



Interview with Stanley Hauerwas

Author: Rebecca O'Loughlin

Journal Title: Discourse

ISSN: 2040-3674

ISSN-L: 1741-4164

Volume: 8

Number: 1

Start page: 19

End page: 28

[Return to vol. 8 no. 1 index page](#)

Continuing our series of interviews with academics with a special interest in teaching issues, Rebecca O'Loughlin, Academic Co-ordinator for theology at the Subject Centre for Philosophical and Religious Studies, talked to Stanley Hauerwas about his theological background, the relationship between theology and religious studies, and the marginalisation of theology in the university. The interview was conducted in Sheffield on 29th May 2008.

Thank you for agreeing to be interviewed by Discourse. If I could just begin by asking you about your academic background: to a British audience, your working class roots and former employment as a bricklayer don't make you a classic candidate for a career in academic theology. Could you tell us a little bit about how you became an academic, and how you experienced the transition to academic life?

I didn't have a career as a bricklayer, but I was raised to be one. In my family that was all we knew, so when I was a very young boy, I was taken out on the job, and I was taught all the skills necessary to become a bricklayer. My father

didn't want me to lay bricks until later, because he didn't want me to start making good money for fear I wouldn't want to go to college. I was the first of anyone in my family to go to college. I decided to study theology because I couldn't get saved. We were part of an evangelical Methodist church where you joined the church on Sunday morning, but you had to be saved on Sunday night, with 45 minutes of hymn singing, an hour sermon and an altar call that lasted forever. I wanted to be saved but it just didn't happen, and I didn't think you should fake it, so finally one night, I thought, if God isn't going to save me, I can dedicate my life to the ministry. At least I'll put God under some constraint.

We had an associate minister at the Church, who had actually gone to college and seminary, and he said, 'Well, you need to read', so I started reading. I read a lot of bad stuff, but then I discovered a book by B. Davie Napier, called *From Faith to Faith*¹. Now, we weren't smart enough to be fundamentalist, but we believed the Bible was true, and through this book I discovered it wasn't. Secondly I read a book by Nels F. S. Ferre called *The Sun and the Umbrella*², and it suggested that religion probably hid God as much as revealed God, and I thought that's probably right, so I gave it up. That must have been when I was 16 or 17, and I didn't think of myself as a Christian any more but I was still scheduled to go to college, so I did.

I went to South Western University in Georgetown, Texas. It was a small school, and I thought I would major in history, I had no idea why, but I discovered what I really loved was philosophy. There was a wonderful man there, named John Score, who was a theologian, but the college was small and I was the philosophy major, so for six semesters we read Copelston³, with the primaries, and it just was a wonderful preparation. I became increasingly convinced that I didn't know enough to be an atheist, so I started reading and going to other courses that John was teaching on other theologians. I was particularly struck by H. Richard Niebuhr's *The Meaning of Revelation*⁴, and so I decided to go to Yale to find out if that stuff was true! Niebuhr had retired and died the year I got there, but that's how it began, and I've been in it ever since.

You have been called 'contemporary theology's foremost intellectual provocateur'. What do you think about the controversy that your work generates? Do you consider that it's a sign that you're doing theology properly?

I don't like the language of provocateur. I'm oftentimes introduced as being very provocative, and I always tell people, don't tell me I'm provocative. You can say I'm outrageous, wrong etc. but provocative is a liberal word, it means, I understand you better than you probably understand yourself. It means, I'm not really in agreement with you, therefore I'm able to distance myself, which means I finally don't have to take you seriously. So screw provocative! I think that I make a lot of people angry, because I have something to say, and I have something to say because I take Christian convictions seriously and straight up, and that's a very big challenge to Christians, who have spent some generations trying to show the world that we don't have anything to say other than what the world already thinks it knows. I don't try to be controversial, I think that would be a silly stance, but I do seem to have that effect primarily among other Christians. Interestingly enough some of my best readers are secular. They say, this is interesting, I didn't know that Christians had that to say.

Yes, in 'The State of the University's you say that as a theologian you are something of a resident alien in academia, so could you talk a little about how someone who's been labelled sectarian, tribalistic and fideistic is so well read in disciplines outside of theology, and has been called the most influential theologian in America today?

Yeah, I don't know what to make of that, that's Jeff Stout's claim, and I said 'Oh, come on Jeff, being a theologian and being influential is a contradiction in terms, people are not going to take you that seriously'. If I am read outside the theological world, and I am, I suppose, to some extent, it's because I share the agony of the people who are reading me. By that I mean, when we're doing certain things and we can't explain to ourselves why we're doing them, I look for cracks and the sensibilities of our time to try to help us understand what we're doing. Why do we care for the

mentally disabled? Why do we think suicide is wrong? Why do we accept the presumption that violence is more determinative than non-violence? So by taking on questions I maybe don't have the ability to answer, and trying to do it as honestly as I can, I think I attract some people to the kind of work I do. Also, my own thinking is determined primarily by what I read. I'm a reader, and that makes me extraordinarily eclectic, and therefore I think some people read me because of what I read. I've been deeply influenced by Alasdair MacIntyre, for example, and some people who are trying to figure out Alasdair, try to figure out the relationship between Alasdair and myself. Those are the kinds of readerships that I think come not necessarily from the Christian world, but that are still interested.

So do you think that by refusing to jettison the distinctive language of Christianity, ironically you are more influential than those who have?

Yes, (laughs) and I don't think it's an irony. I think I've been deeply influenced by Wittgenstein. I never try to look for meaning that is more determinative than what I say, so I try to work in a manner that helps people see the grammar of the faith, and demonstrate how differences in language might matter, so hopefully it's a way of helping people see the significance of not being Christian. I struggled my whole life trying to figure out the significance of being Christian, so if I can help some people see the significance of not being, that would be a very big help. I'm using 'grammar' in the Wittgensteinian sense, strongly shaped by Herbert McCabe's work. By grammar, I mean how the shape of sentences in relationship to other sentences determines what I'm saying, and therefore shapes meaning. I think people think that Christianity should be available and understandable without training, and I think training is all there is. So when someone says, 'I can't imagine what you mean when you say Jesus Christ is Lord', I say, 'Well of course you can't, it's taken me 68 years, and I'm still trying. Karl Barth tried for 14 volumes and was still working on it.' And when they say, 'Why would you ever buy into something when you're not sure what you're saying?', the answer is, every indication I have, from significant people who helped me discover what it is I'm saying, is, they live as if it's true, and I try to direct attention to what those conditions are, for truthfulness.

You've taught at universities in the US throughout your academic career. Could you say a little bit about how university education in the US compares to that in the UK, especially in relation to theology?

Well, this may be a surprising answer, but I think theology in America suffers from the American penchant to avoid conflict. We're just too damn nice, and I would never accuse the British of that! I often think one of the great scams of modernity is how the British got the reputation for being civil. Who was ever a more bloodthirsty group of killers than the British? I think it makes for a better context for theology in Britain, because there is an engagement in British intellectual life that at least starts from the presumption that you might be wrong. It does mean that universities in Britain are not afraid of controversy, and they don't try to domesticate intellectual disagreements, so if a theologian can make a case, they're open to that. I take it, also, that you've had an ancient tradition in which theology has been recognised as a serious intellectual engagement that isn't just about opinion, and it's not the case that we have that in America. We just don't have the ancient universities. Now I understand, in Britain, how some of the newer universities tended to move more in the religious studies direction, rather than having a strong theological centre, and I regret that. I think that theology needs to be at the heart of any serious engagement with a faith. Christianity may be further along in dying in Great Britain than it is in America, but if that's the case, it's sure as hell producing a wonderful group of great theologians. It's a wonderful time in Britain right now, in terms of the kinds of people that are around for discussion.

Could you talk a little bit more about your views on religious studies, and its relationship with theology?

Well, like so many university disciplines, it's completely incoherent. You don't know what a religion is, and there's no methodology necessarily associated with religious studies that gives it any kind of identity. I think it developed 20 years ago because it was a way that people who had learned a lot of stuff as Christians and didn't like it, but still needed a job, and who had a PhD, could go ahead and continue to be in universities, by teaching about religion. Also it was the attempt to deal with the fact that we suddenly discovered there are a lot of people in the world who aren't

Christians, but have seemingly religious points of view that we ought to know about, which I certainly think is true, so I take it as a kind of pragmatic response to those kinds of developments.

But my own view is, religious studies departments are where people are hired who are willing to study a religion either that's already dead or so they can kill it, and as a result, I just think they don't produce much interesting work. Who's going to read this? Why is it important? That doesn't mean that there isn't some very good work done in religious studies departments, that should be read, I certainly read a great deal of it. But I asked one of my religious studies colleagues, who studies medieval Judaism, if we could somehow get back Ibn Sina, Maimonides and Aquinas, would he appoint them in religious studies, and he said no. When I asked why not, he said, 'Well, they're confessional thinkers'. Now, how stupid can you get, to not be willing to have an Ibn Sina, a Maimonides or an Aquinas, simply because they were practitioners of what they thought about? I mean, it's very interesting that religious studies oftentimes is still captured by modernist epistemological assumptions that have been given up across the university, and of course, they're still captured by those assumptions because they don't know how to teach undergraduates of diverse backgrounds the seriousness of Islamic or Jewish or Christian accounts of the world, other than, it's a matter of opinion. So the matter of opinion becomes a way of being objective, and a way then you can't expect anyone to take it seriously. It's a big power problem in modern pedagogy.

So you've said that the next part of your career will focus on education, in particular on the marginalisation of theology in the university. How did this interest develop?

It's always been there. As I say in the preface to 'The State of the University', my life has been constituted by two primary institutions, the university and the church, and it's partly because I owe so much to both, I want to try to be as good a servant as I can to them, by trying to suggest in what ways I think the modern university has impoverished itself by not having theology as one of the serious subjects of the university curriculum. The problem with the secular is not that it's secular, it's that it's so unbelievably stupid about strong religious traditions. People think that they know what Christianity is because they had to go through some kind of Sunday School, and that is myth. People oftentimes get upset in the States about the religious right. Well, one of the problems with the religious right is that the people so often associated with it don't know dipshit about Christianity, and have no idea about its diversity, its controversies, its wrong steps. I'm trying to avoid language like 'faith traditions', I just hate that, but I think that the world is less able to negotiate difference, exactly because our universities have not had within their core a strong theological presence. I mean, sometimes religious studies academics seem to think that the way you make sure that Catholics are not going to be dogmatic, in the world in which we find ourselves, is to teach them about Buddhism, but they don't know dip about Catholicism, (laughter). I'm not against teaching Buddhism, but it'd be a very good thing to know something about Catholicism.

Why do you think that theology is no longer considered to be a necessary discipline in the modern university?

Well, I think there are many reasons, but let me give you one. I think it has to do with Christians being in power, in a way that it was simply assumed that we knew what we were talking about and others didn't, and so we were able to teach, for example, introductory courses in Old Testament, without ever helping students to realise that it's not the Old Testament for Jews. So it was a reinforcement of Constantinian Christianity that was gained through the Church's accommodation to the powers in a way that we thought our beliefs were simply what anyone would believe on reflection, and so people rightly said that the teaching of theology in universities was coercive. Now that we are losing the power to control our destinies, theology should become more interesting again, but unfortunately people still think this is the case. Where would the secular in America be today without the religious right? That's the spectre that's always there, ready to come down on you, to take all the fun out of life. I just find that silly. The religious right won't last very long, and we need to reclaim what we can do well, in service to the university, in ways that the university can recognise as crucial for the training of people able to live in the world as we know it, without killing. That's part of the problem?the universities don't know what they should be about.

What do you think a university is? Or should be?

It's the memory of people for the discernment of the challenges that memory produces, and there are many different disciplines necessary for the doing of that, but I think that's its fundamental task, and it involves teaching people how to talk, so language is absolutely at the epicentre of that.

Do you think that theology will survive in universities?

I think the interesting question is, whether universities will. I mean, universities which are always ready to be bought by the highest bidder will survive in some form, but I think the question is, whether the essential task of the university can be sustained by a people who live as if they need no memory, and I just don't know the answer to that. Theology is, first and foremost, the discipline of the church, so the church will always by necessity raise up people who may not be in the university, to do the kinds of work that is demanded by the extraordinary claim that we only know the world had a beginning because we know the end in Jesus Christ. That's an extraordinary set of metaphysical presumptions, so you're always going to need people to know how to think about that, so I don't worry about the future of theology, it may be better done than in universities. But I do think that theology could be a very important discipline, and I even worry about it being a discipline, because we're undisciplined, you've got to take it into the world, which always lets you know that you'll never know enough to do theology, but I do think theology is exactly the kind of engagement that refuses to let compartmentalisation of the modern world, exemplified and legitimated by the compartmentalisations within the modern university, be legitimate, so we can challenge that in ways that hopefully is of use to the university.

So, you've said that prayer and theology go together. Does that mean that theology students who don't have any religious beliefs can't do theology?

No, Gavin D'Costa really debunks that wonderfully, in his book,⁶ and much better than I do. No, obviously, non-believers can be really quite exceptional theologians and you can learn a hell of a lot from them, but I do mean, however, that that will not sustain the activity of theology across generations, and so prayer is a fundamental practice. And you've got to remember that what is a liturgy of prayer, from beginning to end, is the necessary practice to locate that theology's about God, it's about a God that we pray to. And that's absolutely at the centre of things, and if you just think it's about belief, then, what good do beliefs do you? It's not about believing in the Virgin birth; it's about praying to Mary. So prayer is my way of suggesting that a Christian theology is about God and that entails practices that make intelligible the activity of theology itself.

Are there conflicts in teaching theology in a secular institution?

I like being at a secular university. I was at Notre Dame for years, and it was wonderful, I'm forever indebted to them for letting me be there, but there you had the impression that theology was at the centre of the universe, and you never get that idea at Duke. And so, I find that wonderfully freeing, and I love interacting with secular colleagues, in terms of what I can learn from them, and hopefully every once in a while I might have something to teach them.

So, if we talk about theology students, have they changed, over your time as an academic?

I don't have wide experience. At Notre Dame I was teaching Roman Catholics, and at Duke I mainly teach people going into the Ministry, of various Protestant denominations, primarily Methodist. What has changed, since I've been at Duke, and I can only speak about that, is they are a hell of a lot smarter and they're younger, and Duke has a good reputation for being a serious intellectual centre for Christian theology, and so we're attracting very good students, and I'm very glad that that's the case. One of the things that is happening is that many of these students come from secular backgrounds, and they discovered Christianity along the way, and they really are absolutely enthralled, and they may think they want to go into the ministry, but they're not necessarily associated with any Church, and so that's a very interesting set of developments.

What happens after they graduate?

Some of them go into different professions, some of them find a church. Many of them are attracted to the Episcopal Church, but given the conditions of the Episcopal Church in America it's no easy matter to get ordained.

So finally, looking back over your career, who or what have been the greatest influences on your academic career?

Well certainly Karl Barth, Thomas Aquinas, Augustine. And it doesn't often show but Kierkegaard, Wittgenstein, MacIntyre, and John Howard Yoder; they've all had very significant influence on me. A thinker that also doesn't show as much, is Sheldon Wolin, an American political theorist, who I've learned much from. In the UK, certainly Rowan Williams has been a big influence, as well as Herbert McCabe, Fergus Carr, Nicholas Lash? I've learned a hell of a lot from them.

Thankyou very much for talking to us.

Thank you.

Endnotes

1 Napier, B. Davie, *From Faith to Faith: Essays on Old Testament Literature* (New York: Harper and Brothers, 1955).

2 Ferre, Nels F. S., *The Sun and the Umbrella* (New York: Harper and Brothers, 1953).

3 Copleston, Frederick Charles, *A History of Philosophy* (London: Continuum, 2003).

4 Niebuhr, H. Richard, *The Meaning of Revelation* (New York: Macmillan, 1941).

5 Hauerwas, Stanley, *The State of the University: Academic Knowledges and The Knowledge of God* (Malden, MA; Oxford: Blackwell Pub., 2007).

6 D'Costa, Gavin, *Theology in the Public Square: Church, Academy, and Nation*, (Oxford: Blackwell, 2005).

[Return to vol. 8 no. 1 index page](#)

Created on: November 26th 2008

Updated on: August 19th 2010