Thorn in the side

by Richard Fox in the November 21, 2001 issue

With the Grain of the Universe: The Church's Witness and Natural Theology. By Stanley Hauerwas. Brazos Press, 250 pp., $22.99.

Religious liberals need Stanley Hauerwas, a perpetual disturber of their peace. Religious conservatives can find him fruitfully unsettling too, since he is a pacifist and opposes capital punishment. But he offers basic reassurance to theological conservatives, who relish his steady insistence that the Christian message is not only true, but provides the one true account of "the way things are," of "the way the world is." Christians, he says, proclaim the truth that God revealed in Jesus. Christianity is not just "their truth, but the truth for everyone."

Hauerwas is a painful thorn in any liberal's side, but Christian liberals are his special target. He heaps scorn on the idea that Christianity can be or should be reconciled with modern culture. He thinks liberal Christians, pathetically eager to fit in to the mainstream of modernity, are asserting not the authentic gospel but a "disguised humanism." Protestant liberals, he says, take "humans, not God, as the center of Christian faith." In his estimation liberalism and modernity deserve each other. They've long since given up on witnessing to the unvarying truth that is the God made manifest in Jesus Christ.

Once the wounded liberal extracts the Hauerwasian thorn, she realizes that Hauerwas has damaged only her complacency, not her faith. He has issued a timely wake-up call and inadvertently supplied a reminder of what is distinctive and worthwhile about liberalism, secular as well as religious. At his best he has even modeled how one should proceed in laying out whatever it is that one believes. One should embark on a careful, generous-minded exposition of what one's opponents hold dear, taking their ideas at their strongest, not their weakest. Hauerwas teaches an ethics of argument: develop and proclaim your views in sympathetic appreciation of those with whom you most fundamentally disagree.

As it happens, Hauerwas is much more diligent in being fair to individual liberals and moderns than he is to "liberalism" and "modernity," which become handy labels for

what he most reviles. Yet he strives to explicate fully the liberal beliefs of his main antagonists, William James and Reinhold Niebuhr.

With the Grain of the Universe is the published version of Hauerwas's Gifford Lectures, delivered earlier this year at the University of St. Andrews. The purpose of the lectureship, according to Lord Adam Gifford's will, is to treat theology "as a strictly natural science," that of "Infinite Being, without reference to or reliance upon any supposed special exceptional or so-called miraculous revelation."

Naturally, Hauerwas rejects the idea that there can be any such science. But while rejecting Gifford's position he affirms the notion that Christian theology, correctly understood, can be taken as a natural theology. It is natural theology because Christians, knowing the world through God's revelation of himself, are equipped to "see the world as it is, and not as it appears." Their faith is fully in accord "with the grain of the universe," in the phrase Hauerwas borrows from the Mennonite theologian John Howard Yoder.

For his lectures Hauerwas chooses the structural expedient of explicating the ideas of three previous Gifford lecturers: William James (whose lectures were published as *The Varieties of Religious Experience*), Reinhold Niebuhr (*The Nature and Destiny of Man*) and Karl Barth (*The Knowledge of God and the Service of God according to the Teaching of the Reformation*). At first it seems a strange strategic choice. Why doesn't Hauerwas spend more time telling us what he thinks, instead of what these three earlier intellectual giants thought? Although his exposition of their ideas is peppered with his own judgments (often in dense, intricate but very rewarding footnotes that will tax every reader's patience and eyesight), he keeps his distance from his own text. He tells us he doesn't want the book to be about him or his ideas, ground "well-plowed," he says, in his earlier books.

He claims a special aversion to systematizing, and rejects the suggestion made by friends that he try in his final lecture to "pull everything together." In that lecture on "the necessity of witness" Hauerwas gives brief attention to three of his heroes--Yoder, Pope John Paul II and Dorothy Day--while reiterating his central claim that "witness is not simply something Christians 'do,' but is at the heart of understanding how that to which Christians witness is true. If lives like theirs did not exist, then my argument could not help but appear as just another 'idealism.'"

But the heart of Hauerwas's lectures is his thorough exposition of James, Niebuhr and Barth. James and Niebuhr serve him as exemplars of liberal modernity whose errors are transcended once and for all by the Christocentric Barth. But Hauerwas is not in the least dismissive toward James and Niebuhr. He lays out their intellectual and biographical trajectories in painstaking detail. For the pragmatist James the cross-cultural study of religion was essential because it presented human beings at the passionate peak of their shared experience. He was not a Christian believer himself, but he was a believer in "faith" as a key to personal and communal well-being. Indeed, his 1907 book *Pragmatism* was framed as a defense of religion, a fact often overlooked in today's broad revival of pragmatism.

Niebuhr's Christian apologetics, Hauerwas shows, took the form of a Christianizing of James. Human experience was the starting point for inquiry. The Bible was true not just because it was God's revelation but because it offered a perspective that open-minded human seekers could know was faithful to their experience. Christianity was necessary as well as true because in Niebuhr's eyes it was the only available faith that challenged men and women to struggle for justice while chastising them for their sins. Niebuhr's formulation was irresistibly appealing to many liberals willing to acknowledge the plain fact that their own experience was laced with sin, however full of grace it might also be.

Niebuhr's last-ditch effort to make Christianity reasonable was in Hauerwas's view bound to fail. It might soothe mid-20th-century liberals as they left their small-town Protestantism behind or confronted the disasters of war and depression. But by the late 20th century modern-minded liberals would find James more palatable than Niebuhr. "Why go through Niebuhr's verbal gymnastics to save the symbols of Christianity," Hauerwas asks, "when James can give you everything Niebuhr wanted in a less confused way?"

With the failure of the Niebuhrian prescription--accommodate liberal secular modernity but gussy it up in noble religious garb--the Barthian alternative, says Hauerwas, finally became persuasive. It had been "unintelligible in a Niebuhrian world." Now Niebuhr became unintelligible. Modern liberal seekers found him unnecessarily complicated or downbeat, while Christians found his theology thin and secular. Barth taught the essential lesson: stop trying to make Christianity seem reasonable, stop catering to the secular modernists, start preaching the gospel and witnessing to the crucified Lord. Christians are those who refuse to make peace with the world, who declare war on it by realizing that "the habits of our speech must be

disciplined by the God found in Jesus Christ."

Liberal Christians can thank Hauerwas for being so careful to identify what James and Niebuhr cared most about: the growth of individuals as they pursue peak experiences of intimate knowledge (James) and build on those experiences to spread justice in the world (Niebuhr). James and Niebuhr admired all God-intoxicated prophets, yet they cherished secular prophets too (James venerated Whitman, Niebuhr celebrated his secular Jewish friend Fred Butzel). They thought civilization needed religion because despite the danger that religion could turn into fanaticism or narrow-mindedness, it often prompted human beings to strive realistically and humbly for high ideals.

Hauerwas is right that Niebuhr was fundamentally Jamesian. But sometimes he makes Niebuhr more secular than he really was. Maybe Hauerwas is right when he claims that "Niebuhr's god is not a god capable of offering salvation in any material sense." Too bad Niebuhr can't reply to that charge himself. I suspect he'd reaffirm his view that Christian salvation would surely comprise bodily resurrection as well as spiritual survival. But then he'd consign the whole question of individual salvation to the back burner if not the dustbin. Certainly he would agree that there is a real God who can do as he pleases once we're dead, including raising us up in any material way that may make sense to him.

Niebuhr was at one with the Social Gospel in caring much more about social justice than about his own or anyone else's individual salvation. And of course social justice was not only about witnessing, but about political action to build coalitions, change laws, and shore up imperfect institutions that defend the poor and disadvantaged.

When Hauerwas asserts that liberal Christians are those who take "humans, not God, as the center of Christian faith," or when he says that one of "the most cherished conceits of modernity" is that "humans are the measure of all that is," he reveals that he has not thought hard enough about what liberalism and modernity mean to their proponents. He does not have to agree with them, of course, but he owes it to himself to know his enemy better than this.

From the liberal standpoint, modernity is not the desert of meaningless lifestyle-chasing Hauerwas implies it is (he appears to endorse Wendell Berry's judgment that the "dominant story of our age, undoubtedly, is that of adultery and divorce").

Liberal Christians typically put God at the center of their faith, not human beings. They typically believe that God is love, and as such knowable and accessible to them when they are at their best, that is, when they are cultivating love individually and socially. Some liberal Christians doubtless make the attainment of love too simple, as Niebuhr thought they did. But plenty of liberals have learned from him, from his predecessors like Walter Rauschenbusch and from his disciples like the now-late, always-great Robert McAfee Brown, that the path of love is the path of suffering.

With the Grain of the Universe shows Christian and secular liberals why James and Niebuhr are so important to their faith. James, like his hero Whitman, underwrites the quest for novel experience, for becoming more fully human. This was Emerson's way: living one's life in a quest for wider and wider circles of experience. Liberalism is about individuals getting to be who they decide they most truly are, according to their own lights, whether they are women or men, gay or straight, no matter what their color, cultural background or economic status. Liberal modernity is about choice, and helping others acquire the power to choose. It is about choosing again and again, remaining open throughout one's life to refashioning oneself. This can look like anarchy to many defenders of tradition. But now it is a tradition in its own right, a tradition (in the 19th-century U.S. alone) developed by Jefferson, Emerson, Fuller, Douglass, Whitman, Lincoln, Stanton, Anthony, Gilman, Rauschenbusch, Gladden, Debs, Dewey and James, among many others. It is a tradition that needs defending today more than ever. It is the tradition at the fountainhead of liberal and democratic freedom.

Hauerwas is right that an outlook based on the pursuit of individual autonomy may well launch people into idolatry, as they will often put themselves first, before other people and before God. If they deny their createdness, they are setting themselves up for a spiritual fall even if they finagle a worldly success. But liberal religion has been more vibrant in the modern era than Hauerwas imagines. Thanks to such teachers as James and Niebuhr, it holds in balance forces that traditionalists often wrongly consider incompatible: individual growth and a sense of personal limits, reason and revelation, science and faith, faith and doubt, the religious and the secular.

Liberals can learn a great deal from Stanley Hauerwas (and from his primary hero Karl Barth) about their common Christian faith. And they can learn something about the antiliberal sensibility. What may irk traditionalists the most about liberals is their comfort with uncertainty. For liberals the certainty that God is love opens up a lived

terrain of creative uncertainty. There they are called to labor open-endedly to overcome that blindness toward others that Christians of all stripes--disciples of James and Niebuhr, Barth and Hauerwas--know will always afflict us.