

Christian and citizen

By [Robin Lovin](#) in the [May 4, 2004](#) issue

In Review



Democracy and Tradition

Jeffrey Stout

Princeton University Press

Reading this book is like joining an ongoing conversation, since Jeffrey Stout has been discussing religion and democracy with Stanley Hauerwas, Alasdair MacIntyre

and Richard Rorty since the mid-1970s. Often when we interrupt an animated conversation, it's best to politely excuse ourselves and move on. But this conversation is worth overhearing.

When listening in on such discussions we're apt to begin by agreeing with the first speaker we hear, though we may not understand what's at stake. Stout's initial examination of piety and hope in American democracy, which he traces from Emerson to the "blues sensibility" of Ralph Ellison and connects to Augustine's ideas about virtue, may seem right on target. But Stout knows that he's already deep into controversial territory. Emerson's piety is not like Augustine's, and as Stout says, "There are Augustinians and Augustinians."

Just what that means becomes clear much later, after Stout discusses the "secularization" of public discourse. Growing religious diversity and the loosening of confessional orthodoxy have meant that Americans can no longer expect to deal with public political questions from a common theological perspective. Some philosophers, nervous about the possibility of religious coercion and intimidation, have concluded that religious people should keep their faith out of public life. Rorty has taken that position, though he now says that it's religious institutions and religious leaders that worry him, not the religious expressions of ordinary citizens.

Stout, however, will have none of this secularism. A secular democracy recognizes that people differ in their religious commitments; secularism, on the other hand, requires them to pretend that they don't have those commitments. Stout thinks that we can't sustain the public commitment that democracy requires without the religious virtues of piety, hope, and charity toward our neighbors. Here he goes beyond many of even the most open-minded proponents of secular democracy. Not only are religious ideas permissible in public debate, he says, but public life is endangered when religion is excluded. So far, the mainstream Protestant standing at the edge of Stout's conversation is probably nodding in agreement. Where's the controversy?

The controversy has to do with the "other" kind of Augustinian, the person whose piety cannot find expression in a secular society, but hardens into a "new traditionalism" that rejects even Stout's generous terms for religious participation in public life. The traditionalist sets a much higher standard for public virtue than does a modern secular democracy. Without a common theological narrative to sustain the demands of real virtue, traditionalists believe, moral community collapses and

society is held together only by coercion and violence. MacIntyre, who portrayed the decay of Western ethics in *After Virtue*, is the philosopher who defines this new traditionalism, but its most vigorous spokesperson in contemporary religious life is Hauerwas.

By now we are into an argument, and Stout's book gives us a detailed account of how that argument has developed. Initially, Hauerwas's position merely commits him to a strong statement of the distinctive Christian virtues and the power of Christian faith to reshape lives according to those virtues. This is consistent with Hauerwas's Methodist tradition, but, according to Stout, it also fits well with an emphasis on character and virtue deeply embedded in American democracy as understood by Emerson, Whitman and Dewey.

In the early years of their long-running dialogue, Stout might well have expected Hauerwas's Christian virtue ethics to fit well with his own account of democratic virtues, the two value systems cooperating to sustain a secular democracy without yielding to the secularism of Rorty and others. Instead, Hauerwas took up MacIntyre's pessimistic evaluation of modern culture. Rather than providing a distinctive Christian voice within a pluralistic democracy, Hauerwas and the new traditionalists became witnesses against it.

There are some very bright people in this discussion, and the sides keep shifting. The listener who begins by wanting to join Stout and Hauerwas in upholding religion against secularism suddenly finds that Stout and Rorty have joined forces to defend secular democracy against an unbending religious rejection of democracy's liberal values. Hauerwas, despite his early emphasis on social justice, has decided that attempts to change society are not only futile but actually betray the mission of the church. The church exists to form people for a life of resistance to the fragmentation and violence of the secular world. The church's mission is not to make democracy work. In fact, according to Hauerwas, democracy as it has evolved in modern liberal societies probably cannot work.

In the book's third part Stout makes a case for his own vision of secular democracy, which he defines as a plurality of communities of virtue that engage with one another to order their common life together—to make it not merely orderly but also increasingly just. When democracy works, people can flourish, despite the fact that their visions of what flourishing entails may differ sharply. Stout wants to persuade us that such a democracy is possible.

But it is not only difficult to create and sustain such a democracy, it is difficult even to talk about it coherently. How can we speak about how a society can become better when the participants don't even agree on what a good society is? Stout's effort to answer that question is the book's major contribution. One could argue that it is the question democracy itself has to answer. Either American democracy is living on social capital inherited from an earlier time when Americans shared a common perspective on life's questions, in which case we face a slow descent into the fragmented and violent world Hauerwas sees; or else the enthusiastic, individualistic and yet genuinely loving piety of Emerson, Whitman and Ellison has a better grasp of our human nature, and it really is possible to be both democratic and virtuous. As democracies become increasingly globalized and diverse, the world needs to know the answer to this question.

I want to agree with Stout if he and Hauerwas are the only choices. But Stout's careful statement of the possibilities for democracy raises other questions about religious belief. He is convinced that the language about God does not really add anything important to our understanding of common human experience. (See his *Ethics After Babel*, 1988.)

We know from experience that our democratic discourse works. Stout's analogy to it is the process by which generations of players have created a set of practices and rules for soccer. We need no Platonic ideal of soccer, no eternal law of soccer present in the mind of God, to teach us how to play soccer, what virtues we need to play it well or how to improve the game. If people want to talk about their understanding of soccer in those terms, we don't try to stop them. We might even try to figure out what they're saying and learn from them. But soccer does not require theology or metaphysics, and it is a good thing for life in a pluralistic society that ethics does not, either.

Those for whom God plays a central part in life may think that this makes politics seem too easy. The differences in citizens' beliefs about the origin and destiny of human life may keep them from coming to politics with the kind of shared enthusiasm and exuberant rivalry that they bring to sporting events. There may be elements of anger, tragedy and coercion in political life that run deeper than liberal democracy wants to recognize. We may need more than the resources of good will and neighborly love to deal with them.

The immanentist piety of Emerson and Whitman is not the same as piety oriented toward a transcendent God, even if immanentist piety serves well enough to orient us lovingly toward our neighbors when no major differences of power and interest divide us. Emerson's perfectionism places too much faith in human capacities and fails to understand human limitations, according to Reinhold Niebuhr, who said that "the ultimate fulfillment of human life transcends the possibilities of history" (*Beyond Tragedy*).

Stout, however, sees this objection coming. Augustinians "all agree that modern democracy is vitiated to some significant degree by its lack of true piety. But some embrace modern democracy, somewhat ambivalently, as a way station in a long journey toward the end of human history. Reinhold Niebuhr and Paul Ramsey defended this position in the twentieth century. Jean Bethke Elshtain defends it today," he writes. Doubtless these Augustinians will not expect as much as Stout does from the search for justice, and they will be more concerned than he is to construct a democracy that can restrain evil within and meet external force with force. Nevertheless, they can work together and might even learn something from one another.

Stout's book thus ends with a vision of democracy that he hopes will appeal both to Rorty's secular pragmatists and to Niebuhrian realists, though he knows that neither of those groups will agree with him completely. For him, that sort of practical collaboration is what democracy is all about, in contrast to a traditionalism that does not trust the virtues of anyone who does not share its religious commitments.

This book will not conclude the conversation. Hauerwas has already responded to Stout in a postscript to his new book, *Performing the Faith* (Brazos). Hauerwas clearly has little hope of winning over the secularists, but he might be able to bring the Niebuhrian realists to his side by showing them a less compromised way to relate to the world than the one Stout offers. Hauerwas's postscript rejects Stout's account of Christian traditionalism as impermeable to the world. Hauerwas reminds us of writings in which he has talked about cooperation with others in the search for justice, and he now flatly asserts, "Something has gone wrong when the church is not learning from the world how to live faithfully to God."

Clearly, it would be premature to offer a final evaluation of this discussion. It's important to note, however, that the central disagreement between Stout and Hauerwas seems now to be over a judgment about modern democracy. Stout invites

us into a vigorous local democracy in which kids play soccer and a diverse and dedicated group of neighbors team up to protect their community from the encroachment of a large, bureaucratic medical center. Who wouldn't want to pastor the church on the corner in that neighborhood?

Though Stout is fully aware that the social reality is often more bleak, he confronts injustice with a passion born out of his awareness that something much better is not only possible but already exists. If his underlying optimism about American democracy is right, it's hard to refuse his invitation to religious people to participate in it.

Hauerwas, by contrast, sees primarily the divisions and violence in the world around us. He finds hope only in the church. It's not clear whether this judgment is historical or theological. Do the historical facts of the moral collapse of liberal democracy drive the church into a *status confessionis* like the Confessing Church faced in Nazi Germany or Christians in South Africa faced under apartheid? Or does the extremity of those situations merely clarify a permanent, theological truth: that the church always exists in opposition to the world, even in Stout's virtuous democracy?

Meanwhile, those of us who are neither "new traditionalists" nor Emersonian democrats have questions for both sides. Our theology warns us not to accept Stout's liberal democracy at face value, and our sense of history suggests that things are not as bad as MacIntyre and Hauerwas make them out to be. What worries us about liberal democracy is that political leaders, especially democratically elected ones, find it difficult to admit their mistakes. A piety which includes an awareness of judgment and an acknowledgment of guilt may be essential to keep a political system from becoming too satisfied with itself. This is especially important in a time when opposing powers and ideologies that have limited democracy externally have largely disappeared. As Lincoln understood, a victorious democracy has to be reminded that it, too, is under God's judgment. Otherwise, it begins to think of itself as the instrument of that judgment.

There may be times when our political environment becomes so corrupt that judgment is the only word the church can speak. We must be prepared to make our confession in those times, and part of the value of Hauerwas's work is to remind us how to do so. But Stout gives us ample evidence that ours is not one of those times. If he is right, then we have other tasks. We have to help a flawed democracy to function better without thinking that our mission is, as Hauerwas puts it, to "make

America work.” We have to preach virtues that in some ways set Christians at odds with their society and their neighbors, and still send them out to work with those neighbors to make that society better.

Most of us who have read Reinhold Niebuhr don’t expect reality to get much clearer than that. A democracy that will accept us on those terms might just be a place where something can be accomplished.