

An atheistic sense to Stanley Hauerwas's theology

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Abstract

This essay argues that Stanley Hauerwas' Christian ethics exemplifies a manner of speech that does not premise divine activity as necessary for theological judgment. An anti-constantinian reticence regarding divine activity sits at the heart of Hauerwas' work, giving it an atheistic sense emblematic of secularized cultural conditions, marking his theology as decidedly baptist. The essay takes the form of a sustained engagement with Nicholas Healy's incisive critique that Hauerwas disastrously joins together what should remain apart, what David Kelsey distinguishes as logics of belief and logics of coming to belief. After passing on a defensive response to Healy, the article advances a constructive response that would have theological speech take up residence between logics of belief and coming to belief, which the article re-imagines in terms of what Stanley Cavell calls "comedies of remarriage."

Keywords

atheism, Cavell, Hauerwas, Healy, Kelsey, language

Something Cavell says in *The Claim of Reason* nicely contextualizes the theology of Stanley Hauerwas. He writes, "We have not mastered, or we have forgotten, or we have distorted, or learned through fragmented models, the forms of life which could make utterances like 'God exists' or 'God is dead' or 'I love you' or 'I cannot do otherwise' or 'Beauty is but the beginning of terror' bear all the weight they could carry, express all they could take from us. We do not know the meaning of the words. We look away and leap around."¹ In this article, I set out to explore the conditions Cavell speaks of, and to figure Hauerwas's theology as the attempt to talk about God out of those conditions, this even amidst the well-known Hauerwasian appropriation of the "cultural-linguistic" reading of Wittgenstein that I see Cavell confounding.² My concern is not with scholastic matters

1. Stanley Cavell, *The Claim of Reason: Wittgenstein, Skepticism, Morality and Tragedy* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1979), 172–73.
2. On this see Peter Dula's "Wittgenstein Among the Theologians," in *Unsettling Arguments: A Festschrift on the Occasion of Stanley Hauerwas's 70th Birthday*, ed. Charles R. Pinches, Kelley S. Johnson, and Charlie M. Collier (Eugene: Cascade, 2011), 3–24.

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regarding different readings of Wittgenstein and all the specific ways Hauerwas takes them up. Indeed, I proceed as if Hauerwas himself does not always trace the ways his specific readings of Wittgenstein may be at odds with the manner in which his theology exemplifies the cultural conditions expressed in the quotation above.

My concern here takes the form of an engagement with Nicholas Healy's 2014 volume, *Hauerwas: A (Very) Critical Introduction*, whereby I argue that one response to Healy's incisive criticism (a response I call "God is there") empties Hauerwas's theology of its most interesting feature.³ In contrast, I offer a different sort of response ("Why not?"), one which will cast Hauerwas's theology as baptist insofar as it resists a Constantinian purview that presumes "the forms of life which could make utterances like 'God exists' ... bear all the weight they could carry."

Hauerwas's "theologically bare" theology

In his most recent book Hauerwas begins his response to Healy by referring to him as "an estimable theologian,"⁴ and certainly Healy in *Hauerwas* puts forth an estimable argument, much of the virtue of which is its single, focused, and sustained critique that works so well because it remains parsimonious in its ambitions. Everything in *Hauerwas* (even at its most trenchant, charitable in ways that matter) is deployed toward this single argument, which is captured most starkly when Healy states, "Within his account of the church and his argument as a whole, Hauerwas makes no significant move whereby he clearly displays the material consequences of the necessary reliance upon God's actions to make possible and actual what is for us an impossibility."⁵ Early on Healy lays out the critique:

Hauerwas's overriding concern for ethics (and to a lesser degree, apologetics) so dominates his treatment of Christian doctrine that he treats doctrine inadequately and/or distorts it. Put another way, his systematic focus on living the Christian life well, and on the benefits of church life over all alternatives, deflects his attention from what we must say about the triune God who makes any of it possible. Put another way, Hauerwas's ecclesiocentric thinking distorts to the extent that it fails to be sufficiently theocentric.⁶

I take these comments of Healy's and his argument more generally as raising the question, "Is there or is there not God in Hauerwas's theology?"

For Healy, Hauerwas's emphasis on church crowds out not only mention of God but also need of God insofar as Hauerwas has created a theological ethics that does not require God for its theoretical coherence or practical success. When Healy says that Hauerwas "deflects attention from what we must say about the triune God who makes any of it possible," he means that God is what makes the ethical life of the church possible, such that inasmuch as Hauerwas's theology has crowded out God, it falls short of being Christian. Completing the argument, Healy offers his most damning line, "Hauerwas tends to give the impression that we Christians are left alone here with a set of resources we have been given from our past, to try to make things and ourselves better, rather like people do in any other tradition."⁷ Clearly, by "left alone," Healy indicates the deeply problematic sense of Hauerwas's theology as atheistic in practice and in theory, that there is no God at its structural and material center. Healy is good enough to put things in more subtle terms, with nods to "traditional theology," "theocentric" models, and other terms I will revisit. At the end of the day, however, Healy means to ask whether the living God understood by Christians as Father, Son, and Holy Spirit matters for Hauerwas's portraiture of life in God.

3. Nicholas M. Healy, *Hauerwas: A (Very) Critical Introduction* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2014).

4. Stanley Hauerwas, *The Work of Theology*, in manuscript form, 12.

5. Healy, *Hauerwas*, 122.

6. *Ibid.*, 16.

7. *Ibid.*, 124.

No doubt exaggerating the point: Healy thinks Hauerwas's theology issues as if God does not exist, or at least is not materially related to creaturely affairs (which is just what I understand "Father, Son, and Holy Spirit" to indicate). Perhaps what Hauerwas's theological ethics gives us is a vision of the church as a process of social formation whereby moral characters witness in name only to God; behind the name "God" stands the church, whereas Healy would rather prefer what he calls in other writings "a more gentle turn to the church."⁸ Because Hauerwas stipulates that God can only be *shown* through church practices and cannot be known by something other than those practices (presumably dogmatic propositions about God's activity in, through, and beyond the church), Hauerwas doubles down on the church, which must now do both the work of forming individuals and by that formation point unmistakably to God. Hampered by philosophical beliefs that theology can only show, the weight of Hauerwas's ethics, as Healy holds it, lays entirely upon the church to *show* God in just this way. When Healy then calls Hauerwas's bluff and his ecclesiology comes up short, proving to rely on a circular "privileged heuristic to reality" and therefore unable to produce a church so amazing that only the truthfulness of God could explain it, there is not much reason to keep talking about God, Christian theology having been conceptually backed into an ecclesial corner from which there is nowhere to go.⁹

By the time Healy calls Hauerwas's work "theologically bare" we know enough to understand that description as but the kindest way of saying that Hauerwas's theology operates as if God either does not exist or does not participate in our lives: "The only time God is mentioned is not to discuss the Cross or resurrection, or God's presence or absence in our suffering, or something similar, but to note, 'Like God, we suffer because we love.'"¹⁰ Healy takes this reference to be particularly instructive of an instance in which Hauerwas's theological caginess gets the better of him, revealing a kind of atheistic sense to his theology. I will take up these pages from Hauerwas's *Naming the Silences* in fair detail below because I, too, take them to be instructive, though in my reading, they teach something about silence and the need for it and about the discursive space taken up after certain cultural arrangements have given way. We need first to get a deeper sense of Healy's critique by turning to the theoretical machinery powering it—a distinction David Kelsey makes in *Eccentric Existence* between logics of belief and logics of coming to believe. It is Kelsey, after all, who supplies most of the concepts and criteria for Healy's critique of Hauerwas. A short excursus on *Eccentric Existence* will both situate Healy's argument and provide traction for the kind of response to Healy's criticism I develop below.

In *Eccentric Existence*, Kelsey distinguishes between what he calls "the logic of belief" and "the logic of coming to belief."¹¹ In Kelsey's formulation, a logic of belief for any community is composed of all those beliefs and their systematic relationships that constitute what it means to believe whatever it is that community believes. For Kelsey, "theocentric" presumes a "rough logical hierarchy" that places beliefs about God as "logically more basic" than beliefs about anything else. A theocentric anthropology would, then, make beliefs about human beings logically dependent upon

8. Nicholas Healy, "Three Ways of Engaging Theologically with Modernity," *New Blackfriars* 94 (1050, March 2013): 177–87 (182).

9. On 95, Healy quotes from *Subjectivity: Ethnographic Investigations*, ed. João Biehl, Bryon Good, and Arthur Kleinman (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2007), 8–9.

10. Healy, *Hauerwas*, 124.

11. David H. Kelsey, *Eccentric Existence: A Theological Anthropology* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 2009). Kelsey actually offers a third logic, "the logic of the life of Christian believing," but for the sake of argument I follow Healy's focus on the first two. Hauerwas treats what he calls Kelsey's "great book" in *Approaching the End*, where Hauerwas both disagrees and agrees with Kelsey on theological issues related to creation. Stanley Hauerwas, *Approaching the End: Eschatological Reflections on Church, Politics, and Life* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2013), 6, 20–21.

beliefs about God.¹² For Kelsey, the Christian logic of belief is by definition theocentric in that all “Christian beliefs systematically hang on the claim that God’s relating to all that is not God, including human beings, is grounded in God’s free, wise and generative love.”¹³ When those possessed of Christian beliefs ask each other about their beliefs, good answers will convey and properly order beliefs in relation to beliefs about God.

It is different with coming to belief. Because coming to believe does not require belief, conversations can proceed without antecedent beliefs about God; they can proceed with an atheistic sense. When a foreigner to a community asks questions about that community’s beliefs, it makes sense that in answering the foreigner one does not presuppose of the foreigner the community’s order of beliefs. For example, a member of the believing community cannot presume of the foreigner that certain claims will prompt certain affective reactions, or be surprised or offended when those affective reactions do not come. If the community member wants her community to come off as attractive to the foreigner she had better find ways to communicate those affections and beliefs in ways the foreigner can understand and embrace. When Kelsey uses descriptions like “proximate contexts” and “neutral” and “apologetic” and “rationales why anyone . . .,” he intends “a persuasive apologetic argument why one ought to move from unbelief to belief or unfaith to faith.”¹⁴ If the member is asked by another member of her community, “Why do you talk like that to the foreigner?” she naturally responds, “Because I’m trying to persuade.” There is nothing untoward about persuasion playing a role here. As Kelsey writes, “A functional account of how Christian concepts and beliefs may work—that is, the role they may play—in human beings’ movement from unfaith to faith (or in living the life of faith, for that matter) is not the same as an account of what the beliefs mean, how they do or do not hang together, what they imply, how they may be freshly articulated most perspicaciously, and so forth.”¹⁵

According to Kelsey’s formulation, the great danger is to “conflate address” so that one confuses logics of belief with logics of coming to belief in talking with the unbeliever and the believer, respectively. If in the course of trying to persuade a nonbeliever one talks as if one were talking to a believer, one would fail as an evangelist. Conversely, one ought not talk to a fellow believer by dumbing down or trying to make attractive logics of belief by, for example, premising humans for any question about God. Logical sequence gets systematically confused in these two kinds of conflations, and in that confusion the corresponding initiative gets lost.¹⁶

With Healy’s critique read more broadly through Kelsey, we can see in greater relief the trouble Hauerwas’s theology gets into, resulting in a problem that cannot simply be corrected by more explicit talk about God. Rather, the stage has been set. Hauerwas has configured his theology in a way that inclusion of God is welcome, but unnecessary.

According to Healy the error can be plainly seen in Hauerwas’s (ostensibly) Christian virtue ethics. The problem here is that some evaluative notion of “human” has been smuggled in without having first related how that account “logically relates” to God, resulting in conceptions of the human that proceed as a unified theory bereft of any mention of God. Hauerwas’s use without remainder of Alasdair MacIntyre’s theologically agnostic account of moral formation commits him to this kind of mistake. In contrast, one might compare Kelsey’s pruning of MacIntyre’s sense of excellence such that God rather than excellence becomes the point. This allows Kelsey to offer an account of moral formation that, like Hauerwas’s appropriation of MacIntyre, relies on notions of *telos* and *habitus* but, unlike Hauerwas, relates *telos* in terms of communion with God and grace-enabled *habitus* in

12. Kelsey, *Eccentric Existence*, 28, 29.

13. *Ibid.*, 119.

14. *Ibid.*, 81.

15. *Ibid.*, 113.

16. *Ibid.*, 27.

resistance to evil as that which threatens communion.¹⁷ The way Kelsey works out Christian virtue ethics by situating terms within a “global” story of “God’s action toward all that is not God” serves as a case in point of how a logic of faith systematically hangs everything on God, and hence is appropriately “theocentric” in contrast to an atheistic sense about Hauerwas’s theology.

First kind of response: “God is there”

I can think of two kinds of responses to Healy. I will present these two responses as “God *is* there” and “Why not?” As a response to Healy, “God *is* there” takes one of three approaches: “God is there and *you’ve* missed it,” “God is there if you *think* about it,” and “God *can be* there with a little modification.” The first holds that God is there in Hauerwas’s theology and Healy has, for whatever reason, failed to see as much. Hauerwas takes a turn at this first approach in that already mentioned recent book of his, in which he tries to point to the places where God does show up in his theology and in ways that do not just back into “church.” Specifically, Hauerwas calls attention to *With the Grain of the Universe*: “In that book my account and general agreement with Barth would, I should hope, qualify Healy’s judgment that in contrast to Kelsey my account of Christian practices is not sufficiently theocentric.”¹⁸

A second approach to the response is to admit a kind of lacuna in Hauerwas’s theology but to argue that the lacuna is not a necessary one—that the mechanics of the theology presumes or permits what is not explicitly stated. The easiest way to make this approach is by offering a “Hauerwasian” argument that majors in, and obviously so, the kinds of theological essentials Healy considers properly theological. Plenty of examples of this approach can be found through the work of Hauerwas’s students. For example, in *The Blackwell Companion to Christian Ethics*, the book Hauerwas credits as “the definitive ‘big book’” he has been pressed for (by the likes of Healy, presumably), although “his friends have written it,” the preface quips. There, in essay after essay, authors illumine some contemporary ethical issue through logics of belief in order to work out a Christian treatment. A few quick examples will suffice. In “Bodies and Abortion,” Frederick Christian Bauerschmidt contends with contemporary notions of “body space” used to justify abortion by rereading the notion through a baptismal theology through which selfhood is established only as the Holy Spirit “invades the candidate’s body through the touch of the ecclesial community.” For Bauerschmidt the Pauline sense of “belonging”—where creaturely belonging borrows its sense, though in a discontinuous way, from Christ belonging to the Father—clarifies what it means for Christians to say, “My body *belongs* to me.” This kind of ethical treatment is what Charles Pinches refers to in his *Blackwell Companion* essay as “naming and describing” through the scriptural logic of faith. In their essay on economics and exchange, D. Stephen Long and Tripp York figure an economics of abundance through a conception of “Gift”:

the Holy Spirit is properly named ‘Gift.’ The Spirit is the Gift (*Donum*) who is the Love proceeding from the Father and Son. The Spirit is also the Gift-given (*Datum*) who makes possible our creation and redemption. Because the Spirit cannot be alienated from the Giver, the Spirit is given without any intention of a return (with no *‘intentione retributionis’* according to Aquinas). Whenever such a gift is received it becomes confirmed to our very being. Thus we turn to God and offer it in praise and thanksgiving. Such a gift-giving economy draws us closer into the life of God, a life that knows no lack.¹⁹

17. *Ibid.*, 31–32.

18. Hauerwas, *The Work of Theology*, 19.

19. *The Blackwell Companion to Christian Ethics*, ed. Stanley Hauerwas and Samuel Wells (Oxford: Blackwell, 2004). Frederick Christian Bauerschmidt, “Being Baptized: Bodies and Abortion”, 250–63 (255); Charles R. Pinches, “Proclaiming: Naming and Describing”, 169–81 (176, 178); and D. Stephen Long and Tripp York, “Remembering: Offering our Gifts”, 332–45 (340).

Now one could refuse these examples as examples and this approach in general by countering that these kinds of formulations are not really Hauerwasian *insofar* as they do theology in these structurally and materially significant ways. I do not think Healy would refuse things in this way, as will be shown by the third approach whereby Healy's *Hauerwas* advances its own constructive proposal.

Healy's version of "God *is* there" offers terms by which Hauerwas's theology might be saved from the atheistic sense haunting it. He employs a Kelsey-granted notion of "conceptually formed" practices that can redeem the Alasdair MacIntyre-granted notion of practices:

the function of church practices is not [as it is for Hauerwas under the sway of Macintyre] primarily to form our identities as Christians, although that is what they also do. Nor is it to primarily bring us to new heights of excellence, though they may also do that. Rather, Christian practices are communally sanctioned ways of concretely responding to God, the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. As such, they are 'conceptually formed' by the logic of Christian belief, by the broader Christian understanding of who the triune God is and how that God acts toward us.²⁰

By "conceptually formed," Healy means that the practice is organized by constitutive concepts the determination of which is granted by criteria maintained by the community for whom those practices comprise a way of life. A theologically conceptual practice, then, is one where the logic of Christian belief, which as Christian necessarily presumes God acting, rules those concepts such that no practice could be deemed properly Christian unless it presaged God acting. Healy rescues Hauerwas's theology from its atheistic sense by reconfiguring his account of practices in a way that makes them *necessarily* about God. With this modification, Healy has created a theoretical mechanism that requires of Hauerwas's theology talk about divine activity even when it only wants to talk about the church. I will return to this constructive proposal of Healy's when I bring up reasons why one might want to resist this modification. For now it is enough to say that Healy's modification gets caught trafficking in a conception of theological speech as metaphysically grounded ("*extra nos* and *pro nobis*,")²¹ so that meaning obtains even when speech breaks down. He does so, seemingly, because he anticipates this intervention yielding an all-important "account of God's action that is clear as to the differences that God's independent and invisible action makes for how we see the empirical church as Christian—irrespective of whether we are transformed by our practices or are merely unsatisfactory Christians."²²

Second kind of response: "Why not?"

Thus, one kind of response to Healy's incisive criticism that God does not show up in Hauerwas's theology is to try to find ways for God to be present in the very manner Healy questions. I have referred to this kind of strategy as the "God *is* there" response and offered three approaches to it. For the remainder of this article, I consider what it might mean for Healy to be right about the atheistic sense to Hauerwas's theology, and what it means to attend to Hauerwas's reasons for that sense. The first response, "God *is* there" presumes that the atheistic sense can and should be corrected. I develop another response—which I call "Why not?"—in the balance of this article, in which I say that the atheistic sense has its reasons, and that I find these reasons theologically important such that to try to cover them over is to miss something interesting in Hauerwas's theology.

What if Hauerwas means the atheistic sense? What if he has good reasons for it, and that any of the three approaches to the response "God *is* there" are necessary but not sufficient for getting a full

20. Healy, *Hauerwas*, 117.

21. *Ibid.*, 125.

22. *Ibid.*, 99; cf. 113, 115.

view of Hauerwas's theology? I think Healy is right about the atheistic sense but that he has not yet come to terms with why Hauerwas leaves God largely out of the way he talks about things, and without having taken stock of that, without having asked, "Why does he do it this way?" Healy has not, for all his efforts, quite yet engaged Hauerwas's thought. If I am right that Hauerwas has good reasons for the atheistic sense to his theology, then—and I suppose this is where Healy really gets worried—that says something about theology going forward, regardless of whether we interpret Hauerwas's near cult-like popularity as indicative of our spiritual age or causative of a new one. Then it becomes a matter of how we read the writing on the wall. Does learning from Healy entail rehabilitating Hauerwas (the first response) or does the event of Hauerwas's theology portend the next stage of Christian theology (the second response), which for the sake of this journal's special issue might be intimated as a decidedly baptist one?

We can begin to deal with "Why not?" (and its double entendre: *Why* not? and *Why not?*) by thinking more about Healy's constructive modification "conceptually formed." In an article that largely tracks with his "conceptually formed" proposal in *Hauerwas*, Healy includes a comment that demonstrates how "conceptually formed" might be intended in a problematic manner. He writes,

Thus a church practice cannot be quite the same as a traditional or a cultural practice; the analogy's *maior dissimilitudo* is revealed here. Traditions and cultures are ways of living in the world. Their members can become well-formed and flourish without ever having to consider the conceptuality of their practices. *Nor is there a standard outside the tradition or culture against which to assess its practices*, except perhaps other traditions, the limitations of the physical and social worlds, and their instrumental adequacy for flourishing. *This is not the case for church practices, since they are primarily a response to the one in whom we have faith, who is the source of our understanding of what it means to live well, and in responding to whom is to live well.*²³

In this passage, Healy posits the crucial difference between church and non-church practices in terms of whether judgments "of what it means to live well" can be grounded elsewhere than in communally governed criteria. For both church and non-church practices, traditions are "ways of living in the world." In both cases, the practices often ensue without members having to "consider the conceptuality of their practices." The difference, if I am reading this right (and that has to do with whether my reading of *Hauerwas* has me accurately emphasizing portions here) has to do with whether "there is a standard outside the tradition or culture against which to assess its practices." With non-Christian practices, there is not. With Christian practices, there is because this kind of practice responds to God, who by acting toward us grants access to a standard beyond the practice—a standard by which we can evaluate the response nature of the practice. If this is what Healy is getting at—and moments in *Hauerwas* give me the sense that he is—then his account of the crucial difference church practices offer, a difference that must be highlighted by speaking forthrightly about God, is that God somehow grants those practices their meaning or secures criteria for our assessment of them in ways that makes evaluation of those practices, and so the practices themselves, of a different kind.

This strikes me as wrong. Even if Christian practices respond to God's action, both the reception of that action and the evaluative assessment of any response to it would be directed by publicly determined criteria, what David Kelsey describes as "humankind's lived world in its concrete everydayness," or what he marvelously characterizes as "the quotidian."²⁴ To be sure, Christians conceive of

23. Healy, "Three Ways," 183–84; cf. Healy, *Hauerwas*, 117. My emphasis.

24. Kelsey, *Eccentric Existence*, 198–199, 191. "The quotidian is not denigrated. Its dignity lies, not in the fact that it inherently refers beyond itself to transcendent reality, nor in its having an ontological depth more meaningful than itself, but simply in its being just what God creates in all its everydayness. This feature of Wisdom's creation theology serves to focus our efforts to understand proximate contexts in their concrete quotidian everydayness" (ibid.). Interestingly, his discussion of the quotidian is one of the few places Kelsey does not amend MacIntyre's *After Virtue* account of practices as "conceptually

their practices in Christian-specific ways (e.g., “I see my kneeling as responding to God” versus “I see kneeling as habituation to humility”) but the form of Christian practices is not pragmatically different than non-Christian ones. The fact that God exists beyond our practice has no truck in our comportment toward that existence, which is bound (insofar as it is an existence that matters to us), like any other state of affairs, to the ordinary way our judgments issue for anything—that is, in language as “a basic condition of human life in a common public world.”²⁵ I want to say that this is part of what makes divine condescension (what Kelsey, quoting Calvin, describes as God accommodating Godself to our life in words)²⁶ so remarkable—that God submits to our ordinary ways of responding to anything at all, which makes the stakes of human response to God’s activity real ones. This all bears on what I understand as central to Healy’s critique—a presumption I consider philosophically untenable even if I can see the reason we might be tempted by it. He wants the fact of God to change the way we talk about God, whereas, as I see it, our talk about God is wholly dependent on the manner in which we receive that fact, making the fact ours and so “God” something *we* say.

Even if “conceptually formed” risks the objections I have raised, we can see why Healy insists on it. Remember I said, “with this modification, Healy has created a theoretical mechanism that requires of Hauerwas’s theology talk about God even when it only wants to talk about the church.” The preceding paragraph is meant to show that God talk, even with God’s activity as its intentional content, still involves church, that is, Christian talk about God occurs as *the church’s* talk about God, such that to entertain reflection on our God talk is necessarily to entertain reflection on the church as the condition of possibility of talk about God. Healy wishes God talk did more, namely commission God as the referential meaning of Christian speech. For Healy, Christian God talk is authorized similarly to how Christian practices gain meaning, by God’s being accurately represented in the former and efficaciously present in the latter. In the view I am proposing in order to contextualize Hauerwas’s theology, Christian God talk of the kind Healy proposes must, even with its intentional content, still satisfy conditions set down by communally governed criteria for what counts as truthful God talk and meaningful presence. Communal discernment around these kinds of judgments is in large measure what Hauerwas understands church to be, which does not mean that within his account of church God is not real. Indeed, what Hauerwas’s emphasis on communally governed practices gives us is an account of Christian belief where God is *realistically* present and efficacious, without that account having to pander—since it does not presume God as “the source of our understanding”—to reductive questions about whether God is *really* there. Cora Diamond gets at what I gather to be at stake for Healy:

If you think that some significant distinction rests on whether there is or is not something *x*, and you are shown that the presence or absence of *x could* make no difference of the sort you wanted it to make, this is puzzling in a way an unnecessarily risky hypothesis would not be; it shows that you were in some unclarity about the distinction that you were trying to explain to yourself, and that you had in a sense substituted a fantasy for the real difference. You *knew* what ought to be, what *had* to be, the basis of the distinction, and so you did not look to see how the distinction actually is made, what that is like.²⁷

For Healy, what makes any practice Christian—what distinguishes its benefits from those of non-Christian practices—is the presence of God. But this puts him, and anyone committed to this

formed”; part of the curiosity here is that Kelsey once again mentions the intentional content of Christian practices as responding to God (ibid., 193, 197; cf. 14)

25. Kelsey, *Eccentric Existence*, 199.

26. Kelsey, *Eccentric Existence*, 38.

27. Cora Diamond, *The Realistic Spirit: Wittgenstein, Philosophy, and the Mind* (Cambridge: MIT Press, 1995), 45. Diamond describes empiricism as “something we get into in philosophy by trying to be realists but going about it in the wrong way”—one might think of “conceptually formed” as assuming the role of placeholder in Healy’s latent empiricism (ibid., 39).

view, in the position of having to certify God's role in Christian practices—as “conceptually formed” responses to *God*—whereas Hauerwas can, among his fellow practitioners, speak realistically about God without having to legitimate that speech.²⁸ With this in mind, we are now prepared to reconsider the conflation of which Healy accuses Hauerwas.

Healy filters Hauerwas's theology through Kelsey's rubric. Because he takes the rubric for granted, he neither allows Hauerwas's theology to speak for itself nor asks himself why Hauerwas represents Christian theology as he does. Having committed to the rubric early, Healy misses one of the more interesting features of Hauerwas's theology—a feature that might otherwise rearrange Kelsey's rubric. Hauerwas writes from a space somewhere *between* the positions fixed in Kelsey's rubric as logics of belief and coming to belief, where God may be envisaged as acting but the significance of that acting cannot be taken for granted. I think that for Hauerwas the American church now sits at a time when the regnant culture makes unapologetic statements about God difficult to manage. I am not saying that even though Hauerwas believes in God he does not want to say as much; I do not see myself rendering comment about his personal beliefs. I am saying he writes as if it is unclear to him how one ought to talk about God. There remains in Hauerwas's thought a post-Constantinian cultural residue that situates Christianity at a distance, and so for him statements about God need to be approached, as Healy describes, “at an angle.”²⁹ In his thought process, it seems to me, the claims of Christianity fit together in relatively comfortable ways, and together they constitute a coherent discursive universe. But these beliefs do not order themselves in ways ascribed by Healy as “traditional” or “premodern” or “theocentric.” Instead, Hauerwas reasons out ethical life for Christians within a frame of mind in which God exists as Triune, as tradition tells him, and as the one who raised Israel from Egypt and Christ from the dead, as Scripture tells him. We can imagine him thinking forward from there, or backward from local concerns, as he puts the pieces together for what church might need to be like given all the moving parts. For Hauerwas, holding all this together is not difficult or even surprising, given the theological world he inhabits and the liturgical life in which he participates. But to go ahead and locate and identify God's activity in certain ways now (e.g., as necessarily intimated by practices of the church) goes beyond what is licensed in the post-Constantinian grammar of his theology. One could claim, as Healy does, that such statements are natural entailments of logics of belief, but one could just as well figure reticence as the way to go on in the present, which does not preclude retrospective judgments about the past or hope for the future.³⁰

What might count as good reasons for going on in this manner? Healy supplies them himself when he quotes from Charles Taylor's *A Secular Age*, where Taylor discusses the transition “from a society in which it was virtually impossible not to come to belief in God, to one in which faith, even for the staunchest believer, is one human possibility among others.”³¹ With the cultural sea

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28. Diamond, once again: “To think ... that we have an idea of what it is to be real which is what guides us in our practice—this is to think that the term ‘real’ means something besides what we should see if we looked at how we tell real things. To conceive the matter in this way reflects, Berkeley thinks, a fundamental confusion about language, about what it is for a term to be kept to a fixed meaning, for there to be anything guiding us, constraining us, in our actual use” (ibid., 49).
 29. “Theology is not a major structural or material part of [Hauerwas's] argument but it clearly informs it and the project, too. His Christian beliefs or, perhaps rather more accurately, his beliefs about Christianity, prompt him to seek changes in the church, for which he provides reasons that often depend upon largely theologically-neutral considerations. So we cannot begin by attempting to discern his theological convictions and see how they guide the structure of his argument. The theology has to be approached at an angle, as it were, through the philosophical and theoretical material” (Healy, *Hauerwas*, 10).
 30. I am indebted to Matthew Whelen for helping me formulate this, not that he is culpable for how it might still confuse matters.
 31. Healy, *Hauerwas*, 44–45 citing Charles Taylor, *A Secular Age* (Cambridge: The Belknap Press of Harvard University, 2007), 3.

change of secularization in mind, John Thiel asks of Kelsey's *Eccentric Existence*, "given the fact that theology has passed through the fire of the Enlightenment, has not, in fact, theology's proximate context changed in a way that calls for an appropriate methodological response? We usually do not think of method as a theological *locus*, but Kelsey makes a fine case for doing so. Yet, historical research clearly has shown that Christian doctrine develops. Why should this not be true for the 'doctrine' of theological method?"³² I take Thiel's point about the changing nature of doctrine to be the question of whether we can afford to be any more rigid about method than we are about doctrine, unless we suppose that method proves timeless in a way that doctrine does not. While Kelsey accepts as a matter of course the changing nature of doctrine such that no periodization holds a conceptual monopoly on how theology is done, Kelsey invokes the phrase "in premodern theology" often enough that one begins to wonder if his confidence about method is ultimately in service of what follows the invocation.

I want to return to a moment in Hauerwas's corpus that we saw Healy reference earlier, about which Healy said, "The only time God is mentioned is not to discuss the Cross or resurrection, or God's presence or absence in our suffering, or something similar, but to note, 'Like God, we suffer because we love.'"³³ Healy cites this after discussing an instance in Hauerwas's work that he takes to be particularly instructive, and so I will also use it as instructive regarding what I have been trying to develop regarding Hauerwas and the future of Christian theology.

Healy begins the section, "when it would seem necessary to talk about grace, or the Holy Spirit, or Christ's active presence among us now, Hauerwas usually does not do so. This can result in a kind of abstraction in which theory replaces God-talk." Let us turn to the reference for a moment (and again, the purpose of this exegetical exercise is to offer reasons for Hauerwas's reticence regarding the God talk Healy thinks proper and necessary). The example Healy draws from comes from *Naming the Silences*, a book wherein Hauerwas deals with the suffering of children. Specifically, it is a book "made up of stories about ill and dying children" in which Hauerwas formats each chapter around, respectively, a daughter dying of leukemia, an autistic child, children with terminal illnesses, and a son who dies in an accident. The specific chapter Healy targets is "Medicine as Theology," in which Hauerwas argues, using various sources, that narrative is the manner by which people make sense of their experiences, including experiences of suffering, and Hauerwas worries that preoccupations with medical technology and its concomitant stories of healing, hence "medicine as theology," supplants the narratives by which most people live. Hauerwas concludes the chapter by reflecting on the temptations that theodicy as a genre issues in. At this

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32. John E. Thiel, "Methodological Choices in Kelsey's *Eccentric Existence*," *Modern Theology* 27 (1, January 2011): 1–13 (11). Kelsey responds to Thiel: "there are a number of rather different intellectual projects all of which are quite properly called 'theology.' I agree that there is a 'richer spectrum of theological options open for Christian appreciation' than the one represented by *EE*. Given their different goals and audiences, it seems unlikely that any set of methodological choices could be claimed to be in principle normative for all of that spectrum. What I do try to do is make a case for the proposal that if one undertakes a theological project in what I call 'secondary theology' that seeks to explore the 'logic of Christian beliefs' (in contradistinction to the 'logic of coming to belief') in regard specifically to anthropology, then the methodological choices made in *EE* allow for a complex and coherent account of *anthropos* while being less likely than alternative and widely adopted methodological choices to lead to conceptual consequences in anthropology that one has strong reasons to avoid." David Kelsey, "Response to the Symposium on *Eccentric Existence*," *Modern Theology* 27 (1, January 2011): 72–86 (73). Healy makes his case by reading Hauerwas's project as an instance of Kelsey's "secondary theology," and as such finds it lacking. It would be fruitful to imagine Hauerwas's theology of the sort that Kelsey hints at—i.e., "a richer spectrum of methodological choices"—and I suppose that is what I attempt in this article.
33. Healy, *Hauerwas*, 124.

point Healy writes, “The only time God is mentioned is not to discuss the Cross or resurrection, or God’s presence or absence in our suffering, or something similar, but to note, ‘Like God, we suffer because we love.’”³⁴

Healy’s use of the quotation is a bit misleading, though, because at the point at which Hauerwas says what he says, Hauerwas does not do as Healy accuses him. Instead, after relating Nicholas Wolterstorff’s *Lament for a Son*, Hauerwas discusses how suffering to the degree experienced by Wolterstorff tempts theodicy, quoting Wolterstorff, who says, “To the ‘why’ of suffering we get no firm answer.” Hauerwas then says,

Like God, we suffer because we love, so we must acknowledge what Wolterstorff does, “Suffering is down at the center of things, deep down where meaning is. Suffering is the meaning of our world. For Love is the meaning and Love suffers. The Tears of God are the meaning of history. But mystery remains. Why isn’t Love-without-suffering the meaning of things? Why is suffering-Love the meaning? Why does God endure his suffering? Why does he not at once relieve his agony by relieving ours?” Wolterstorff is wise enough not to try to answer these perhaps misshapen questions. To do so would betray his helplessness.³⁵

About this Healy registers several complaints (see immediately above):

- 1 When it would seem necessary to talk about grace, or the Holy Spirit, or Christ’s active presence among us now, Hauerwas usually does not do so.
- 2 This can result in a kind of abstraction in which theory replaces God-talk.
- 3 Hauerwas does not counter with a theological treatment of the issue. It is theologically bare.
- 4 The only time God is mentioned is not to discuss the Cross or resurrection, or God’s presence or absence in our suffering, or something similar, but to note, “Like God, we suffer because we love.”

Having had a look at what Hauerwas actually does, we know that Complaint 4 misses the point; on this issue, Hauerwas may be guilty of “over-quoting,” but through that quoting he says something quite poignant about God: because suffering sits at the core of life in this world and because God suffers, God is the meaning of the world. “But mystery remains” because we are left wondering why God being God would not rather remove suffering altogether. None of this is theologically bare as suggested by Complaint 3; a rich theology arises through Hauerwas’s employment of Wolterstorff’s wrenching questions, which are anything but the abstraction worried about in Complaint 2. As to the issue filed in Complaint 1, Healy is right that Hauerwas does not “talk about grace, or the Holy Spirit, or Christ’s active presence among us now.” But then again, consider the context. Hauerwas has just commented,

[Wolterstorff] expresses surprise that the elements of the gospel—particularly the hope of resurrection—he thought “would console did not.” This does not make him believe any less in the resurrection. “Yet,” he says, “Eric is gone, *here* and *now* he is gone, *now* I cannot talk with him, *now* I cannot see him, *now* I cannot hug him, *now* I cannot hear of his plans for the future. *That* is my sorrow.” A friend said, “Remember, he’s in good hands.” I was deeply moved. But that reality does not put Eric back in my hands now. That’s my grief.

Imagine Hauerwas following those anguished words by inserting “talk about grace, or the Holy Spirit or Christ’s active presence among us now.” At their best, such interjections would be received as the type of abstraction mentioned in Complaint 2.³⁶

34. Stanley Hauerwas, *Naming the Silences: God, Medicine, and the Problem of Suffering* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1990), 150. Hauerwas quotes from Nicholas Wolterstorff, *Lament for a Son* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1987), 31, 74, 90.

35. *Ibid.*

36. *Ibid.*, 150, 149.

More than just “theologically bare,” Hauerwas in this passage seems to be trying to perform the silence, the point of which is the argument of the entire chapter. One might even say that Hauerwas’s words on these pages are not totally deprived of God, for there is something Godly about allowing silences to speak. Where appropriate, in a book like *Naming the Silences*, Hauerwas does offer what Healy asks for, but again, *where* appropriate. For example, earlier he writes, “I suspect that if Christian convictions have any guidance to give us about how we are to understand as well as respond to suffering, it is by helping us discover that our lives are located in God’s narrative—the God who has not abandoned us even when we or someone we care about is ill.”³⁷

My goal here has not been to show up Healy’s argument, which I have attempted to convey as incisive, even though I have contextualized some of those writings of Hauerwas he worries about. Neither, to be clear, has my goal been to demonstrate that God is present in Hauerwas in a way Healy does not acknowledge. I already discussed that strategy as “God *is* there,” which, as I said, is not something I am altogether interested in. Rather, my goal has been to name the silences Healy worries about as exemplary of a certain kind of theological speech—one that I have described as residing between logics of belief and logics of coming to belief, and one that will be ignored, devalued, or misunderstood within a purview that sees the logics as necessarily opposed.

Marriage and remarriage: Between belief and coming to belief

One way of relating rather than opposing logics of belief and coming to belief is to recast them in terms of marriage, where separateness exists alongside communion. For Kelsey they are mutually exclusive logics and ways of speaking, where a logic of belief presumes love and a logic of coming to believe makes love the goal. In the former, love is the foundation for the way in which the lovers relate to one another; if either partner needs convincing (say, that the other is attractive), something has gone wrong. A logic that hangs on the presumption of love, like a logic wherein Christian beliefs systematically hang on prior claims about God, goes something like, “Since I love you, it never occurs to me to ...” instead of “Unless you can convince me to love you, I will” Coming to belief works differently because love is in question and attraction proves the affair’s whole drama, making modes of persuasion fair game and comments such as “Since I love you, it never occurs to me to ...” premature.

But what if matters are a bit more fluid, where love and persuasion mingle closely together and relating the two requires delicate negotiation? I do not imagine that too strange a suggestion, or at least it feels familiar to me when thinking about theological speech in this day and age. Taken this way, we might think of life with God as not so neatly arranged that things “systematically hang” in all the ways we might want. Rather, our life with God—a life where dead children raise the lament “Why does he not at once relieve his agony by relieving ours?” toward a disorienting loss of enchantment—works out similarly to our life with anyone we love/seek to love, and we find ourselves saying things like “Since I love you, it *shouldn’t* occur to me to ...,” and even “Unless I am convinced ...,” where I convince my beloved as well as myself.

Stanley Cavell refers to this drama as a comedy of remarriage, where “the drive of its plot is not to get the central pair together, but to get them back together—together again. Hence the fact of marriage in it is subjected to the fact or the threat of divorce,” and the couples in these dramas

are forever stuck in an orbit around the foci of desire and contempt. This is a fairly familiar perception of what marriage is. The conversation of what I call remarriage is ... of a sort that leads to acknowledgement; to the reconciliation of a genuine forgiveness; a reconciliation so profound as to require the metamorphosis

37. *Ibid.*, 67; see also 79.

of death and revival, the achievement of a new perspective on existence; a perspective that presents itself as a place, one removed from the city of confusion and divorce.³⁸

Cavell pushes matters further by asking whether the institutions of marriage remain any more stable than the marriages themselves, and if not, what it means for marriages to bear the weight of that instability:

The overarching question of the comedies of remarriage is precisely the question of what constitutes a union, what makes these two into one, what binds, you may say what sanctifies in marriage. When is marriage an honorable estate? In raising this question these films imply not only that the church has lost its power over this authentication but that society as a whole cannot be granted it. . . . In comedies of remarriage it requires learning, or accepting, your sexual identity, the acknowledgment of desire. Both forms of discovery are in service of the authorization or authentication of what is called marriage, the question of the legitimacy of society is simultaneously raised, even allegorized.³⁹

Questioning “what constitutes a union” strikes me as vitally important for thinking through belief and coming to belief, because the shift in the cultural conditions of those logics will alter their respective and joined meanings.

I started off by quoting from Cavell’s *The Claim of Reason*—another text that takes God at an angle—in order to contextualize Hauerwas’s theology:

God or love or responsibility or beauty do not exist in our world; we have not mastered, or we have forgotten, or we have distorted, or learned through fragmented models, the forms of life which could make utterances like “God exists” or “God is dead” or “I love you” or “I cannot do otherwise” or “Beauty is but the beginning of terror” bear all the weight they could carry, express all they could take from us. We do not know the meaning of the words. We look away and leap around.⁴⁰

Cavell had just been thinking about his daughter learning the word “kitty.” Initially he pointed to a kitten and uttered the word “kitty,” which his daughter repeated, suggesting that she understood how to use the word. Later when she uses “kitty” for a fur piece, he finds himself wondering whether she was confused by the pointing, mixing up “kitty” and “fur.” Cavell, of course, is pressing Wittgenstein’s point about ostensive definition and how “kitty” and gestures like pointing belong to conceptual worlds we *live*. About his daughter using the word “kitty,” Cavell queries, “What did she learn in order to do that?” This would be the standard question for standard ways of understanding language as instancing meaning prior to the uses in which meaning is gained. By “what did she learn in order to do that?” Cavell is caricaturing arrogances regarding ostensive definition. Cavell counters by asking, “What did she learn from having done it? . . . If she had never made such leaps she would never have walked into speech. Having made it, meadows of communication can grow for us.” Having “never walked into speech,” kittens “do not exist in her world yet, she has not acquired the forms of life which contain them. They do not exist in something like the way cities and mayors will not exist in her world until long after pumpkins and kittens do.” After demonstrating what is involved in learning concepts, Cavell quickly turns to what is involved in maintaining and losing them, and speaks of “the way God or love or responsibility or beauty do not exist in our world.”⁴¹

38. Stanley Cavell, *Pursuits of Happiness: The Hollywood Comedy of Remarriage* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1984), 2, 19.

39. *Ibid.*, 53.

40. Cavell, *The Claim of Reason*, 172–73.

41. *Ibid.*

Learning and losing and relearning concepts take place like marriage and remarriage, where the form of life necessary for the use of any concept comes under pressure. Healy's Kelsey does not seem to think that any condition could be so taxing as to jeopardize concepts and their ordering, and so proscribes an appropriately theo-logical method as only going one way. But I see speech about God as laboring under the pressures of our human life in words, which is certainly true in the case of talk about the God whom Healy deems active as Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. We no longer inhabit cultural conditions wherein God's activity or love of God can be presumed. And even if conditions could be secured for those presumptions—an arrangement Hauerwas understands as "Constantinian"—they would be ill-fitted for speaking about the one that blows wherever it pleases (John 3:8).⁴² I have tried to characterize these shifting conditions in terms of loss, like the losing of one's son as an occasion for the losing of one's concepts, and to intimate something like the following picture: "On the basis of the fundamental question of how God is to be identified in someone crying to an absent God, a conception of divine difference has opened up so radically that it affects everything that can be said of God's relation to what is not God, and thus every dimension of theology, from the nature of creation itself to the nature of prayer."⁴³

By recasting logics of belief and coming to belief in terms of marriage and remarriage and then examining the conditions of their institution, I have tried to complicate those distinctions of Kelsey's as Healy draws on them in order to critique Hauerwas. The goal here has not been so much to defend Hauerwas from Healy as much as defend a certain picture of Christian faith that Hauerwas's theology happens to exemplify, which I think important. Akin to the question John Thiel puts to it, I find Kelsey's organizing distinction inadequate to capture the complexities of Christian speech about God. Healy's mistake is to presuppose its adequacy and then deploy it in order to capture Hauerwas's theology. The inadequacy of Kelsey's paradigm leads Healy to miss too much that is important in Hauerwas's theology and so the conditions of Christian existence today.⁴⁴

Author biography

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42. In *After Christendom*, Hauerwas writes, "Constantinianism is a hard habit to break. It is particularly hard when it seems that we can do much good by remaining 'in power.' It is hard to break because all of our categories have been set by the church's establishment as a necessary part of Western civilization." *After Christendom: How the Church is to Behave if Freedom, Justice and a Christian Nation Are Bad Ideas* (Nashville: Abingdon, 1991), 19.
 43. Rowan Williams, "Balthasar and the Trinity," in *The Cambridge Companion to Hans Urs von Balthasar* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2006), 37–50 (40). Thanks to Natalie Carnes for this reference. On the topic of concept lost, see Jonathan Lear, *Radical Hope: Ethics in the Face of Cultural Devastation* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2008); Carol J. White, *Time and Death: Heidegger's Analysis of Finitude*, ed. Mark Ralkowski (Aldershot: Ashgate, 2005); and Cora Diamond, "Losing Your Concepts," *Ethics* 98 (2, January 1992): 255–77.
 44. Brandon L. Morgan has served the development of this article from beginning to end. I am also grateful to Paul Martens for hosting several conversations related to these matters.