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State of the University: Academic Knowledges and the Knowledge of God (Book Review)

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Book Reviews

Hauerwas, Stanley. *The State of the University: Academic Knowledges and the Knowledge of God*. Oxford: Blackwell Publishing, 2007. 222 pages. ISBN-978-1-4051-6248-7. Reviewed by Jason Lief, Instructor of Theology and Youth Ministry, Dordt College, Iowa.

What are universities for? Whom do they serve? These two questions provide the foundation of Stanley Hauerwas' book *The State of the University: Academic Knowledges and the Knowledge of God*, a collection of his essays focusing upon the significance of the university for the Christian community. According to Hauerwas, who is the Gilbert T. Rowe Professor of Christian Ethics at Duke University, all institutions of higher learning should wrestle with these questions in order to become aware of their purpose and influence. Although many slogans and mantras herald the ideals of education, seldom do institutions, both public and private, acknowledge the dissonance between rhetoric and praxis. In asking these questions, Hauerwas prods the Christian community to examine its answers in the context of the biblical narrative.

Throughout these essays Hauerwas engages the thought of a variety of individuals, including Yale president Richard Levin, Cardinal John Henry Newman, Gregory of Nazianzus, and Rowan Williams. He discusses such topics as monastic remnants in Ireland, stone cutting, and the war in Iraq. In the context of this diversity, three interconnected themes develop: (a) the culpability of the university in establishing a language that has undermined the possibility of discourse, (b) the use of that language in legitimizing Constantinianism (both within the Christian community and modern secularism), and (c) the role of the university in the moral formation of the people it serves.

In his essay titled "What Would a Christian University Look Like?" Hauerwas discusses the ideas of Wendall Berry, a critic of the modern university, who believes that the "...violence of education is...to be found in the destruction of language and community" (99). According to Hauerwas, the language of the university has been used to describe the world in a particular way, "securing power" and legitimizing current political, economic, and social structures. "Objectivity" and "specialization" have rendered the language and traditions of local communities impotent, emphasizing the validity of objective, scientific, truth as proclaimed by specialized experts. In the context of the university, such language results in a disconnected curriculum focused upon the investigation of so-called objective truth. The result is the formation of a "public" consisting of free—meaning disconnected—individuals. Hauerwas believes this abstraction allows for the influence of money, of which he writes, "there is no 'abstraction' more

abstract than money" (98). This is demonstrated by the fact that the "disciplines that flourish in the contemporary university are those that study money (economics), are the source of money (sciences), or are linked, often it seems mistakenly, to future chances of being in an occupation or profession that promises a high earning standard" (84).

Sadly, Christian institutions use language in a similar way, employing Christian rhetoric to legitimize the status quo. The curricula of many Christian institutions are just as disconnected as their secular counterparts—a situation that Hauerwas believes contributes to the number of college-educated people who abandon the faith. He writes, "That students took course after course in which there was no discernable connection to Christian claims about the way things are surely created the conditions that made the conclusion that Christianity is at best irrelevant, and at worst, false" (47). Hauerwas contends that for many Christian institutions, the "Christian" aspect is reduced to the student's personal life, expressed in residential life programs. Thus, rather than being challenged to cultivate a language that describes the world from the perspective of the gospel, Christian higher education legitimizes the present order by preparing students to take their place within the structures of the status quo.

All of this reflects for Hauerwas the influence of "Constantinianism"—a term he uses to describe the appropriation of Christian symbols and language by the dominant culture to support and legitimize the present order. The privatization of Christianity in this context means that theological language, such as the "kingdom of God," provides divine confirmation of the status quo. He also refers to "secularization" as the university-produced form of "neo Constantinianism." Hauerwas writes, "Universities, whether private or public, have been the crucial institutions for developing the knowledges to legitimate this understanding of the secular . . . Now the university is expected to produce people educated to serve the bureaucracies of modernity in which it is assumed the state is crucial for an ordered world" (179). In the context of modernity the language of "secularism" drains Christianity of its eschatological power, establishing a university-supported "neo Constantinian" paradigm, which works to maintain the status quo.

The solution, according to Hauerwas, is for Christians to reclaim their identity as an alternative prophetic witness

to the world. In his essay “Carving Stone or Learning to Speak Christian,” Hauerwas compares Christianity to the stone-cutting trade; to be “Christian” means to be immersed in a community with particular stories, symbols, and language that are reflected in a particular way of living. In this context, the Christian university must be a place where people are formed by and for the Christian community. Here, a way of speaking is developed that redefines and confronts the world. Within such a university, disciplines converse with, challenge, and correct each other, and faith engages the academic realm as we seek to know truth. Such a place forms and shapes people to become like Gregory of Nazianzus, who not only wanted to “do something for the poor” but loved the poor and worked to create “liturgical action in which the poor and the leper, through the power of beautiful words, were made the center of a city ruled by Christ” (197).

Overall, Hauerwas makes a strong argument, engaging a variety of ideas while effectively utilizing analogies and stories to support his points. Hauerwas’ ideas reflect the influence of John Howard Yoder, as well as the neo-orthodoxy of Karl Barth, and some might take issue with the implications of these theological foundations. Yet, his message transcends traditional interpretations of the “Christianity and culture” debate with a universal call for the Christian community to reflect upon the purpose and function of the university in the context of the gospel.

What is missing, however, is a discussion concerning the relationship between the Christian community and existing social structures. In calling for Christians to establish an alternative culture, he does not discuss the nature of such structures (are they inherently good or bad?) or whether they might be transformed by the gospel. In creating its own material culture, does the Christian community copy the existing structures of the dominant culture, or do we create entirely new ones? Further, Hauerwas minimizes the role of Christian educational institutions

in forming graduates who participate in the structures of dominant culture as a witness to the gospel. Although it is much easier to maintain an alternative community in separation from the dominant culture, Hauerwas’ call for the Christian community to “remain in” and “exist for” the world necessarily means that influence will go both ways. The Christian community cannot influence the world without the world in turn exacting some degree of influence upon the community. Hauerwas believes that the university must play a significant role within the Christian community for establishing a material culture in contrast to the dominant culture. He does not, however, provide a realistic description of how this can be accomplished without falling into “Constantinianism.”

Regardless, this collection of essays represents a significant challenge for all Christians involved in higher education, from presidents and professors to students and constituents. Hauerwas passionately demonstrates the need for the Christian community to reclaim the university, not just for job training but as a place to develop a different way of speaking and living in the world. Too often Christian educational institutions at every level utilize Christian jargon to legitimize the status quo. Methods of teaching, course offerings, athletic programs, and administrative policies are at times influenced more by movements within the dominant culture than by faithful obedience to the gospel. As money increasingly becomes the driving force in all forms of higher education, Hauerwas prophetically calls Christian institutions with millions of dollars invested in infrastructure, athletic programs, and endowments to become institutions for the poor. He may not give us a clear picture of how this might be accomplished, but through this book Hauerwas summons institutions of higher education to reclaim their place within the Christian community, being informed not by the political, economic, and cultural forces of the dominant culture but being formed by the gospel of Jesus Christ.

Robinson, Marilynne. *Home*. New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2008. 322 pp. ISBN 978-0-374-29910-1. Reviewed by David Schelhaas, Emeritus Professor of English at Dordt College.

I must confess that rarely have I looked forward so eagerly to a new novel as I have to Marilynne Robinson’s *Home*, her sequel to the Pulitzer Prize-winning *Gilead*. (Robinson is a professor at the Iowa Writer’s Workshop, and in addition to being a teacher and novelist, is highly regarded for her writings on the work of John Calvin.) As it turns out, *Home* is not a sequel. Even though it is set in the town of Gilead and has the same cast of characters, it does not tell us what happened *next* in the lives of the Reverends Ames and Boughten or the other characters. It tells us what was happening at the same time to the same characters but from a different point of view—something for which I have no name. Perhaps we could call it a

“simulquel.”

At first glance this seems an audacious undertaking. How can she set the same cast of characters in the same small, dull Iowa town in almost exactly the same span of time and expect to make a second novel that engages her readers? Yet Robinson does engage us and enlightens us about the power of place, the paradoxical nature of home, the complexity of relationships between parents and children and between siblings, the mystery of good and evil, the wrestling of unbelief with belief, and finally, the wonder of love and grace. She does it with the sheer power of her language and an imagination that provides marvelously subtle insights into the psyches of her