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The Church, Kingdom of God and Human Solidarity: Stanley Hauerwas,

Steven L. Carter, and Pope Francis

First, let me tell you where I’m going with this paper. Genesis 1 tells us that God created the human person in his image, both male and female, and he gave them “dominion” over the earth. Humans are mandated by God to manage the affairs of our planet in his name and “reign” over its creatures, its physical environment and human society in a sustainable, peaceful and harmonious way. That creation mandate, as we all know, got off to a bad start with the fall of humanity in Chapter 3 and God’s decision to launch a rescue operation starting with the Jewish people and leading to the coming of his Son Jesus, who inaugurated by word and deed the Kingdom of God.

The way I see it, the coming of God’s kingdom in Jesus did not erase the prior mandate given to all humanity through Adam and Eve. There was certainly a current in the Protestant Reformation that so emphasized human depravity that there was little room left for natural grace to flow through human politics and through efforts to care for all aspects of creation. And true, Calvin’s “two kingdoms theology” has been claimed by very diverse parties, from the New England Puritans to the Church of England three hundred years ago, from the twentieth-century liberal Protestant claim of “Christ transforming culture” to recent Christian Reconstructionists. But I would argue that in Calvin’s mind this was mostly about the sharp contrast between the hopelessly flawed human societies and nations and the coming glory of Christ’s kingdom in the eschaton. It’s very similar, at least in spirit, to Tim LaHaye’s *Left Behind* series. Don’t bother about trying to make peace in the Middle East. Armageddon is just around the corner, anyway.

Whether you subscribe to Walter Wink’s interpretation of Paul’s expression, the “powers of this world,” or not, there is clearly the potential for good and bad in the exercise of political, economic, cultural and social power that we find in human societies. This is how I’m reading Genesis 1:26-28. Here it is in the New Living Translation:

26 Then God said, “Let us make human beings in our image, to be like us. They will reign over the fish in the sea, the birds in the sky, the livestock, all the wild animals on the earth, and the small animals that scurry along the ground.”

27 So God created human beings in his own image.  
    In the image of God he created them;  
    male and female he created them.

28 Then God blessed them and said, “Be fruitful and multiply. Fill the earth and govern it. Reign over the fish in the sea, the birds in the sky, and all the animals that scurry along the ground.”

God’s human creatures are plainly called to “govern” and “rule.” And this happens to be the teaching of the Qur’an, as Muslims of all stripes have come to see. That was the topic of my 2010 book, *Earth, Empire and Sacred Text: Muslims and Christians as Trustees of Creation*. In Sura 2:20 God declares to the heavenly council that Adam is his “trustee,” or “representative,” or “deputy.” This concept has been central in recent efforts to reinterpret Islamic law in more liberal ways and generally push for a more aggressive application of human rights in Muslim-majority countries. So you have to understand that this, together with my website “HumanTrustees.org,” is very much a concern in this paper.

So I will start with theologian Stanley Hauerwas’ view of the church and politics and then look at Steven Carter’s critique, which then leads me to Pope Francis and his view on human solidarity.

I approach Stanley Hauerwas with some trepidation. He’s a towering figure, certainly one of the best theologians of our time. A prolific writer, his career spans over four decades, and his message remains remarkably consistent. Scores of non-theologians have discussed his ideas—political scientists and sociologists, philosophers and ethicists, historians and legal scholars. What is more, in 2000 and 2001 he was the first American in 40 years to deliver the prestigious Gifford Lectures. The other reason, I have to say, is that I’ve actually read, besides several articles, only one of his books, his 1995 *In Good Company: The Church as Polis*.

Perhaps Hauerwas’ most influential book was one he co-wrote with William Willimon, *Resident Aliens: Life in the Christian Colony* (1989). There he argued that instead of trying to conform the world to the gospel, which was an impossible task, the church should instead strive to nourish each and every one of its members to conform to Jesus and his teachings. The church is a radically different reality to that of the world, and liberal democracies in particular. Christians, quoting from the book of Hebrews, are “resident aliens,” and the church is an outpost of the coming kingdom and a “colony” in that sense.

More recently, Hauerwas in his 2011 book, *War and the American Difference: Theological Reflections on Violence and National Identity*, saw at least three fundamental contradictions lying at the heart of US liberal democracy. On the one hand, freedom is exalted in theory but it is everywhere constrained by an invasive and destructive market capitalism. On the other hand, modern liberalism prides itself in freeing all citizens to “realize their capabilities,” but as the gap between rich and poor keeps widening, the state intervenes with programs that do little to help lift up in a holistic way those left behind. Finally, what is most serious of all, liberalism promises peace but ever since the US found redemption from its devastating and shameful civil war through the Great War, it has been addicted to war and will not recover. As he puts it, “War is a moral necessity for America because it provides the experience of the ‘Unum’ that makes the ‘pluribus’ possible. War is America’s central liturgical act necessary to renew our sense that we are a nation unlike other nations.” That is one reason why, for him, American civil religion is empty, and, in fact, pernicious.

But besides Hauerwas’ lifelong attempt to bring pacifism to theology’s center stage, his main focus has always been the church. That’s why *In Good Company* makes for such fascinating reading. There, he engages in conversation those who have nourished the most in his thought and faith. On the list are Protestants, including, of course, the Anabaptists; there are Catholics too, which is particularly useful for this paper. So as Hauerwas finds himself in a sort of no-man’s-land – neither Protestant (though he officially remains Methodist) nor Catholic – he nevertheless has definite ideas about the church. I offer this quote, as it nicely summarizes some of his repeated concerns:

I seek, therefore, not for the church to be community, but rather to be a body constituted by disciplines that created the capacity to resist the disciplines of the body associated with the modern nation-state and, in particular, the economic habits that support the state. For the church to be a social ethic, rather than to have a social ethic, means the church must be (is) a body politic (p. 26).

Hauerwas, at least in this book, does not mention the kingdom of God. Yet by his very formulation of the church as a “body politic,” or a “polis” in the Greek sense, that resists the values of the nation-state where it is placed, you end up with a two-kingdoms approach, it seems to me. This is what makes me uncomfortable, though I am in complete agreement with many of his concerns. My main bone of contention with him is his critique of the notion of human rights, inalienable rights, a notion inherited by the Enlightenment and central to the values of liberal democracy, which he calls “completely incoherent.”

In the book, this discussion comes up when he discusses with approval Pope John Paul II’s encyclical *Centesimus Annus*. Unlike other recent papal documents, this one, thankfully, he adds, tones down its liberal language of “rights.” These rights are not “primary moral notions,” but rather “subordinate to prior obligation.” In other words, “truth is prior to any account of rights.” And so freedom is not an end in itself, but it is “subordinate to the discernment and articulation of the truth (p. 131).

Steven Carter, a law professor, best-selling novelist and columnist for *Christianity Today*, himself published a book on America and war the same year Hauerwas did. Carter, an African-American who otherwise is usually supportive of President Obama, came down hard on him in *The Violence of Peace: America’s Wars in the Age of Obama*. The next year he wrote an article for a law journal (*Law and Contemporary Problems*) entitled, “Must Liberalism Be Violent? A Reflection on the Work of Stanley Hauerwas.” In a nutshell, Carter argues that Hauerwas, in failing to distinguish between the violence of war, whether in self-defense or as aggression – and the violence of the state in order to enforce its laws has declared the modern nation-state, and the United States in particular, irredeemable. This also means that any attempt to change the system is wrong-headed and vain.

“Although he is rarely explicit about the point,” notes Carter, “his work carries the implication that he rejects the liberal dichotomy between law and force. He sees the law as fundamentally violent, particularly toward dissenting communities, and, in America, he sees law, culture, and capitalism united in a totalitarian effort to craft one sort of person only—the sort who sees truth as less important than freedom” (p. 209). Hauerwas, then, completely rejects the central tenet of modern liberalism made famous by philosopher John Rawls: the priority of the right over the good. For Rawls, various communities support the laws of the land on the basis of an “overlapping consensus,” that is, people with different “comprehensive doctrines,” whether religious or political, come together on the basis of a minimal agreement about justice.

As we saw earlier, for Hauerwas truth precedes right or a state’s laws, which includes of course the notion of human rights, now inscribed in the body of international law. For him, truth is about the story about Jesus the Christ that we as Christians embrace and inhabit through our daily practice – the story for which we are ready to die. In his words,

“ . . . the project of modernity was to produce people who believe they should have no story except the story they choose when they have no story. Such a story is called the story of freedom and is assumed to be irreversibly institutionalized economically as market capitalism and politically as democracy. That story and the institutions that embody it is the enemy we must attack through Christian preaching” (p. 209).

Compulsory education is understandably the fiercest battleground in our American culture wars, and Carter is very sympathetic to the complaints of many religious groups. There are plenty of secular educators who in the guise of critical thinking and tolerance make it their mission to indoctrinate the young. He even gives one example he calls “egregious,” that of a court case in which a family lost their battle to the Court of Appeals for the Sixth Circuit because the judges saw nothing religious or anti-religious in the curriculum in question. It was as if they were telling these parents that their child needed the skills to be able to accept or reject the religious instruction they were given. In essence, writes Carter, “It elevates choice to a status above other values, rejecting entirely the possibility that what liberalism calls choice is actually just another form of discipleship—a discipleship into the storylessness that Hauerwas describes—and thus, albeit unintentionally, into the values of consumerist capitalism, in which everything is up for grabs.” Anyway, you can see where this is going.

Still, is there any mandate for us, as followers of Jesus, to be salt and light in a dark, storyless world? And is there a creation mandate that we share with people of other faiths, including militant atheists? Can we and/or should we try to make the world a better place, or should we retreat into the four walls of our churches? Steven Carter is much more sanguine about that possibility than is Stanley Hauerwas. Carter offers a couple of examples of legal reforms that would “make space for the construction and nurturing of the very communities of meaning and discipline that Hauerwas believes are necessary to Christian life and witness” (p. 215). But that is still a defensive position, in my estimation. My question is, how can Christians impact the wider society in the US and globally in a way that demonstrates and points to the kingdom of God Jesus came to inaugurate?

After all, this whole discussion has ignored the central message of God’s kingdom. Though he doesn’t say it directly, Hauerwas seems to imply that the kingdom is confined to the church. But what if God’s Spirit is already at work all over the world, and even outside the church, where people, in the spirit of the Beatitudes, are crying out to the God they know, are brokenhearted, hunger for justice, mourn over their sins and the sins of their people, show mercy and work for peace? As far as we can tell, these Buddhists, Hindus, Muslims, seculars or whatever, are not “saved,” but they are groping for the truth in the right direction. They are living up to the best they know of what God’s creatures should do. Certainly Jews, Muslims and Christians easily share this conviction that in doing so they are indeed living up to their calling as God’s trustees of creation.

Pope Francis’ first official document, a pastoral letter entitled *Evangelii Gaudium* (Joy of the Gospel) exhorts Catholics worldwide to live out their faith so as to attract non-Christians to the love of Jesus. The Church as a whole, he repeats, should be focused primarily on its mission:

“I dream of a ‘missionary option’, that is, a missionary impulse capable of transforming everything, so that the Church’s customs, ways of doing things, times and schedules, language and structures can be suitably channeled for the evangelization of today’s world rather than for her self-preservation” (p. 25).

This mission, he underscores, is firmly rooted in God’s kingdom:

“The Gospel is about the kingdom of God (cf. *Lk* 4:43); it is about loving God who reigns in our world. To the extent that he reigns within us, the life of society will be a setting for universal fraternity, justice, peace and dignity. Both Christian preaching and life, then, are meant to have an impact on society” (p. 142).

In this mission, we must realize our solidarity with those around us. We were all created in God’s image, and as such, we are brothers and sisters and “the earth is our common home” (p. 145). God reprimanded Cain and severely punished him for murdering his brother and then flippantly retorting, “Am I my brother’s keeper?” In fact, he was, and so are we, as in the Parable of the Good Samaritan. This solidarity, Jesus taught, is first and foremost with those most vulnerable and needy – also that Catholic doctrine of the preferential option for the poor. And so in economic terms, human solidarity takes precedence over private property:

“Solidarity is a spontaneous reaction by those who recognize that the social function of property and the universal destination of goods are realities which come before private property. The private ownership of goods is justified by the need to protect and increase them, so that they can better serve the common good; for this reason, solidarity must be lived as the decision to restore to the poor what belongs to them” (p. 149).

It’s in that context that you have to read this famous paragraph, quoted so often:

“Just as the commandment ‘Thou shalt not kill’ sets a clear limit in order to safeguard the value of human life, today we also have to say ‘thou shalt not’ to an economy of exclusion and inequality. Such an economy kills. How can it be that it is not a news item when an elderly homeless person dies of exposure, but it is news when the stock market loses two points? This is a case of exclusion. Can we continue to stand by when food is thrown away while people are starving? This is a case of inequality” (p. 45).

I close with the thought with which I began. As fellow human beings created in God’s image, we share by word and deed the good news of God’s kingdom come in the person of his Son and spreading through the power of his Holy Spirit. But as we reach out in priority to the hurting, the enslaved, and even as we try to dismantle the structures of injustice imbedded in the political and social systems of our world, we meet many others who are already engaged in this costly quest for justice. And they are not followers of Jesus. Yet the language of human rights and the concept of the inalienable dignity of each human being is a language we can share. It certainly doesn’t contain the whole gospel, but it is common ground because of creation – we are God’s deputies on earth empowered to rule together with justice and love. As we lead the way forward, we point to the kingdom of God, imperfectly here among us all, but fully to be revealed when Jesus returns.