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[1] Stanley Hauerwas is Gilbert T. Rowe Professor of Theological Ethics at Duke Divinity School. He is self-described as "part philosopher, part political theorist, part theologian, part ethicist". *Time* magazine recently described him as "America's Best Theologian," a heavy load that one hopes he is bearing bravely.

[2] *With The Grain of the Universe: The Church's Witness and Natural Theology* was delivered as the Gifford lectures of 2001 at the University of St. Andrews. The Gifford lectures require the lecturer to discuss natural theology. The dictionary definition of natural theology is "theology based on knowledge of the natural world and on human reason, apart from revelation." The problem posed by this is that Hauerwas disagrees with the whole idea. He argues strongly that any God susceptible to proof is not really God: "The metaphysical and existential projects to make a "place" for such a god cannot help but "prove" the existence of a god who is not worthy of worship" (15). He believes that "the very idea that we might know God abstracted from how God makes himself known was the result of the loss of a Christian politics called church" (16). Hauerwas interprets even the hallowed proofs of the existence of God in Thomas Aquinas as the product of a culture where the existence of God was not problematic. Aquinas' never proved the existence of God from nature; instead he related the God in whom people believed to the world in which they lived. Since God's existence has become problematic in our culture, we misunderstand Aquinas, and seek to prove God's existence. But in so doing, Hauerwas argues, we inevitably subordinate our belief in God to other cultural beliefs in the primacy of the individual, in reason, and in the autonomy of the natural world.

[3] Under these circumstances, Hauerwas' agreement to do the Gifford lectures must have led to some soul-searching, and then into researching how others solved the problem. The lectures and the book are the fruit of that research. In the course of discussing natural theology, Hauerwas tells the theological story of the twentieth century by concentrating on three of the greatest Gifford lecturers--William James, Reinhold Niebuhr, and Karl Barth. As he does so, he examines how our understanding of natural theology relates to seemingly distant topics such as politics and morals.

[4] Hauerwas first summarizes William James' pragmatic approach to understanding human knowledge, including religious knowledge. Within this approach, James is sympathetic to religious experience and understanding. He is impatient with people who suppress the evident fact of religious experience and the achievements that derive from it, because they insist that everything that is believed must first be confirmed to be rational in terms of some external criteria of rationality. Hauerwas gives James credit for discovering "we are part of that which makes the world what it is" (59). In other words, there is an unavoidable moral character in our existence. But the religious experience validated by James is very much a humanist experience. Its truth derives from the centrality of human experience. The deity discerned through such human-centered thought is not the biblical God. Hauerwas ends his study of James by noting that James rejected Christianity not because he thought it was irrational, but because Christianity was incompatible with the democratic values of modernity.

[5] Hauerwas' notes that Niebuhr's theology is normally considered very different from the humanist religious thought of James. After all, Niebuhr advocated a life dedicated to Christian service, a life he

exemplified as well as preached. Niebuhr's ethics include a belief in original sin. But Hauerwas argues that much of Niebuhr's Christian terminology is not supported by his "thin" theology. Rather, Niebuhr's theology adopted essentially the same humanist standpoint as James, though Niebuhr was cleverer at using that standpoint to address neo-orthodox themes. For example, Niebuhr says that the fundamental human problem is that all human beings are trapped between finiteness and freedom, and must resolve that tension. Niebuhr's then derives his doctrine of sin from this belief about the human condition. Niebuhr's doctrine of sin is thus based on humanist assertions. Making this and similar observations, Hauerwas concludes that Niebuhr's thinking comes from the same world-view as James.

[6] Barth is the hero of the book. Unlike James and Niebuhr, Barth steadfastly refused to make any part of his theology human-centered. Instead, Barth orients his entire theology around the revelation of God in Jesus Christ. At the risk of being called irrational, Barth subordinates human reason to its object. In the case of theology, that object is the reality of the revelation of God in creation and redemption. In so doing, Hauerwas claims, Barth was reordering theological language in a God-centered way. In modifying philosophical categories in the service of theology rather than the other way around, Barth laid the groundwork for truly rational theological discussion, permitting talk about God in a language that can accommodate what God truly is. Barth's work "enables Christians to see the world as it is, not as it appears" (183). This approach to natural theology leads directly to the idea that Christian discourse will appear in the world as witness.

[7] Hauerwas takes exception only to Barth's implementation of this theology. Hauerwas believes that Barth's doctrine of the church was not sufficiently robust, leading to a weakened moral theology. But Hauerwas holds that the deficiencies of Barth's theology were small errors compared to Barth's recovery of our moral responsibility to witness to the triune God, a witness that enables human beings to correctly understand creation within an understanding of the creator.

[8] Hauerwas' own conclusion draws out further the implications of this approach to natural theology using the idea of witness. He holds up the example of three additional witnesses, John Howard Yoder, John Paul II, and Dorothy Day. Through their God-centered lives these witnesses demonstrate the accuracy of Christian belief. These people "witness to the nongodforsakenness of the world even under the conditions of sin" (20), and thus ground a natural theology. This is the foundational idea behind the title: Christians do not prove the existence of God, but demonstrate that existence by living "with the grain of the universe". And this is Hauerwas' solution to the problem of the Gifford Lectures.

[9] *With the Grain of the Universe* will be useful to readers wanting an introduction to and a point of view on the ideas of James, Niebuhr or Barth, particularly Barth. The book requires close reading and is not quickly assimilated. This is not just because of its wide-ranging argument. It is also because Hauerwas' single passage through his sources leaves much for readers to think through on their own. The book should not be oversimplified as "James is bad, Niebuhr is still bad, but Barth is good". Rather, if Hauerwas is right, and proper Christian witness provides a rational response to, and language to talk about, God's self-revelation, then it becomes possible to recover the value of much of the human-centered discussion that provided the modernist project. Barthian thought will permit "recovery of natural theology as a Christological theme" (159). Hauerwas provides suggestions about what is salvageable; speaking kindly of Niebuhr's analysis of sin, and of James' ability to improve our understanding of faith. But how that humanistic discussion can be centered within the divine economy rather than external to it, and how it can be reworded using terminology of divine revelation is largely left as an exercise for the reader.

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