Edinburgh Research Explorer

Beyond Theologies of Resentment: An Appreciation of Jeffrey Stout's "Democracy and Tradition"

Scottish Journal of Theology

Additional services for *Scottish Journal of Theology:*

Beyond Theologies of Resentment: An Appreciation of Jeffrey Stout's Democracy and Tradition

David Fergusson

How to cite this article:
David Fergusson (2006). Beyond Theologies of Resentment: An Appreciation of
Jeffrey Stout's Democracy and Tradition. Scottish Journal of Theology, 59, pp
183-197 doi:10.1017/S003693060600216X

Request Permissions : Click here

Article review

Beyond Theologies of Resentment: An Appreciation of Jeffrey Stout's
Democracy and Tradition

Abstract

Jeffrey Stout's latest book[1] is likely to command even wider attention amongst
theologians than *Ethics after Babel* (1988). Written in three parts and comprising
material some of which has already appeared in other contexts, the book argues
several theses. The modern democratic tradition is richer and more complex than
exponents and critics of Rawlsian liberalism tend to recognise. This tradition
should continue to accommodate religious voices, although these need to be
more patient of democratic politics than recent theologies of 'resentment'. A
moral pragmatism provides the best philosophical framework for promoting
the discourse and practices of democracy. Each of these claims merits further
elaboration before some critical remarks are ventured.

In extolling democracy as a tradition, Stout argues against defining it in
terms of state neutrality, public reason or procedural processes. It represents
a commitment to particular attitudes, a love of specific goods and virtues,
an account of political authority and a holding of one another responsible
for our beliefs and actions. Ethical reasoning is central to this tradition.
'Protestors rarely just march. They also carry signs that say something. They
chant slogans that mean something. They sing songs that convey a message.
And they march to or from a place where speeches are given.'[2] On account
of a suspicion of deference and authority, those inculcated in the democratic
process are prone to neglect its status as a tradition with a particular history.
This is one of its endemic weaknesses. Democratic habits do not derive from
self-evident moral propositions. Like any other tradition, democracy has its
own history and context, requiring a particular training and orientation of
its participants. (Stout's pragmatism generally displays an overt preference
for Hegel over Kant.) To illustrate this, Stout turns his attention to a group of
writers who do not often feature in the canons of secular liberalism. These
include three public intellectuals – Emerson, Whitman and Dewey – who,
as essayists, contributed to the development of a political culture that was

---

[1] Jeffrey Stout, *Democracy and Tradition* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2003),
pp. xv + 348. £22.99.
[2] Ibid., p. 6.

rooted in convictions about character, the formative role of religion, family and local community. While this tradition came frequently to adopt a critical stance towards earlier pieties, it remained indebted to these. Thus it sought their repair rather than their abolition.

The culture of democracy, according to Stout, is one that has always remained hopeful about the outcomes of politics. Through retaining an urbane and modest optimism, it is at odds with at least one brand of Augustinianism. Yet this does not prevent Stout from offering a sombre diagnosis of the present state of the democratic tradition. Its symptoms include an ignoring of the plight of the poor, the absence of an ethical foreign policy, voter apathy and the accompanying tendency to fragment the political process by retreating into enclaves defined by race and lifestyle. This critical reading of the dysfunctions of modern politics might lead in either of two possible directions, both well travelled in modern academic life. Yet neither a reinvigoration of earlier forms of traditionalism, nor a comprehensive deconstruction of everything in sight is attempted by Stout. He quotes Emerson. 'I do not wish to push my criticism on the state of things around me to that extravagant mark, that shall compel me to suicide, or to an absolute isolation from the advantages of civil society.'[3]

Alongside his fear of a return to an implausible traditionalism, Stout's commitment to the role of religion in democratic society leads to a careful though critical reading of three recent influential writers, MacIntyre, Hauerwas and Milbank. It is this second division of his study that is likely to attract the most interest amongst theologians. In part, he sees their work as a legitimate reaction against the dominant, though seriously mistaken, Rawlsian characterisation of liberalism in which religious considerations become either bracketed out or marginalised in public debate. 'The more thoroughly Rawlsian our law schools and ethics centres become, the more radically Hauerwasian the theological schools become.'[4] Roughly speaking, Stout's claim is that since the Rawlsian version of liberalism is misguided in its attempt to strip theological reasoning out of political argument (here Rorty features as a contemporary representative of hard secularism), the counter-action it has provoked is both unnecessary and skewed. The thick, positive accounts of freedom and justice proclaimed by key figures in the democratic tradition are often religiously situated. That is why Rawls has difficulty citing a sufficiently broad range of historical examples to confirm his thesis. Abraham Lincoln, Martin Luther King and Dorothy Day did not confine their political arguments to those terms and conditions subscribed to by secular

[3] Ibid., p. 60.
[4] Ibid., p. 75.

liberals. Nor do contemporary participants. It is possible to understand, discuss and disagree with those who appeal to religious considerations in political argument. These need not be 'conversation stoppers'. Moral debate does not take place on the basis of determining ethical positions by their deductive relationship to a handful of agreed first principles. The give-and-take of conversation, the range of reasons offered, the capacity to engage in 'immanent criticism' of positions not wholly shared – all enable political conversation in a society of divergent religious commitments. Stout cites the experience during the Vietnam war years of building coalitions with dissenting Protestants, secular Jews and the radical Catholic underground. This was achieved without loss of intellectual integrity.

The proposals of radical orthodoxy are rejected on the ground that they do not take with sufficient seriousness the religious diversity of modern democratic societies. And since this diversity is inevitable for the foreseeable future, these proposals remain unrealistic. (Diversity could be curtailed by coercion, but no one seems to advocate this.) Ethical discourse is 'secularised' in modern culture in so far as it cannot take for granted shared assumptions about God, Christ and the church. To make this claim does not to commit one to regarding such claims as irrelevant or lacking in public significance. But the fact of religious plurality must alter the ways in which these are deployed rhetorically. In this restricted sense, 'secularisation', according to Stout, is an ineluctable feature of modern plural societies. Attempts to check or reverse this by lamenting the disenchanted turn that Scotus took in the early fourteenth century or the mistaken rejection of a Platonic–Augustinian orthodoxy are dismissed as 'extremely implausible'.[5] Short shrift is given to testimonials for a medieval worldview that imagined an organic unity of church and state under a single theological vision.

In attacking radical orthodoxy, Stout complains both of an over-intel-lectualised explanation of modern trends and also of a related suppression of some basic theological questions. Exponents get away with this largely through operating at a highly abstract level. These questions revolve around the issue of whether modern democratic aspirations can in any sense be perceived as providential. Have they generated any benefits for citizens that might be perceived as blessed by God and therefore worthy of preserv-ation? Stout detects an ambivalence in Milbank's work on this issue. For example, in forming coalitions with other groups and individuals, Christians may participate in political actions that ameliorate the condition of the unemployed. Yet how is this to be explained theologically? If those outside the church are adjudged unwitting collaborators in the reign of God, then

---

[5] Ibid., p. 101.

the secular is affirmed in ways that appear inconsistent with the party line. If not, then we seem to offer little more than 'nostalgia, utopian fantasy, and withdrawal into a strongly bounded enclave'.[6] Attempts to eulogise thinkers such as John Ruskin and Samuel Taylor Coleridge ignore much of their context, especially the connections with a broader democratic stream of social criticism, thus misrepresenting them as offering a kind of counter-modernity. 'If one tugs a little on Milbank's references to Ruskin and Coleridge, the whole tale begins to unravel. The democratic vitality of the modern period has been eclipsed by "the secular" writ large.'[7]

The current flourishing of interest in counter-cultural theologies, at least of the type espoused by Milbank and Hauerwas, is explained sociologically. These are the understandable reactions of a 'school of resentment' that reacts against an (illegitimate) limning of secular space by liberal thinkers. Yet their analysis is mistaken, as also is the prescription. In eschewing secular liberalism, they are merely contributing further to the atomisation of modern societies that increasingly lack the capacity to conduct those moral and political conversations on which democracy depends.

> Theologies designed to articulate, defend, and reinforce resentment of the secular are symptoms of the disease they are meant to cure. They are the ideological expression of the enclave society. Their social function is to legitimate identification with the enclave as the primary social unit. The main means they employ to generate solidarity within the small group is the bashing of liberals, practiced as a form of ritual sacrifice.[8]

The criticism of MacIntyre continues along lines already marked out in Stout's earlier work. Against the charge that liberalism is a self-defeating project in which a tradition of enquiry attempts to attain a transcendent position of universal reason, Stout contends that it can recognise its character as a tradition without self-referential contradiction. Rather than expressing a single project, liberalism comes instead to denote a set of social practices and institutions that emerge, initially in western Europe and the USA, to accommodate modern societies to the facts of pluralism. Indeed, the term 'liberalism' is now generally avoided by Stout, his preference being for the more open-textured and pragmatic notion of 'democracy' or 'democratic modernity'. This generates the further criticism that MacIntyre's analysis of the liberalism in *Three Rival Versions* is too narrowly focused on the contributors to the ninth edition of the *Encyclopaedia Britannica*. By extending the canon

---

[6] Ibid., p. 105.
[7] Ibid., p. 107.
[8] Ibid., p. 115.

of democratic writers to include the likes of Whitman, Dewey and T. H. Green, a stronger sense of the richness and variety of this tradition emerges, as well as an awareness of its indebtedness to older classical, romantic and Christian antecedents. Cobbett and Jane Austen are presented by MacIntyre as amongst the last great representatives of virtue ethics. Yet, as Stout shows, Cobbett can equally well be perceived as a forerunner of forms of radical social criticism leading to Orwell, Agee and Wendell Berry. Similar remarks could equally well have been made of Jane Austen as a transitional figure. The emphasis upon marriage for love rather than money, the prioritising of accomplishment above social rank, and the adumbration of later feminism in characters such as Jane Fairfax, provide signs of a shifting social order, albeit one in which much of the past is commended in the face of change.

In offering his prognosis, Stout is of course less pessimistic than MacIntyre. Today we have an 'eclectic diversity of tradition-generated resources of thought and action'[9] (the *bricolage* of *Ethics after Babel*), yet this is not equivalent to the irreversible fragmentation and incoherence discerned by MacIntyre. Some resolution of seemingly interminable moral conflict appears possible.

> [W]e have had great debates over whether women should be permitted to vote, whether alcoholic beverages should be banned in a society that cares about the virtue of temperance, and whether blacks should be allowed to sit in the front of the bus. Each of these more recent debates, so far as I can tell, is now over.[10]

Moreover, in presenting his case, MacIntyre reveals a tendency to employ argument and rhetorical techniques (the idiom of 'ruin and fragmentation') that are themselves readily identifiable as borrowing from the setting against which they are directed.

One rejoinder, in part anticipated by Stout, runs like this. In MacIntyre's tradition-centred account of rationality, conversation and argument across traditions can take place. It is possible to understand more than one tradition, just as one can speak more than one language. In this engagement of rival versions of enquiry, it may happen that in the long run one tradition will overcome another, partly by absorbing its best features and partly by proving itself to be more adequate to the resolution of particular problems. To facilitate this process we require institutions and practices that will promote a civil encounter of rival traditions. Hence the university is recommended as a place of 'constrained disagreement'. In this respect, one can argue for some

---

[9] Ibid., p. 132.
[10] Ibid., p. 123.

standard features of a liberal society on a MacIntyrean basis.[11] An account of his philosophy can then be offered that softens its apparent rejection of the 'liberal' project. The project may be a failure, but various liberal aspirations are still accommodated within MacIntyre's programme for a non-violent clash of traditions.

In response to this counter-objection, Stout offers something like the following rejoinder. To understand a tradition other than one's own requires an unusual degree of empathy and imagination, as well as intellectual insight. Aquinas may have displayed a gift for philosophical multi-lingualism, yet it remains lacking in MacIntyre's caricatures of liberalism as a tradition. Even the complaint that our modern societies have failed to produce 'institutionalised forums' is hard to square, argues Stout, with the professional distinction MacIntyre has attained, together with the journals and publishing houses that have enabled both of them to pursue their disagreements in the public domain.[12] Nevertheless, this does not quite clinch the case against MacIntyre. What if our problems today, as already registered by Stout, result from the erosion of those earlier moral traditions that initially provided much of the energy and resources for democratic progress? In response to this, as we shall see, Stout has a different narrative to offer, that of ethical pragmatism.

The critique of Hauerwas's work is the most intense within the volume. Revealing a careful study of his writings over a thirty-year period, Stout acknowledges him as the most influential American theologian writing today. Perhaps because Hauerwas's work resembles, in some of its intentions and outcomes, positions shared by Stout himself, we are offered a sustained engagement with his theology. At its best, his work offers illuminating insights on a range of topics (disability, medicine, suffering) yet its unrelenting assault on liberalism remains deeply frustrating for Stout. The fundamental charge seems to be that the bolting of MacIntyre's anti-liberalism to Yoder's dualist ecclesiology leaves the world in a doubly darkened condition. Outside the ark of salvation, the world of political liberalism is also 'after virtue'.[13] While Stout is too good a reader of Hauerwas to waste time on the tiresome charge of 'sectarianism', nevertheless he finds his analysis neither philosophically nor theologically plausible. On the philosophical front, criticisms already levelled at MacIntyre apply, *mutatis mutandis*, to Hauerwas. His account of 'liberalism' verges on caricature. Many

---

[11] This is argued, for example, by Jean Porter, 'Openness and Constraints: Moral Reflection as Tradition-guided Inquiry in Alastair MacIntyre', *Journal of Religion* 73 (1993), pp. 514–36.

[12] Stout, *Democracy and Tradition*, p. 139.

[13] Ibid., p. 154.

of the novels and essays he draws upon so richly in his writings belong to that wider democratic culture that is otherwise despised. The necessary language of 'justice' becomes occluded through its association with a political ethos that is rejected wholesale. The prioritising of the church and the bestowal of epistemological authority upon its moral exemplars runs the risk of an authoritarianism that is profoundly undemocratic in its exclusion of voices that demand a hearing.

> Say, if you like, that these exemplars constitute an aristocracy. But surely Hauerwas does not suppose that they are to be found in a particular social class or that their spiritual gifts can be correlated with the titles, ranks, or offices of some existing institution, ecclesial or secular.[14]

The demand for communities of non-violent ethical discipleship is not matched by any obvious manifestation within the empirical church. (MacIntyre's preference for traditional Thomism scores more highly, at least on this index.) Greater attention to the example of Dorothy Day would pull Hauerwas in a different direction, it is argued, in gauging the respective capacities of church and world for virtuous living.[15]

Stout reaches the ironic conclusion that the success of Hauerwas's work is that it is readily assimilated by Christians for whom its implications seem relatively undemanding.

> It was tempting to infer, half-consciously, that following Jesus involves little more than hating the liberal secularists who supposedly run the country, pitying poor people from a distance, and donating a portion of one's income to the church. Hauerwas has not done much to guard his readers against this temptation.[16]

In contrast, a preference is displayed for the theology of Barth, especially as it appears in the recent work of George Hunsinger. Here one finds a ready acknowledgement that the grace of God is neither confined to the church nor exhausted by the ethical endeavour of Christians. Divine action takes place elsewhere, thus creating the possibility of making common cause with other political actors and movements. This banishes the spectre of a strict (Yoderian) dualism between church and world, thus facilitating (*contra* MacIntyre) a more positive reading of aspects of modern democratic culture. A doubly darkened world now becomes twice brighter.

---

[14] Ibid., p. 167.
[15] Ibid., p. 161.
[16] Ibid., p. 158.

The third part of the study leads into rather different territory that may be neglected by those who mine Stout's work for his criticisms of Hauerwas and radical orthodoxy. This would be a pity since Stout's defence of ethical pragmatism deserves careful consideration, not least because it is the closest we come here to anything resembling a detailed account of the democratic tradition. Moreover, in providing a counter-narrative to that of MacIntyre, this material is crucial to the earlier argument of the book.

The tradition of democracy is depicted as a set of social practices that promote particular habits and attitudes amongst their participants. Given its resources, exponents, genres and typical claims, it merits classification as a 'tradition'. Yet democracy also involves a resistance to more deferential notions of authority, and a willingness to test and criticise these on occasion. Its commitment to a collegial exercising of authority and its readiness to grant a hearing to everyone who satisfies minimal conditions of civility also mark out some of the more anti-hierarchical features of the democratic tradition. Hence American pragmatism is understood as advocating 'an anti-traditionalist conception of modern democracy as a tradition'.[17] We are dependent upon moral assumptions and patterns of reasoning that have come down to us, and they are inescapable. However, they are also defeasible, for we can test and revise them, although not all at once. Here the pragmatist epistemologies of Sellars, and especially Brandom, are used to illustrate this notion of a defeasible moral authority. 'Observational social criticism' is a key feature of the democratic tradition. Critics such as Cobbett, Orwell and Agee did not make it up as they went along. They drew upon a moral vocabulary and a set of images identifiable to their readers, yet in doing so they interrogated and reshaped that same tradition in some of its manifestations. So a critical conversation took place that led to some genuine advances. We need to allow that conversation to continue.

What emerges in Stout's account of ethical pragmatism is a richer understanding of how moral communities actually function. Rather than drawing down a set of universally agreed moral principles and working through their deductive implications for practice, an ethical community uses stories, rituals, advisers, exemplars and patterns of training.

> The dispositions of the reliable moral observer are not acquired mainly through highly specialized, professional forms of training. They belong to the ethical life of the people as a whole, and are acquired through the same process of moral acculturation that nearly everyone in the

---

[17] Ibid., p. 204.

community undergoes – in the nursery, around the dining room table, in the classroom, on the playing field, and so on.[18]

The ideal of a common morality should be resisted as a single, comprehensive scheme. Nevertheless, this does not exclude the possibility of moral understanding across shifting contexts and cultures. This will work, provided we adopt an attitude of humility towards ourselves and charity towards others. Such duality seems to exclude both the relativism of anything goes and the absolutism that we may already know every moral truth. Meanwhile, amidst this argument, there is also resistance to patterns of postmodernism that attempt a relentless deconstruction of every positive position, often in tones of moral outrage. The self-defeating, even dishonest, nature of this sort of project is recognised by Stout. Moral outrage requires respect for its own presuppositions and standards, yet once the deconstruction is underway it must turn with a serpentine inevitability upon the hand that feeds it.

> Postmodernism of this sort often begins with a high quotient of moral seriousness. Its political instinct is to align itself with ordinary people against the systems of power relations that surround them. But the narcissistic and self-refuting implications of the antirealist metaphysics it adopts eventually reduce the critical enterprise to a somewhat farcical academic melodrama.[19]

A further claim made for moral pragmatism is that it will give us ethics without metaphysics. The concept of 'truth' can function ethically in ways analogous to its use in other cognitive contexts, yet this does not require us to offer some moral theory explaining how this is so. In this respect, moral theorists who have had recourse to the notion of divine command (Robert Adams) or natural law (Finnis and Grisez) are mistaken. No such account is necessary to democratic culture. Indeed such accounts may actually threaten this culture when they start to break down. Children can acquire a robust moral vocabulary, including the notion of moral truth, without being offered a metaphysical theory of what makes this possible. In attacking theories of moral realism, Stout is not seeking to exclude the possibility of a theological interpretation of ethics. His quarrel is with those who regard the objectivity of ethics as resting upon the faith of a minority group. Pragmatism attempts to maintain important features of moral objectivity while disengaging these

---

[18] Ibid., p. 222.
[19] Ibid., p. 256.

from metaphysical explanation. The requirement for some transcendental condition of moral excellence becomes otiose.

> The purpose served by pragmatic ethical theory is rather to make clear that a society divided over the nature and existence of God is not thereby condemned to view its ethical discourse as an unconstrained endeavor. If the God of the philosophers is dead, not everything is permitted. There can still be morally valid obligations to constrain us, as well as many forms of excellence in which to rejoice.[20]

Insisting that pragmatism does not reduce truth to warranted assertibility, Stout appeals to an argument he locates in Wittgenstein as read by Sabina Lovibond.[21] Our notion of truth in ethical discourse is not constituted by social consensus, principally because we have agreed not to treat truth in this way. Therefore, it may be possible for one person to be sincerely and coherently in ethical dispute with the rest of his or her community. Moral discourse can function without shared metaphysical commitments. Theology can subscribe to this sanitised construction of pragmatism through annexing its particular theological claims. In this respect, it is a house with many rooms for quite different inhabitants.

With its array of contemporary allusions and historical observations, Stout's work is rich, subtle yet highly readable. In future, it will be difficult to address these problems without reference to his arguments, insights and criticisms. The serious and careful consideration of recent theological literature in such a high-level philosophical work will give encouragement to those who labour on the interface of church and political society. As a sympathetic though critical outsider, Stout has surely provoked further self-reflection amongst theologians. This applies most obviously to the tradition of democracy. While theology has joined in much of the recent assault on political liberalism, it has had too little to say about its commitment to tolerance, diversity and pluralism. On what basis can these be affirmed, if Rawlsian and other variants of liberalism are antithetical? If Stout does not attempt a full frontal defence of democracy as a moral tradition (the closest he comes to this is in chapter 9), at least he suggests ways in which its historical antecedents offer the beginnings of a theological rationale. The conciliarist traditions of the fourteenth century, the emphasis upon popular consent as legitimising political rule, the demand of Puritans for greater social egalitarianism and the early modern drive towards religious

---

[20] Ibid., p. 268.
[21] Ibid., p. 276.

toleration – these point to ways in which theology retains a stake in the democratic process that Stout espouses.

Yet his sense of hope in the 'civic nation' and its democratic traditions is tempered by the recognition that these are now in serious trouble. Internal pressures within Western societies have created social fragmentation. In America, society has three constituencies each contending for the upper hand; a business elite that controls many of the transnational corporations, those who identify with one or more diasporas and have little sense of national affiliation, and a third group comprising a variety of middle Americans who share a commitment to evangelical Christianity and a construction of national identity in related terms.[22] By his reckoning, external pressures have also intensified this sense of crisis. In the war against terror, there has been a neglect of international law, a readiness to abandon the ethical constraints of the just war tradition, and a failure to make the ideological case for democracy. While these particular criticisms will probably provoke more ire from American reviewers than from others, they also indicate some tensions in Stout's position. Given the critical reading of contemporary democracy shared by Stout, can an account that is more hopeful for its future than that of MacIntyre et al. be sustained? Here Stout can draw upon two valid types of argument. One is merely to point to the ways in which alternative social forms (whether by historical or geographical comparison) may actually be worse. And if neither secular liberalism nor nostalgic traditionalism are viable alternatives, then we appear to be stuck with something like modern democratic culture as the best possible option. This consideration is reinforced by those observations of Stout that reveal much anti-liberalism to participate quite positively in the expressivist, democratic culture that it appears to be attacking. A second type of argument, and one already rehearsed in his previous work, is to offer a modest sociological account of moral reasoning that suggests ways in which, across competing religious convictions, citizens of democratic societies do actually get along and make common cause on a wide range of ethical issues. Hence there remains something like a civic nation. This is reinforced by the capacity of art, sport and other leisure pursuits to unite citizens and draw them into a range of further social networks that need not be defined by ethnic, religious or racial differences. I suspect that Stout could make more of this. The frequent allusions to his experience as a soccer coach point in this direction.

Despite these rejoinders, one is left with a suspicion that the problem of contemporary moral fragmentation may require more to be conceded to

---

[22] Here Stout is following the analysis of David Hollinger, ibid., pp. 291ff.

MacIntyre's analysis than Stout allows. His ethical pragmatism attempts to show how standard patterns of moral reasoning and an attendant vocabulary with its concepts of moral vision, discovery, seriousness and truth can be maintained in the absence of a single theory that undergirds these. Thus many of the standard disputes of modern moral philosophy are not so much resolved as dissolved. These are beset by pseudo-problems, no single theory of moral objectivity (or subjectivity) being either necessary or plausible. While Stout shows instructively how moral discourse can get along well for much of the time without explicit reference to metaphysical theories, it is not clear that such theory can altogether be dispensed with. His attempt to deal with moral diversity without recourse to subjectivism is more plausible than some, for example John Gray's defence of moral irrealism when confronted by 'the ordeal of value pluralism'. But it remains problematic in the face of, say, a Humean pragmatism that, shorn of religious and metaphysical commitments, reduces social morality to a useful contrivance for coping with the exigencies of the human condition. Here the vocabulary of the realist becomes illusory, a means of staining and gilding the world with the colours of our inner sentiments.

It was anxieties about the practical effect of such (non)metaphysical commitments that led Thomas Reid to seek an explanation of moral and aesthetic value as proceeding ultimately from the being of God, even if this proved an elusive and quite mysterious notion. Reid's conviction arose not from an unduly speculative mind or an inflated ontology, but merely from the conviction that without some such account our practical notions of honour, duty and obligation could not be sustained indefinitely. It was our ordinary use of language together with the ways in which children were introduced to moral truths that compelled Reid to realism. Practice demanded an account of moral objectivity that could not be assimilated to notions of warranted assertibility. If our community had resolved not to use the concept of moral truth in a particular way this was the result not of convention but of constraint. Stout's moral pragmatism seems to make light of these fundamental meta-ethical contests, as if nothing much was at stake. Yet the disorder in our present situation that both he and MacIntyre discern (albeit with different emphases) may be not altogether disconnected from the relative demise under the conditions of modernity of those ethical traditions that reposed upon strong metaphysical commitments about God, scripture, church and human nature. To put the same point rather differently, can the older pieties of family, virtue and religious community, for which Stout wishes to reserve a vital place in modern democratic culture, function without some allegiance to their standard meta-ethical claims? Can citizens maintain their deepest moral convictions indefinitely in the

absence of a worldview that offers an account of human nature and the cosmos?

This leads to a further query regarding the extended criticism of Stanley Hauerwas, who is castigated at some length for his rabid and interminable attack on liberalism. While the liberal tradition can be described in terms much broader and richer than he appears to concede (here Stout's case is persuasive), the force of Hauerwas's work derives primarily from its conviction of the theological and ethical determination of the church. On one reading of his work, I take him to be quite sanguine about the secular. The impossibility of a return to Christendom enables the church to be more humble, and thus to learn that its identity derives neither from power nor from social status, but from a relationship established by God. Only when the secular state either seeks to deny the public significance of the church or itself to function as a pseudo-religious entity (which happens often enough) is it to be denounced. Furthermore, the greatest contribution Christians can make to the secular world is to live as the church. To do this does not commit us to the claim that we have nothing to learn from those outside the church, or that the action of God is limited to the ecclesial domain. In this regard, Hauerwas's theology resonates with the approach of Barth that receives repeated support throughout Stout's book. Extolled for his criticism of the German state in 1934 and a willingness to make common cause with other foci of opposition to the Hitler regime, Barth reveals some leanings that are strikingly similar to those of Hauerwas in our own day. The principal target of Barth's theological criticism was that fusion of civil and ecclesial communities that had blighted much of German cultural Protestantism. Indeed Barth was accused by some Lutheran critics of advocating a liberal doctrine of the state in so far as his theology seemed to promote a greater dissociation of secular from ecclesial spheres. In criticising forms of civil religion, Hauerwas may be read as likewise suspicious of a fusion of the church and contemporary culture. This must set him against either an integration of church and civil society or a dominance of the latter by the Christian community. What remains is something akin to a secular model in which the church maintains a critical distance from the 'civic nation'. It is a condition of this relocation of the church that it can exist in both positive and negative relation to its host society, a point recognised by Yoder in his critique of H. R. Niebuhr's typology.[23] This is the neighbourhood within which Hauerwas's doctrine of the church seems to be situated and

---

[23] See John Howard Yoder, 'How H. Richard Niebuhr Reasoned: A Critique of *Christ and Culture*', in Glen H. Stassen, D. M. Yeager amd John Howard Yoder, *Authentic Transformation: A New Vision of Christ and Culture* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1996) pp. 31–90.

is thus closer to Barth (and Stout) than is recognised here. Where Barth does diverge from Hauerwas (and the radically orthodox) is in his greater stress upon the perfections of Christ that must relativise and subordinate the church in ways that prevent an over-determination, *inter alia*, of its sacramental actions.

Nevertheless, it is not clear to me that Hauerwas's prioritising of the church over the civic nation is misplaced. Where do moral exemplars, such as Dietrich Bonhoeffer, Martin Luther King and Dorothy Day, emerge if not through communities of worship, education and pastoral care?[24] If the 'civic nation' requires models of virtue, where will these be found except in sub-groups that nurture their members according to the practices, beliefs and rituals of their faith traditions? These are not sequestered in ways that prevent the secular world acting positively upon the community. I can find nothing much in the Christian tradition or in Hauerwas's writings to controvert this. His work is a reminder of the indispensability of the gathered congregation as the primary form of the ecclesial body of Christ where the Word of God is heard and the sacraments are celebrated. As such, it is an attempt to think ethically and politically about the ways in which baptism demands an allegiance of us above that of family, civic community and state. For Protestant theology this represents a recovery of some Catholic themes that can be discerned in the writings of the magisterial Reformers,[25] while also offering a fairer hearing to those on the radical and free church wing of the Reformation whose theological voices were too often silenced or ignored by the mainstream. And, from Stout's perspective, the health of such groups is surely vital to a democratic culture that seeks to inculcate virtue in its citizens.

A further issue that has troubled me in reading this important study is how well its conclusions can be translated into the very different cultural and political contexts where today most of the church lives. It is written largely for an American audience and most of its illustration and argumentation reflects this setting. Yet in one respect, the role assigned by Stout to religion in the political realm may actually work quite well in settings that have very different religious histories from those of Western countries. Here the aspiration towards a renewed Christendom is almost entirely absent. It is

---

[24] David Chappell's recent study strikes me as significant in this context. He argues that within the civil rights movement the most effective grouping on the religious left were those with strong theological roots in the black churches. *A Stone of Hope: Prophetic Religion and the Death of Jim Crow* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2004).

[25] 'For there is no other way to enter into life except this mother conceive us in her womb, give us birth, nourish us at her breast, and lastly, unless she keep us under her care and guidance until, putting off mortal flesh, we become like the angels'. John Calvin, *Institutes* IV.i.4.

remote and irrelevant, for example, to many Asian contexts in which the church is and always has been a minority body. At the same time, a blanket condemnation of liberal society with an accompanying retreat of the church is similarly out of the question. The political and economic turmoil in which many non-Western churches find themselves makes this impossible. While continuing to prioritise their worship, fellowship and mission, churches seek to engage in critical but positive ways with the wider socio-political realities that confront them. It seems to me that Stout's thesis may translate quite well in such settings.

As far as Europe is concerned, however, the situation looks rather different. The standard secularisation thesis that Stout dismisses so quickly looks more plausible as a restricted account of what has happened in western Europe, where many church buildings are now doing time as night clubs, carpet warehouses and residential flats. The current rapidity of church decline should not be underestimated. Those that do survive are attended and supported by an ageing membership. In part, this may explain the attraction of Hauerwas's writings to those younger Christians, especially clergy, who find themselves in diminishing, beleaguered groups. The prominent public position of William Temple, Reinhold Niebuhr or John Baillie cannot be theirs for the foreseeable future, but they can turn their attention to the formation of congregations as moral communities of worship, witness and discipleship. The validity of this ecclesiological model may be greater than is recognised by Stout in situations where church and parish are now becoming increasingly dissociated. Yet where Stout's voice might profitably be heard by this constituency is in the reminder that dissociation need not entail hostility or estrangement. For this and much else, we should be grateful to him.

David Fergusson

New College, University of Edinburgh, Mound Place, Edinburgh EH1 2LX, Scotland

d.a.fergusson@ed.ac.uk