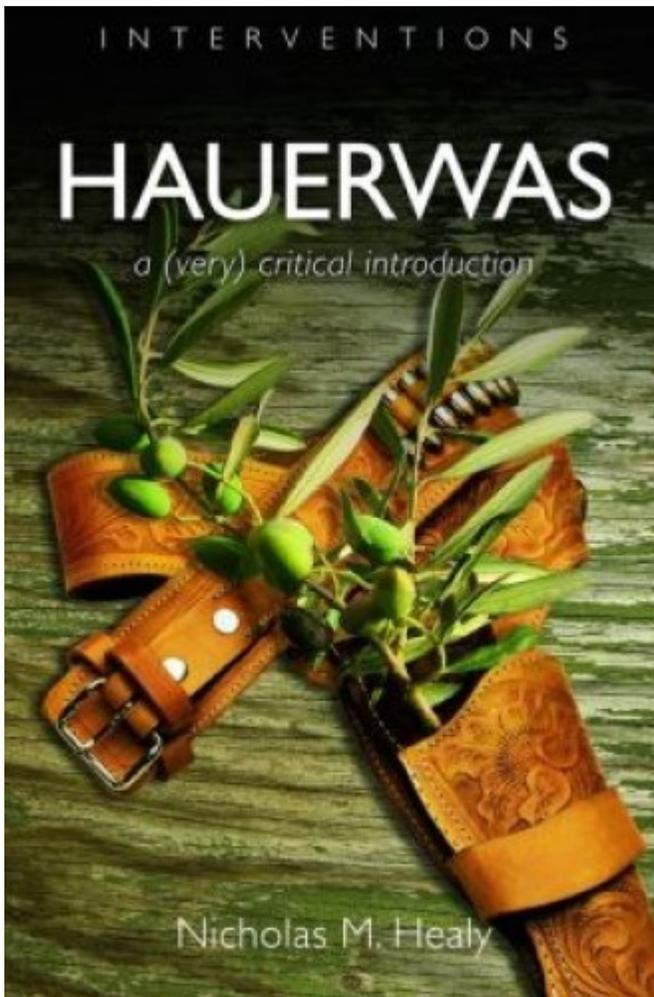


Hauerwas, by Nicholas M. Healy

reviewed by [Michael G. Cartwright](#) in the [July 9, 2014](#) issue

In Review



Hauerwas

By Nicholas M. Healy
Eerdmans

Reading Nicholas Healy's book on Stanley Hauerwas's work reminded me of Karl Barth's words about what it takes to read a theologian well enough to offer critique. According to John Godsey, Barth warned students reading Friedrich Schleiermacher's

great work *The Christian Faith* to hold back criticism. “Your first obligation is to read Schleiermacher himself and come to understand him from the inside; only then do you have a right to criticize him.”

To read a theologian from the inside does not mean that the reader has to do all the work. Barth provided practical guidance for his students, and Barth himself has been the focus of many searching attempts to read his *Church Dogmatics*. In particular, I find George Hunsinger’s book *How to Read Karl Barth* to be an exemplary model of what it means to provide a reader’s guide to the work of a particular theologian. By describing the interacting motifs that readers will encounter, Hunsinger helpfully exhibits the shape of Barth’s theology. Such books provide sufficient orientation to enable readers to move forward in their quest to understand what the theologian has to say.

Hauerwas’s works challenge readers for several reasons. He has published more than 40 books, including his most recent, *Approaching the End*. Very few people have read all that Hauerwas has written, and despite his recent retirement from Duke Divinity School, he continues to write essays and books. Furthermore, Hauerwas does not approach the theological task in a systematic way. As a result, many of his essays in theological ethics remain deliberately unfinished. Finally, reading Hauerwas is hard work because his readers frequently discover authors, texts, and arguments that they did not know existed.

To read Hauerwas from the inside is therefore quite challenging. Not surprisingly, first-time readers often seek guidance. When I first began reading Hauerwas in the early 1980s, I struggled to learn the new conceptual vocabulary that he employed for thinking about theological ethics. Craig Dykstra’s book *Vision and Character: A Christian Educator’s Alternative to Kohlberg* provided clarification as well as thoughtful critique. Fifteen years later, I found Samuel Wells’s *Transforming Fate into Destiny: The Theological Ethics of Stanley Hauerwas* to be an illuminating exposition of the conceptual shifts associated with Hauerwas’s work—from space to time, from tragedy to irony, and so on.

Now Nicholas Healy, a systematic theologian, has written a book that offers a provocative reading of Hauerwas’s work. I read *Hauerwas: A (Very) Critical Introduction* with curiosity and puzzlement. Although it is less than 160 pages long, it is densely packed with argumentation. It is also well-organized. In part this is because Healy adopts the metaphor of the spider’s web that Hauerwas uses to

describe how he thinks about the work of an academic theologian. Healy's goal is to "display the web, its main lines, and its center."

Healy also introduces new criteria to assess Hauerwas's argument. For example, he draws on David Kelsey's two-volume work *Eccentric Existence: A Theological Anthropology*, adopting Kelsey's assertion that theologians throughout Christian history have tended to focus on one or another of three areas of inquiry, each of which has its own logic or systematic coherence. First, fundamental questions like "Who is God?" explore "the logic of belief." When theologians attempt to describe how persons come to faith and why, they address a second concern: "the logic of coming to believe." And the third area is "the logic of living our beliefs, which is concerned with ethical matters, broadly construed."

Kelsey's more systematic account of Christian theological inquiry provides a basis for Healy's central methodological criticism: "Hauerwas tends to conflate all three logics, to the detriment of the logic of belief. . . . Hauerwas is concerned with the logic of coming to believe and the logic of Christian living rather more than the logic of belief." Healy explains that Hauerwas's "systematic focus on living the Christian life well, and on the benefits of church life over all alternatives, deflects his attention from what we must say about the triune God who makes any of it possible." In sum: Hauerwas needs to be *theocentric*, not *ecclesiocentric*.

Does Healy succeed in reading Hauerwas from the inside as Barth taught his students to read the theology of Schleiermacher? In some ways, I think he does. He describes what he judges to be the general framework of Hauerwas's argument, and he pays close attention to the particular way that Hauerwas's argument unfolds.

Healy also argues that Hauerwas would benefit from adopting Kelsey's more flexible definitions of *practice* and *tradition* instead of continuing to use the definitions Alasdair MacIntyre developed in his book *After Virtue*. Healy builds on this criticism later in the book when he explores a problem Hauerwas poses: "how the doctrine of the church is to be correlated with the empirical church." Here Healy probes what he judges to be a flaw in Hauerwas's social theory, namely that "the identity formation of most Christians is generally insufficient for them to be recognizably Christian in their everyday lives."

I do wish that Healy had paid closer attention to Hauerwas's own description of what he takes to be the theological task. In the book *Sanctify Them in the Truth*,

Hauerwas says that the role of an academic theologian is “to explore, repair, as well as, perhaps, discover new connections” in the “intricate web” of theological ethics. But Hauerwas also goes on to say: “Webs after all are fragile. They must constantly be redone.” Where Hauerwas focuses on interconnections within a web, Healy construes the image of the web within a center-periphery framework. What Healy has done is to superimpose an architecture of argument while ignoring the coherence of Hauerwas’s arguments on topics that Healy judges to be peripheral.

What difference does this make? Had Healy chosen to pay greater attention to the shape of Hauerwas’s theology, he might have explored the ways in which the web of Hauerwas’s argumentation on the topics of pacifism and disabilities presumes the doctrines of grace and the person of the Holy Spirit. Instead, Healy elects not to engage Hauerwas’s argumentation about such matters because these matters are “largely dependent upon the center.” Healy might still have expressed concern about Hauerwas’s understanding of these doctrines, but he would have done so with the wider web of interconnections in view.

The restrictive reading Healy offers thus largely ignores the grand architecture of Hauerwas’s argumentation. Healy reads Hauerwas as if MacIntyre is the prevailing influence. In my judgment, he gives insufficient attention to the influences of John Howard Yoder, Ludwig Wittgenstein, and Thomas Aquinas. Here also if Healy had paid greater attention to the web of interconnections in Hauerwas’s essays, he would have been more successful in reading Hauerwas from the inside.

Furthermore, a closer reading of Hauerwas’s writings might have helped Healy offer a more nuanced comparison of Hauerwas’s work to that of Schleiermacher. As Barth recognized, Schleiermacher’s theology presumed that the nation-state, not the church, provided the order and peace necessary for Christian existence. Barth challenged that contention. Healy’s critique of Hauerwas’s understanding of the problem of Constantinianism would be more compelling if he had paid more attention to why Hauerwas thinks it is necessary to disentangle the church from the state in order for Christian witness to the triune God to be intelligible to would-be Christians as well as their non-Christian neighbors.

Someday, someone will, I suspect, write a book about how to read Hauerwas. Until then I will continue to turn to Wells’s *Transforming Fate into Destiny* as the best guide to reading Hauerwas from the inside. Even so, I anticipate that many readers will also turn to Healy for guidance, particularly if they share his bias in favor of systematic theology. But readers who share the intuition that the theological task is

“to explore, repair, as well as, perhaps, discover new connections” in the web of theological ethics will find it more helpful to read Hauerwas first.