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Review: With the Grain of the Universe: the Church's Witness and Natural Theology

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as in 1947 and should be read by all those with a serious commitment to applying a Kingdom theology to every aspect of life. But, contemporary evangelicalism also needs to recover something we have lost along the way—a confessional conviction on matters of God, revelation, and authority. Otherwise, we may find ourselves relevant to contemporary crisis but with nothing left to say. After all, sometimes an uneasy conscience just is not enough.

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With the Grain of the Universe: The Church's Witness and Natural Theology. By Stanley Hauerwas. Grand Rapids: Brazos, 2002, 249 pp., n.p.

Karl Barth as the Church's greatest modern natural theologian? Karl Barth and Thomas Aquinas shoulder to shoulder against modern attempts at natural theology apart from a full doctrine of God revealed in Jesus Christ? John Howard Yoder and John Paul II together as co-exemplars of the Church's cross-bearing witness to Christ and so standing "with the grain of the universe" of the Creator-Redeemer God? Is this but proof that Stanley Hauerwas is, as *Time* has said, "contemporary theology's foremost intellectual provocateur?" No, yes, and no.

That Hauerwas never thought he would be asked to give the Gifford Lectures is understandable, given the Gifford penchant for philosophers and philosophically-oriented scientists rather than theological ethicists. But also, given Lord Gifford's stipulation that the lectures pursue the question of the "All, the First and only Cause, the Sole Being" via (Newtonian) scientific methodology, Hauerwas's uncompromising christocentric, Trinitarian Christian faith would seem at odds with Gifford. Indeed, *With the Grain of the Universe* is in many respects the "anti-Gifford" Gifford Lectures, or better, the Gifford Lectureship that, at the "end of Christendom," holds a mirror to its long and prestigious history of philosophical-theological contribution and finds it wanting at its core—with at least one exception: the witness of Karl Barth.

Somewhat akin to Marx's "adjustment" of Hegel, Hauerwas adjusts the Gifford Lectures by moving to the central concerns of his lectures via critical analysis of three of the most well known and influential of the previous Gifford lecturers: William James, Reinhold Niebuhr, and Karl Barth as representatives, to show that the very premise of the Lectures is wrong-headed and contrary to the real "grain of the universe."

It is important to note that the title was taken from an article by Mennonite theologian and ethicist John Howard Yoder. He states that the strong are not as strong as they think, but the "people who bare crosses are working with the grain of the universe." One does not come to that belief mechanically, statistically, or militarily, but "... by sharing the life of those who sing about the Resurrection of the slain Lamb." If this universe is the good creation of the triune God, the God self-revealed in Jesus Christ, then a full doctrine of God, indeed a fully orthodox Christology, can be the only basis for faithfully recognizing what this creation declares about the living Creator Redeemer God. If so, then it is only "those who bear crosses," "witnesses," *the Church* as "witness" to its Savior, who can stand "with the grain of the universe."

William James may be the quintessential Gifford lecturer. From James's background in the sciences and philosophy (pragmatism), from struggles with the meaning of his own life and of humanity in general, Hauerwas shows that James attempted to save "scientifically" human significance in a world that the sciences had turned into one of vast impersonal chance. His pragmatism, Darwinism and "religious" humanism combined to transform natural theology from a way of thinking that moves from creation

toward God to "religious psychology" that attempts to uncover human significance within the "varieties of our human religious experience" (i.e. subjectivity). So, from James's life and thought, and centrally from his Gifford Lectures, Hauerwas explains how James's account of religious experience was a crucial element of his strategy to sustain human hope in a way sufficient to promote "the human endeavor." Even today James's humanism is exceedingly seductive, notably to those within religious traditions, for we recognize ourselves in his sympathetic portrayals of the "healthy minded." But James's religious guest for human worth in an impersonal universe not only turns God into something akin to Kant's postulated God—in Kant's terms "the (divine) condition of the possibility" of our significance—but is radically reductionistic; it must be resisted by those who would stand within historical Christian communities of faith. In fact, Hauerwas exposes James's clear anti-Christian purpose in *Varieties* and his other works. As Emerson's "theologian," and so as theologian of the "new American religion of the human Spirit," James regarded democracy as the emerging nature of the universe and, if so, Christianity was an impediment to his democratic faith.

Reinhold Niebuhr has been regarded as the "Christian" answer to William James. Yet the title of his Gifford Lectures, *The Nature and Destiny of Man*, makes clear the dubitability of such a claim. Again, Hauerwas sets Niebuhr's Lectures in the context of his developing thought. Though often described as a representative of neo-orthodoxy, Niebuhr grew up as a liberal, heir of the Harnack-Troeltsch tradition. Hauerwas unpacks the formative connection between Niebuhr's first serious theological work, "The Validity and Certainty of Religious Knowledge" (B.D. thesis, 1914), and his subsequent works—including *Nature and Destiny*. Thus, early on Niebuhr established his roots in James by arguing pragmatically that naturalism is inadequate in the face of the human religious need, and the demand for religion and religious truth is the demand for personality within an impersonal universe. Humanity cannot understand itself without the permanent moral order of a personal transcendent God; therefore, it needs a personal God in the moral struggles of human lives—moral struggles without meaning if there is no God. Pragmatically, humanity needs religion that, in turn, needs a transcendent God. But, as Hauerwas rightly points out, this is not the God of orthodoxy (neo- or otherwise). Niebuhr was very critical of Barth, rejected the designation "neo-orthodox," and held consistently to the Jesus of modern historical criticism. He was linked to Barth only because he came to see (before his Gifford Lectures) the pervasiveness and radicality of human sinfulness and so the foolishness of liberal optimism about humanity. But throughout his life Niebuhr remained committed to theological liberalism, as formed by Jamesian pragmatism. In apparent contrast to James, though, Niebuhr remained an "apologist" for Christianity. Yet Hauerwas is right on the mark in claiming that here, too, Niebuhr was thoroughly Jamesian. The progression of Niebuhr's thought was from human need to God, rather than from God to humanity. In this way, Christianity could be a resource for the spiritual regeneration of Western civilization. Niebuhr's blend of James, Troeltsch, and Bergsonian personalism undergirded the liberal Christian tradition for the sake of Western culture and democracy. In contrast to James, then, Niebuhr made Christianity a trusted player in the liberal game of tolerance. But like James's god, Niebuhr's god appears to be no more than a human projection, at best a domesticated god, and as such falls prey to the critique of Feuerbach. As I heard Hauerwas once state, "Niebuhr was an atheist; he just didn't know it." His amalgamation of Troeltsch and especially James could neither convince the secularists nor sustain the lives of Christians. And, very important to Hauerwas's argument, Niebuhr gave no significant account of the church. Thus, as Hauerwas again argues, Niebuhr is not the Christian alternative to James.

As a hero—not as *the* hero of Hauerwas's argument—Karl Barth is the Christian alternative to the unsustainable attempt to make world- or human-centered natural

theology a subject analogous to the physical sciences apart from a full doctrine of God. As reflected in the subtitle, Karl Barth, as a thoroughly Christocentric, Trinitarian Christian, bore witness to the Creator-Redeemer God. In *CDI/1*, Barth stated that his purpose was to emphasize preaching, thus theology, and so Christian speech is first to last about God. Unlike James and Niebuhr, Barth sustained confident Christian speech, i.e. witness. Herein it is Hauerwas's concern to show that Barth, despite his "Nein" to Brunner's "point of contact," in his *Church Dogmatics* as an immense theological metaphysics, does provide the resources necessary for developing a theologically adequate natural theology; that Barth has made clear, like Aquinas in his *Summa*, that natural theology cannot be faithfully done apart from or "in front of" (*a priori*) a full doctrine of the triune God. As such, the real nature of natural theology is to be found in witnesses to the crucified and risen Christ. The *CD* is also a massive attempt to overturn the epistemological prejudices of modernity.

From first to last, then, Barth's *Dogmatics* was intended to make the reader a more adequate disciple and knower of God, and so a faithful witness. This results from the recognition that the truth that is Jesus Christ is not one truth among others but is "the universal truth of God, the *prima veritas*, which is also the *ultima veritas*," because in Jesus Christ God has created all things. Humanity, the cosmos, all that exists in him and for him, the Almighty Word. To know Christ is to know all. For Barth theology, natural or otherwise, is about God, the God disclosed decisively, historically, redemptively in Jesus, crucified and risen; it is not from human reason, religion, experience or the sciences. If we get our theology (God) wrong, we get the world wrong. In *CD* Barth sought to help his readers acquire skills necessary to see all that is *as it is*. For Barth, as true witness of the Creator-Redeemer God, God is the beginning, not the end of speech, the revealer, and so he who reveals and lays claim to humanity—who we are and what we must do. In the aftermath of Christendom and against the modernist, self-projecting, self-centered stream of theological liberalism, Karl Barth not only refused its "crumbs" but galvanized Christianity's historical resources to declare the fully visible Christian gospel, and so "do theology without reservation." That, says Hauerwas, is what Barth accomplished and sustained throughout the *CD* and in his life as witness. But further for Barth, participation as witness in grateful response to God's revelation cannot be intelligible apart from *the church*. According to Hauerwas, Barth's understanding of the possibility of our knowledge of God (which follows its actuality in Jesus Christ, i.e. non-abstract) must conclude by reckoning with his understanding of the moral life that the church makes possible. Yet Hauerwas finds that at just this critical point, Barth gave away too much to the "worldliness of the world" and so undercut too much of the church's call to active, forthright witness in the face of that very worldliness as rebellion against the living God. But as noted above, Barth, the faithful witness to the God who became incarnate in Jesus Christ, is a hero, *not the hero*, of Hauerwas's theological narrative.

So what is the hero? The church both *is* and *ought* to be Hauerwas's hero (to use a phrase Hauerwas uses many times) "to the extent" that it truthfully and faithfully bears witness to the one true and living God, and so lives "with the grain of the universe." Thus, it is in Hauerwas's multi-textured final lecture that he brings to clarity that it is the church, as and "to the extent" that it bears witness to Jesus Christ, that is central and properly natural to a truly natural theology. Only *that* God—the triune God of Christian speech, the God who is known as Jesus Christ—is also the Creator God evidenced in his creation. Hence, the life of Karl Barth, and more recently the lives of such apparently disparate Christians as Mennonite John Howard Yoder and Pope John Paul II (among others) bear faithful (and essentially pacifist) witness to the crucified and risen Christ. Through the whole of the lectures, but especially in the last, Hauerwas seems to make much narrative and methodological use of the late James William McClendon's "Biography as Theology" (cf. McClendon's *Systematic Theology*,

especially volume three, *Witness*). These lives, seemingly so different but unified in their christocentricity, testify to the truth of the God revealed in Jesus Christ and by the Spirit. "By *their* fruit shall we know (*His*) truthfulness." These lives, as representing the church (despite its prevalent faithlessness), are said to be not only working with, but apparently *reveal*, the grain of the universe—and so its Creator who gave his only begotten Son.

Hauerwas's Gifford Lectures are surely "against the grain" of most Giffords, but at the same time they are faithful to his corrected emphases, centered in Christ. If the Redeemer is also the Creator, if the second person of the triune Godhead, the eternal *Logos*, became incarnate as Jesus Christ, how could it possibly be otherwise? Thus, I am essentially in agreement with Hauerwas that natural theology cannot be truthfully, faith-fully done apart from a full doctrine of God. Again, if one does not get God right, one will not get the world (as it is) right. Thus, Hauerwas's formulation and presentation of Barth's theological, Christocentric priority—so that Barth's life and, above all, the church's witness are shown to be *natural* to this world as God's own—is both startling and effective. Hauerwas's narrative portrayals of James, and most notably Niebuhr and Barth, theo-biographically bring into bold relief an often unseen vision of twentieth-century theology—and in a way that allows Hauerwas to employ and embody his own commitment to narrative theology. And I must say that it is about time that Niebuhr's theological liberalism was shown for what it was. Many more accolades could be added.

While largely agreeing with "the grain" of Hauerwas's argument, I do have some concerns. First, what/which "church" is it that, by its witness, works with the grain of the universe? I think that the essence, distinctives, and central foci of a Yoder's Mennonite ecclesiology (believers' church) and those of John Paul II's Roman Catholic Church (as reflected not only in Vatican II but in all the documents and traditions of the Church's Magisterium), as well as those of Hauerwas's Methodist Church and Barth's Swiss Reformed Church, must not be brushed aside as insignificant. Faithful Mennonites and Roman Catholics are not referring to the same entity when they say "church." Thus, Hauerwas's church seems to be an abstraction. This is certainly not intended, given the concrete, historical nature of the witness that the church bears. I was also puzzled by the fact that the church is not only to witness to Christ and to produce such witnesses, but that (if I understand correctly) the church witnesses to its own witnesses. How can the church bear witness to *any* other than to the God revealed in Christ. This tends toward hagiography that glosses over the "warts" of the "saints" (and I know both Barth and Yoder, as examples, had their ample share). I for one do not find that genre to have any possible authority. All viewpoints (even atheists) have their "saints," each group canceling out the other. Also, because of its theo-biographical narrative format, many parts of this work read like book analyses strung together (though given Hauerwas's design, it would have been difficult to do otherwise where it does occur). Interestingly, Barth's own Gifford Lectures play essentially no role in Hauerwas's argument. And, given the formative role Christian pacifism plays in the last lecture, is it possible that the church is the church "only to the extent" that it espouses Christian pacifism ("bearing crosses")? If so, that would be an unusual ecclesiology indeed and outside the grain of the church's understanding of itself through twenty centuries. Christian positions like Paul Ramsey's "just war theory" do not appear incoherent upon their own hermeneutical bases (as does Yoder's upon his). As an aside, until the last chapter, Hauerwas's references to the Trinity, unlike Barth's usage, avoid resemblance to the Nicene-Constantinopolitan terminology. Furthermore, what is expressed in interesting formulas—"God speaking in Christ" or "the Incarnation of the God-self," rather than the Son—while more theo-linguistically current, makes Hauerwas *appear* to be a modalist, or a trinitarian adoptionist (like Ted Peters), or one for whom "Trinity" is not a reference

to the actual tri-personality of God but rather a mere revelatory symbol, a way of speaking (e.g. Tillich). Yet knowing Hauerwas's commitment to the orthodox doctrine of the Trinity, I know that such could not have been his intention.

This is a very enlightening, surprising, corrective, instructive work. Highly recommended.

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The Untamed God: A Philosophical Exploration of Divine Perfection, Simplicity and Immutability. By Jay Wesley Richards. Downers Grove: InterVarsity, 2003, 267 pages, \$26.00 paper.

In a *tour de force* exploring contemporary theology proper, Jay W. Richards, Vice-President of the Discovery Institute, navigates the subtle waters between traditional and current ideas of God to address the knotty problems of divine perfection, self-existence, simplicity, and immutability. The book models a well-researched and argued way of using biblical material as well as the tools of philosophy in doing (and teaching) theological studies.

The author upholds the necessary tenets of classical theism while underscoring its weaknesses in view of creation (is it better that the world and God exist than that only God exists?) and the incarnation (God's change of state from perfection to "relative ignorance, suffering, and degradation"; p. 16).

The basic question theologian-philosophers hold in tension is quite clear: "Can we hold to a biblical normativity, the principle of perfection, and the sovereign-aseity conviction while preserving God's *real* relationships with contingent creation and not view the world as one of God's constituents?" Richards expounds and evaluates two influential twentieth-century thinkers—Karl Barth and his *actualist substantialism*, and Charles Hartshorne and his *surrelativist dipolarity*—before proposing his theological essentialism in the context of theism. Without deferring to an open theism (and its critiques of classical theism), Richards notes, "Christians should affirm that God has an essence, which include his perfections and essential properties, and should attribute to God essential and contingent properties" (p. 17). In that distinction between God's essential and contingent properties *in a theistic sense* lies the resources of essentialism to support a biblical view of God.

The author does remarkable work in harnessing the apparatuses of modal logic in analytical philosophy—the S5 version, along with "possible-worlds" semantics—to critically assess the classical and process options in order to come up with an important alternative for Christian theists. The outline of his argument may be laid out thus:

1. S5 logic keeps from assigning temporal modalities to God. "The characteristic axiom of S5 makes the modal status of all propositions necessary—either necessarily necessary, necessarily possible, necessarily contingent or necessarily impossible" (p. 53–54).
2. God, by logic (confirming intuition), is necessarily necessary in all possible worlds, and essentialism can be used to attribute properties and perfections to the triune God. God has essential properties, which are just those properties he has in every possible world—for example, traditional perfections such as the perfection of power, knowledge, freedom, and goodness.



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