees the church as embattled, in particular by enemies who deny that there is any conflict going on at all.<sup>47</sup> The military rhetoric that pervades his work – think only of such book titles as *Dispatches From the Front* (1994) – is that of a prophet preaching woe to “those who are at ease in Zion” (Amos 6,1). Not the sins of the heathen are the target of his prophecies, but a false sense of comfort cherished by churches who assume, unconsciously perhaps, that they can serve more than one master. Not unlike Karl Barth, Hauerwas warns as loudly as his voice allows against domestication of the gospel, that is, against narratives and practices that suppress Christian witness by softening the difference between God’s kingdom and this world.

Here, then, emerge the contours of what I called ‘the Hauerwas project’. On the one hand, Hauerwas’s theology is a call to Christian faithfulness, conceived in terms of coherence between the Biblical narrative and the stories that the church lives out.<sup>48</sup> If this represents the celebratory dimension of Hauerwas’s theology, the other, critical side of it is a protest against distortions of the gospel – distortions caused by Christians who let their lives be shaped by stories that do not witness to the truth of the Biblical narrative. Hauerwas therefore sees it as “the great task before Christians today (...) to unmask the invisibility of those stories that constitute our lives which we assume, wrongly, are commensurate with our being Christian.”<sup>49</sup>

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46 S. Hauerwas, ‘Whose Church? Which Future? Whither the Anabaptist Vision?’ in: *In Good Company* (ref. 40), 75.

47 S. Hauerwas, ‘No Enemy, No Christianity’ (ref. 45), 199.

48 See also S. Hauerwas, *Christian Existence Today* (ref. 3), 1: “The theologian’s task is faithfulness.” Wells agrees that the kernel of Hauerwas’s “whole project” is a concern “to shift the focus of ethical reflection from the individual in a crisis to the Church in its faithfulness.” S. Wells, *Transforming Fate Into Destiny* (ref. 5), 61.

49 S. Hauerwas, ‘In Defense of Cultural Christianity’ (ref. 44), 164.

## V

How appropriate is it to characterize this project, especially at its critical moments, as directed “against secularization in the church”, as I propose in the title of this paper? Hauerwas is not a frequent user of the term ‘secularization’. He rather speaks about a church that loses its critical function or its ability to recognize idolatry. At first sight, such phrases seem to describe more clearly what is at stake than ‘secularization’, which is after all a “promiscuous concept”, loaded with a variety of often conflicting meanings, most of which do not seem to apply to Hauerwas’s work.<sup>50</sup> He is not interested, for example, in church attendance statistics and does not seem to be particularly worried about dropping membership rates. Only in more recent books, such as *The State of the University* (2007), the term emerges, not as shorthand for a grand-scale narrative of religious decline, or as synonymous with rationalization and differentiation of society, as Max Weber might have had it,<sup>51</sup> but as a *terminus technicus* for the rise to prominence of a mode of time (the “world’s time”) that does not reckon with the new age that has been inaugurated in Christ (the “church’s time”).<sup>52</sup>

Hauerwas obviously does not distinguish between world and church and their respective modes of time in mere sociological terms. In *The Peaceable Kingdom*, he already explained

that the world consists of those, including ourselves, who have chosen not to make the story of God their story. The world in us refuses to affirm that this is God’s world and that, as loving Lord, God’s care for creation is greater than our illusion of control. The world is those aspects of our individual and social lives where we live untruthfully...<sup>53</sup>

In line with all which has been said so far, ‘church’ and ‘world’ thus refer to different types of narratives. The world is world in so far as it rejects the Biblical narrative; the church is church in so far as it witnesses to the

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50 C.G. Brown & M. Snape, ‘Introduction: Conceptualising Secularisation 1974-2010: The Influence of Hugh McLeod’, in: C.G. Brown & M. Snape (eds), *Secularisation in the Christian World*, Farnham & Burlington: Ashgate 2010, 1.

51 S. Hauerwas, ‘The State of the Secular: Theology, Prayer, and the University’, in: *The State of the University: Academic Knowledges and the Knowledge of God*, Malden: Blackwell 2007, 168 n. 4.

52 S. Hauerwas, *ibid.*, 170, 171.

53 S. Hauerwas, *Peaceable Kingdom* (ref. 17), 101.

truth of God's story. To say, then, that church and world live in different modes of time is to reformulate this distinction in terms of eschatological expectation, or the lack thereof. "By secular", says Hauerwas, "I mean the name given to that time, and the correlative politics, in which time is no longer (...) interwoven with a higher time."<sup>54</sup> The church's time, by contrast, is that eschatological mode of time which hopefully anticipates God's future.

If 'the world' denotes a temporal regime, rather than a spatial realm, then 'the secular' may be understood as a way of living dominated by the 'world's time', that is, by a non-eschatological understanding of time. The secular, in other words, is a mode of life shaped through stories that move towards closure prior to the *eschaton*.<sup>55</sup> Hauerwas does not elaborate on this ("I have no 'theory' about the secular"),<sup>56</sup> but follows Talal Asad, the post-colonial anthropologist, in identifying secularism with an aggressive campaign in favor of such secular regimes of time.<sup>57</sup> By asserting that the 'world's time' is the only legitimate regime of time, secularism encourages people to conceive of themselves as living in stories that reach their apex well before the *eschaton* – in a capitalist story of successful entrepreneurship or, as Asad might argue, in an aggressive political narrative focused on expansion and consolidation of state power.<sup>58</sup>

I trust that Hauerwas will not object if I carry this point a bit further and argue, in an Augustinian-inspired manner, that secularization may be understood, not as a grand-scale historical process in which the 'world's time' gradually takes precedence over the 'church's time', but as surrenders of those called to perform God's story by living out of eschatological hope to the seductions of inner-worldly narratives with their promises of earthly power, status, and success. Secularization occurs, or so I would argue, when human beings cease to expect the fulfillment of their desires in God and begin to seek such fulfillment within *hoc interim*

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54 S. Hauerwas, 'State of the Secular' (ref. 51), 170.

55 In "'Long Live the Weeds and the Wilderness Yet': Reflections on *A Secular Age*", in: *Modern Theology* 26 (2010), 349-362, Stanley Hauerwas and Romand Coles also define "the secular" in terms of "closure" (351). Accordingly, they seek "for paths beyond the impasses and closures of this secular age" (357).

56 S. Hauerwas, *Dispatches From the Front: Theological Engagements with the Secular*, Durham & London: Duke University Press 1994, 197 n. 30.

57 S. Hauerwas, 'State of the Secular' (ref. 51), 175 n. 28.

58 T. Asad, *Formations of the Secular: Christianity, Islam, Modernity*, Stanford: Stanford University Press 2003.

*saeculo*, as Augustine called it – that is, in objects, things, or persons that belong to the intermediate age between Christ’s first and second coming.<sup>59</sup> For Augustine, God graciously provides such penultimate goods to be used, but not to be enjoyed, given that human desire is created such as to find its gratification ultimately in nothing but God.<sup>60</sup> In such terms, then, secularization may be defined as a prioritizing of inner-worldly narratives, with their false promises of inner-worldly fulfillment of desire, at the cost of the Biblical narrative – a story of eschatological hope, which promises a fulfillment of desire far surpassing that which is offered by secular stories.<sup>61</sup>

If Hauerwas says that “All I mean by the ‘secular’ is that many, including many who count themselves ‘religious’, are quite capable of living lives of practical atheism”, I understand him as observing that secularization, in the sense just defined, does not only take place outside the church.<sup>62</sup> The seducing power of narratives of self-fulfillment, for example, is felt in every church pew. The attractiveness of managerial language with their promises of power and control is felt in every church council. If Hauerwas raises such questions as whom of you worship in churches celebrating Mother’s Day, Thanksgiving, and the Fourth of July, he inquires to what extent the Biblical narrative, or the church’s eschatological regime of time, has been exchanged for stories committed to the ‘world’s time’. If Hauerwas criticizes romantic love and capitalist consumerism as incompatible with God’s story, then I understand him as warning Christians against secularization in the church.<sup>63</sup>

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59 Augustine, *De civitate Dei*, XI.i.

60 Augustine, *De doctrina christiana*, I.iii-iv.

61 My interpretation of Augustine in these matters is indebted to R. Williams, *Why Study the Past? The Quest for the Historical Church*, Grand Rapids & Cambridge: Eerdmans 2005 and R.A. Markus, *Christianity and the Secular*, Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press 2006.

62 S. Hauerwas, *Dispatches From the Front* (ref. 56), 197-198 n. 30. The footnote continues: “From my perspective the problem in modernity is not that people are not religious, but that they are too religious. Secularists too often think when Judaism and Christianity are destroyed that people will then learn to live ‘rationally’. Rather what happens is people live religiously in the most dangerous ways – romanticism (...) being one form of such religious resurgence.” If, by this definition, human beings are ‘incurably religious’, it follows that the religion of the one is the irreligion of the other. As Hauerwas wittily concludes: “Christians are also ‘atheists’ when it comes to humanism, but our atheism is, of course, Trinitarian.”

63 See also M.S. Northcott, ‘Reading Hauerwas in the Cornbelt: The Demise of the American Dream and the Return of Liturgical Politics’, in: *Journal of Religious Ethics* 40 (2012), 262-280, who relies on Bryan Wilson in analyzing “the cultural continuity between American

What sort of insight does this redescription of Hauerwas's project yield? As you may have sensed, the point of characterizing Hauerwas's works in terms of secularization is to abstract just a little from his critique of American civil religion so as to argue that his protests against distortions of the gospel cannot be put aside with the oversimplified argument that "here in Western Europe, we don't have such civil religions." True as that may be, there seems to be no lack of other inner-worldly narratives that make their impact felt, also in the church, which therefore need to be scrutinized with Hauerwas's critical questions in mind. In what sort of temporal regime do such stories position themselves, and to what kind of reality do they testify? Characterizing Hauerwas's work as one long struggle against secularization in the church is a way of emphasizing the pertinence of his project to churches outside the United States, who struggle as much as those within the States with secularization in the way I have defined it.

## VI

If these words reveal how sympathetic I am to Hauerwas's project, I nonetheless should like to end this paper on a more critical note – critical in the same way, I hope, that Hauerwas's theology is critical. If Hauerwas's aim is to draw firm lines between 'church' and 'world', that is, between performance of the Biblical narrative and practices informed by other stories, then there is a sense in which his theology, with its insistence on community-based acquisition of Christian habits and virtues, runs the risk of accepting rather than challenging a 'secularized' understanding of Christian faithfulness. If Hauerwas's theology is directed against secularization in the church, then my question is to what extent it sufficiently banishes the threat of secularization in what I call his concept of agency – his conceptualization of who exactly is at work in witness and discipleship.<sup>64</sup>

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Christianity, American capitalism and American coercion" (277) in terms of "internal secularization." "[T]he churches in America have been internally secularized by taking into their ritual performances the cultural forms of the secular world so that religion itself is internally secularized" (276).

64 Many other questions could be raised, of course. One might wonder, for example, what extent Hauerwas's vision of Christian discipleship runs the risk of amounting to a form of "goodness without fragility", as John Wall argues in his *Moral Creativity: Paul Ricoeur and the Poetics of Possibility*, Oxford: Oxford University Press 2005, 93. Or one might ask whether

Let me declare at the outset that Hauerwas especially in his more recent work agrees expressly that Christian witness is a “work of the Spirit.”<sup>65</sup> I do not doubt that this belief underlies Hauerwas’s earlier essays, too, and tacitly informs all his reflections on Christian discipleship. In particular, his much-discussed pacifism is a way of testifying that peace on earth cannot be brought about by human interventions. It conveys that God alone can realize a peaceable kingdom, and that the church’s witness to that kingdom of peace is therefore nothing but a gift from God. Likewise, Hauerwas firmly acknowledges God’s agency, though often indirectly, in emphasizing that Christians live in hope and patience, that is, “out of control” or liberated from the illusion that they are the ones who are in charge. Living “out of control”, says Hauerwas, is “a way of suggesting that we are an eschatological people”, who hope and pray that “God will use our faithfulness to make his kingdom a reality in the world.”<sup>66</sup>

Nonetheless, as soon as Hauerwas starts inquiring how Christians acquire such virtues as patience and peacefulness, he falls back on a MacIntyrean understanding of how habits and virtues are nurtured in the practices of a community. Following MacIntyre’s neo-Aristotelian virtue ethics, Hauerwas emphasizes throughout his oeuvre that acquiring virtuous conduct requires immersion in a community, endless repetition of its rituals, imitation of virtuous group members (the saints, in the church’s case), and acculturation in the community’s language. Becoming a Christian, therefore, is a manner of socializing into the language and practices of the church. As Hauerwas states it: “Christianity is the name given [to] that company across the generations that have learned from

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Hauerwas sufficiently acknowledges the fact that the church “must preach the word according to its moral dimension, irrespective of its own shortcomings in living out this word in its midst”, as Bernd Wannewetsch argues in his ‘Ecclesiology and Ethics’, in: G. Meilaender & W. Werpehowski (eds), *The Oxford Handbook of Theological Ethics*, Oxford: Oxford University Press 2005), 63. Wannewetsch continues: “Any endeavour by the Church to ‘back’ the credibility of its proclamation or even to safeguard its efficiency through its own excellence would leave with a very poor alternative. It would lead it either to the adoption of a moralizing regime (...), or – more likely under contemporary circumstances – to the lowering of standards of the proclamation itself” (63).

65 S. Hauerwas, *With the Grain of the Universe* (ref. 11), 211. See also S. Hauerwas, ‘Church as God’s New Language’ (ref. 24), 60 (“the Holy Spirit must make us a body of people capable of hearing [God’s] word rightly”) and S. Hauerwas, *Unleashing the Scripture* (ref. 39), 103 (“God produces the saints, and they are reproduced through us. God makes us possible through the production of the saints”).

66 S. Hauerwas, *Peaceable Kingdom* (ref. 17), 105.

one another the skills necessary for the worship of God made known in Jesus Christ.”<sup>67</sup>

So, what does it take to resist the power of the ‘world’s time’ and to witness to the truth of the Biblical narrative by living in the ‘church’s time’, in faithful anticipation of God’s peaceful kingdom? Judging by *Character and the Christian Life* (1975), one of Hauerwas’s most influential books, one learns such Christian witness from one another. “The individual Christian’s character is formed by his association with the community that embodies the language, rituals, and moral practices from which this particular form of life grows.” The book even goes so far as to say that this process of acquiring Christian character is not essentially different from how characters are being formed in other, non-Christian communities: “To have one’s character formed as a Christian is no different from having one’s character formed as a non-believer. The difference is not in how one’s character is formed, but rather in the actual orientation the Christian’s character assumes...”<sup>68</sup>

Does that imply, then, that Christian character formation can be exhaustively explained in inner-worldly terms, in the sense that conversion from the ‘world’s time’ to the church’s eschatological hope of God’s kingdom is just a matter of learning to speak a new language and acquire the skills to participate in a new set of practices? Samuel Wells rightly wonders, I think, whether Hauerwas, in this specific context, pays sufficient attention to God’s agency or, more specifically, to the work of the Holy Spirit:

Just as Hauerwas appears to be anthropocentric on the issue of revelation, since he concentrates on the practices and language of the Church to the near exclusion of God’s prevenience, so here he seems anthropocentric for much the same reasons. He appears to be making truth a prisoner of the practice of the Christian community. This certainly takes narrative, incarnation, particularity and embeddedness seriously, but it does seem to underplay the otherness and the sovereign prevenience of God.<sup>69</sup>

It is not too difficult to see why Hauerwas assigns much worth to what

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67 S. Hauerwas, *In Good Company* (ref. 40), 9.

68 S. Hauerwas, *Character and the Christian Life: A Study in Theological Ethics*, San Antonio: Trinity University Press 1975, 210, 226-227.

69 S. Wells, *Turning Fate into Destiny* (ref. 5), 83.

he calls “the human aspect” or “the human agency” involved in Christian discipleship. Writing in the 1970s, he vividly remembered a sort of Barthianism that put all its cards on God, with near exclusion of everything resembling human agency. Barth, says Hauerwas, “treats the Christian life primarily in terms of events and acts, which (...) cannot contribute in a theologically significant way to the development of ourselves as men of character.” Hauerwas knows, of course, that for Barth, the language of character was “associated with particular perversions of the Christian life” that he wanted to avoid at all cost. Hauerwas is afraid, however, that one-sided affirmation of God’s agency in the development of a Christian life ignores “how we ought to live and order our being.” Although Barth had good reasons to be afraid of humanism or moralism disguised as Christian theology, an firm emphasizing of “Christ’s work in a way that separates it from the effect it has on the believer” is equally unwelcome, or so Hauerwas contends in 1975.<sup>70</sup> Hauerwas seems never to have changed his mind on this, given that his Gifford Lectures, held in 2001, still make the same complaint: “Barth never brings himself to explain how our human agency is involved in the Spirit’s work.”<sup>71</sup>

Whatever the accuracy of this Barth interpretation, Hauerwas clearly considers it his task to flesh out the human aspect, if only in order to emphasize the historical particularity and context specificity of Christian witness (in congruence with his commitment to the *hic et nunc*). In *Character and the Christian Life*, Hauerwas still contends that “both sides [i.e., the human and the divine] must be affirmed in order to take account of what it means to be a Christian.” He emphasizes that the Christian life “cannot be genuinely thought of as achievement of our own” and that Christians seeking to conform their lives to Christ’s are not only socialized into a community, but also “formed by God.”<sup>72</sup> Gradually, however, such explicit acknowledgments of God’s agency disappear from Hauerwas’s writings. Although I am convinced that Hauerwas never abandons his belief that Christian character formation is ultimately a work of the Spirit, he increasingly focuses his attention and, more importantly, the attention of his readers, on that what Barth supposedly ignored: the human, communal, and historical factors that help explain how human beings become witnesses to the gospel.

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70 S. Hauerwas, *Character and the Christian Life* (ref. 68), 173, 177, 183, 188.

71 S. Hauerwas, *With the Grain of the Universe* (ref. 11), 145.

72 S. Hauerwas, *Character and the Christian Life* (ref. 68), 183, 182, 222.

Granting that such a move might have been desirable in the context in which the early Hauerwas found himself working, the battle lines clearly lay somewhere else now. If Hauerwas is right to observe that the “habits that now constitute the secular imagination are so imbedded in how Christians understand the world [that] we no longer have the ability to recognize the power they have over us”,<sup>73</sup> then it seems a number one priority, also on his own account, to challenge that secular imagination with its secularizing impact on the Christian imagination by emphasizing, more than Hauerwas has done so far, God’s agency in sustaining this world and building the church. Before all other things, then, it seems necessary to explain, to ourselves and to others, that not our work, but God’s agency is what really matters. Especially in a context in which, as Hauerwas notes, alternatives to stories about human power and control seem hardly conceivable, it may be necessary to confess with the Lord’s Prayer that “thine is the kingdom, the power, and the glory, now and forever.” So, precisely to the extent that Hauerwas is right in emphasizing the importance of witness to the truth of the Biblical narrative, it seems necessary to affirm more vigorously that human are not primarily called to work, but to thankful and prayerful acknowledgment of God’s works.<sup>74</sup>

Such a desideratum, however, can only be formulated in response to Hauerwas’s work, in follow-up to an agenda that Hauerwas has set out, and especially in the United States also in a theological context that Hauerwas has helped shape. Such critical questions as the one I just mentioned can be raised only because witness and faithfulness have emerged as important topics for theological reflection – which in the United States at least would have been hard to imagine without Hauerwas’s efforts to that end. Consequently, those who find themselves being not entirely convinced by Hauerwas’s ‘secularized’ concept of agency, should remind themselves that they have ample reason to be grateful for him having raised issues of Christian faithfulness in the first place. Without the ‘discursive space’ that Hauerwas has helped create, especially in the American theological context, there might have been no space at all for

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73 S. Hauerwas, ‘State of the Secular’ (ref. 51), 173.

74 This passage is inspired by Barth’s exposition on the holyday in *Kirchliche Dogmatik* III/4, Zollikon & Zürich: Evangelischer Verlag 1951, 51-79. Interestingly, in some of his more recent writings, Hauerwas seems to move in this direction. See, e.g., S. Hauerwas & S. Wells, ‘The Gift of the Church and the Gifts God Gives It’, in: S. Hauerwas and S. Wells (eds), *The Blackwell Companion to Christian Ethics*, 2nd ed., Malden: Wiley-Blackwell 2011, 13-27.

such considerations as the foregoing.<sup>75</sup> Hauerwas should therefore, once again, not be seen as occupying a position, but as opening things up and making things possible by inviting others to join him in an theological exploration of what it means for the church to perform God's story, to be faithful to the Biblical narrative, and to raise a voice against all that which prevents Christians from living out the truth of the gospel.

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75 As is rightly emphasized in W. Werpehowski, 'Talking the Walk and Walking the Talk: Stanley Hauerwas's Contribution to Theological Ethics', in: *Journal of Religious Ethics* 40 (2012), 228-249.