

# Being Christian in a Democratic State

BY COLEMAN FANNIN

**Moving beyond polarizing political positions, the three books reviewed here uncouple democracy from the violent and commodifying machinery of the modern nation-state. They point toward a rich shared life in families, communities, and cities oriented toward the common good.**

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**D**emocracy and freedom may be inseparable in the popular mind today, but this was not always the case. After the American Revolution many people wondered whether Americans were up to the task of direct self-government, a concern that led to the incorporation into the Constitution of the Electoral College and other measures that protect the rights of minorities. In time, however, citizens came to treasure liberal democracy as the means to guard against infringement on their freedom by the government and to express their will constructively. Christians, especially the Free Church Christians like Baptists, Methodists, Presbyterians, Mennonites, and others that flourished in the absence of formal establishment, came to assume the fundamental harmony of democracy and the gospel.

With the expansion of the modern nation-state, the decline of intermediate institutions, and a growing plurality of moral perspectives have come additional concerns and polarizing debates. The decline of church denominations, the rise of consumerism, and the cult of religious personalities have left Christians divided, with little to help them negotiate competing claims or meaningfully engage the wider culture. For most, love of America and freedom remains a given. For a few, however, critics such as Stanley Hauerwas and Alasdair MacIntyre have aroused or confirmed suspicions that something is wrong and that Christians must rethink their commitments to the American state. They point out that liberal democrats (as represented by

thinkers such as John Rawls) view substantive religious claims as inherently exclusionary and therefore seek a secular rational foundation for public discourse. Further, because this rational foundation cannot be found, our society is propped up by inherited norms and marked by wildly divergent forms of moral reasoning with no common core, no tradition, to adjudicate them.

For decades Hauerwas and MacIntyre have been engaged in friendly arguments with theorists who share some of their views but also stress the importance of democracy. No one has contributed more to these arguments than Jeffrey Stout, and *Democracy and Tradition* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2004, 368 pp., \$28.95) will likely stand as his magnum opus. Though an atheist, Stout appreciates the work of Hauerwas, MacIntyre, and others who long for a new version of traditionalism – not the establishment of a state church, but the flourishing of communities marked by the virtues and free from the state’s claim to absolute sovereignty. At the same time, he believes these “new traditionalists” have wrongly assumed the position of John Rawls and Richard Rorty to be the norm.

The heart of the book is the consideration of whether religion is, in Rorty’s words, a “conversation-stopper.” According to Stout, the liberal secularists threaten the democratic spirit by staking out a rigid, albeit rhetorically effective, position. While acknowledging that a common theological perspective is no longer possible, he chastises secularists for excluding religious arguments and (in Rawls’ case) for having a narrow, foundationalist view of what all “rational” persons believe. Doing so risks undermining the Martin Luther Kings of the world – a very bad idea.

Ultimately, however, Stout is more worried about the new traditionalists like Hauerwas and MacIntyre who seem on the verge of abandoning the democratic process just as, post-9/11, it is threatened by expediency and corporate power at every turn. Their preoccupation with the secularists’ worst excesses leads them to become mired in theoretical issues (e.g., disputes over the meaning of “justice”) where agreement is elusive at best, while neglecting practical matters where diverse coalitions and particular policies can make a difference in our common life. Stout’s appeal is that democracy is itself a moral tradition that “inculcates certain habits of reasoning, certain attitudes toward deference and authority in political discussion, and love for certain goods and virtues,” particularly courage and generosity (pp. 2-3). More to the point, democracy requires the accumulated wisdom and practices of other moral traditions, religious and otherwise, to cultivate the habits of citizenship.

In the first part of *Democracy and Tradition*, Stout examines the emphasis on what Walt Whitman termed “the important question of character” in American pragmatism from Ralph Waldo Emerson to John Dewey. He also considers the debate over Black Nationalism in which James Baldwin and Ralph Ellison suggested an alternative mode of black participation in American life. After assessing the secularists and the traditionalists in the second

part of the book, Stout turns in the final part to what a culture of “democratic traditionalism” might look like that prioritizes democratic social practices and resists the concentrated power of political elites and corporations. Importantly, it would require neither reaching agreement on foundational theories (in metaphysics) nor relativizing truth claims; rather, all beliefs and justifications are welcome so long as they are open to scrutiny and share the

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goal of supporting moral commitments. “As I see it, the issue is what kind of people we are going to be—a matter of self-definition and integrity. It is about what we care about most, of what we deem sacred or supremely valuable or inviolable, not the desire to have clean hands” (p. 200). For Stout the “we” is often America. Thus, readers who share Hauerwas’ commitment to the Church and the difference God makes in eth-

ical reasoning will remain skeptical of Stout’s optimism about the hospitality of the state and the virtues of the *demos*. Still, they will be encouraged that in this “we” Stout includes a variety of local groups as well as creative thinkers such as Wendell Berry and Dorothy Day.



Stout’s book has reenergized the academic discussion of democracy by redirecting it away from a preoccupation with liberal theory. For his part, Hauerwas responds in equally charitable and constructive fashion in *Christianity, Democracy, and the Radical Ordinary: Conversations between a Radical Democrat and a Christian* (Eugene, OR: Cascade, 2008, 378 pp., \$39.00), written with political scientist (and atheist) Romand Coles.<sup>†</sup> Rather than a unified argument, this book is an uneven but candid dialogue between Hauerwas and Coles that emerged from a course they taught together at Duke University. It is carried out in the form of essays, letters, even a lecture, and is grounded in the authors’ shared criticism of the modern liberal “megastate” and appreciation of each other’s work and influences.

Hauerwas and Coles say that their book is “about the politics of death and life...one that refuses to let death dominate our living” (p. 1). This is in contrast to the political thinking of “empire, global capitalism, the megastate, and even many forms of cosmopolitanism” in our culture that fearfully seeks

to stave off death, while simultaneously producing it (p. 3). Yet all is not lost, for both “radical democracy” and “radical ecclesia” are capable of enacting a shared life that is nonviolent, centered on shared goods, and willing to engage the particulars of human encounter and the vulnerability of human existence.

Christianity, at least Christianity not determined by Constantinian or capitalist desires, is training for a dying that is good. Such good dying is named in the gospel as trial, cross, and resurrection. Radical democracy names the intermittent and dispersed traditions of witnessing, resisting, and seeking alternatives to the politics of death wrought by those bent on myriad forms of immortality-as-conquest.... Both radical democracy and Christianity are lived pedagogies of hope inspired and envisioned through memories of the “good, at its best.” Such training is a resource for sustaining the politics of the everyday, that is, the politics of small achievements. (pp. 3-4)

As Coles presents it—and his voice is more prominent, though it brings out the best in Hauerwas—radical democracy sounds a lot like what Hauerwas says about the Church *and* what Stout says about democracy. The key is to cultivate practices such as caring for the least of these, welcoming the stranger, and listening patiently to one another. The way to learn how to do so is to observe models like the civil rights leaders Ella Baker, Will Campbell, and Bob Moses; Jean Vanier, the founder of the L’Arche communities in which people with and without disabilities share their lives together; and the Industrial Areas Foundation that creates independent local organizations to tackle a public need. Still, theory remains important, and essays on Cornel West, Sheldon Wolin, and Rowan Williams (all by Coles) are helpful for understanding the authors, who, in a sense, perform the politics Stout advocates and they themselves describe. Coles, like Stout, thinks current political matters are more urgent, while Hauerwas displays the patience of one shaped by a Christian understanding of time and humanity’s final end or *telos*. Free Church Christians will also appreciate the interplay between Coles’ radical egalitarianism and Hauerwas’ affirmation of the unity enabled by episcopacy and hierarchy, particularly in their exchange on the work of Mennonite theologian John Howard Yoder.



In *The Limits of Liberal Democracy: Politics and Religion at the End of Modernity* (Downers Grove, IL: IVP Academic, 2009, 161 pp., \$18.00) Scott Moore offers not only a primer on how the Church has uncritically adopted the conservative and liberal perspectives that dominant public life, but also a way forward that avoids either accepting this dichotomy or withdrawing from culture. His premise is that although “the world did not fundamentally change that

September [11] morning,...it is true that we have come close to the end of an age which has defined our world and given meaning to our many endeavors" (p. 14). Modernity is increasingly defined by "political and moral extremes" that nonetheless share many assumptions and commitments. With the breakdown of modern politics and what Moore terms "the end of convenient stereotypes," the Church has the opportunity to rediscover a different vision.

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In the modern world it is often assumed that what is most important about politics can be reduced to statecraft. But *politics* refers to so much more than statecraft.... Politics is about how we order our lives together in the *polis*, whether that is a city, a community, or even a family. It is about how

we live together, how we recognize and preserve that which is most important, how we cultivate friendships and educate our children, how we learn to think and talk about what kind of life is really the good life. (p. 15)

Animating the book is the question of how Christians might approach politics when they cease to assume that the answer to the question "What is the good life?" is "Being a good American." The first five chapters revolve around two largely academic controversies from the mid-1990s, but along the way (and especially in chapter six) Moore weaves them into a sweeping narrative of the development of "Enlightenment Liberalism" and the nation-state. This development is well represented today by the philosophies of John Rawls and Richard Rorty, and the politics of political liberals and conservatives who prize individual liberty despite their contrasting views of government. Moore traces the reduction of politics to statecraft and the emergence of the autonomous individual that makes this possible through the writings of Immanuel Kant and Max Weber, among others. At times Moore's argument is too sweeping. Readers unfamiliar with such a critique will benefit from consulting other works for the details, but will be inspired or at least provoked by this section of the book.

In the final two chapters Moore explains how liberal politics is manifested in our "culture of convenience" that equates happiness with consumption and values efficiency above all, offering examples as varied as the universal remote control and no-fault divorce to capital punishment and euthanasia.

In contrast, the “extraordinary politics” of the Church, already partly visible in the earlier episodes, recognizes that we are souls created in the image of God and must be formed by a community in order to flourish and achieve our proper *telos*. At the center of this politics is not mere tolerance—a sign of failing to reason together—but hospitality, which takes our disagreements seriously while acknowledging our vulnerability and being willing to sacrifice for the common good. “Hospitality is always particular; it is an offer made to the stranger or the one in need,” Moore writes. “Through the exercise of the practice of hospitality, I learn how to become both a cheerful giver and a gracious receiver.” (pp. 148-149) In the end, Moore arrives at a prescription close to that of Stout, Hauerwas, and Coles, which makes up for the underdeveloped aspects of his argument.

The strength of all three books reviewed here is that they are *mediating*: at their best they move beyond polarizing positions and, to borrow a phrase from Ludwig Wittgenstein, “back to the rough ground” of democratic practices, while continuing to uncouple democracy from the violent and commodifying machinery of the modern nation-state. For this, readers will be grateful, and from it they will have much to learn.

#### NOTE

† Stanley Hauerwas also responds to Jeffrey Stout’s view in the postscript to *Performing the Faith: Bonhoeffer and the Practice of Nonviolence* (Grand Rapids, MI: Brazos Press, 2004).



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