

# Growth: The Journal of the Association for Christians in Student Development

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Volume 8 | Number 8

Article 16

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2009

## The State of the University: Academic Knowledges and the Knowledge of God

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### Recommended Citation

Guthrie, David S. (2009) "The State of the University: Academic Knowledges and the Knowledge of God," *Growth: The Journal of the Association for Christians in Student Development*. Vol. 8 : No. 8 , Article 16. Available at: [https://pillars.taylor.edu/acsd\\_growth/vol8/iss8/16](https://pillars.taylor.edu/acsd_growth/vol8/iss8/16)

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## The State of the University: Academic Knowledges and the Knowledge of God

Stanley Hauerwas; (Malden, MA: Blackwell, 2007).

Reviewed by David S. Guthrie

Perhaps an important place to begin a brief review of Stanley Hauerwas' recent book, *The State of the University*, is to note that it is published within Blackwell's Illuminations: Theory and Religion series. This series is devoted to exploring the inextricable relationship between religion and theology, on the one hand, and human culture and social theory on the other. This may sound to the most regular readers of *Growth* quite like the most common shibboleth of Christian higher education, namely, the integration of faith and learning. Just so. Like in all of his writings, Hauerwas' intent is to think 'Christianly' from the wellspring of his particular religious traditions in analyzing both what is wrong with the contemporary university, and what might make the contemporary university better—at least such as it is.

If you like edited books, you may quite enjoy this book. To be clear, Hauerwas does not edit the works of other authors in compiling this book. Rather, he edits and compiles his own works, all written (and/or presented as lectures) with particular audiences in mind and at various times. As a result, the argument of the book does not necessarily develop *ad seriatum* as each chapter is read. This approach ostensibly provides considerable freedom in engaging the book since readers can select chapters that sound "interesting" irrespective of position in the text, and still be quite confident that they will catch clear, coherent glimpses of Hauerwas' perspectives. More specifically still, since a number of chapters are framed as Hauerwas' reflections on the contributions of authors who pique his thinking (e.g., John Henry Newman, David Burrell, Stanley Fish, Wendell Berry, John Howard Yoder, Sheldon Yolin, Saint Gregory of Nazianzus), readers may be drawn easily to those particular chapters without really losing much, if any, of Hauerwas' central concerns.

Notwithstanding the previous paragraph, may I suggest that this book is best read by starting at the beginning and reading the first four or five chapters. They provide a very useful framework to Hauerwas' approach and will be particularly helpful to those who may be altogether unfamiliar with this prolific author.

The most important point to offer about *The State of the University* is that this is not a book that reviews recent developments in contemporary American higher education. Instead, Hauerwas' argument throughout is that the university is the co-opted, powerful agent of what he calls "the modern nation state." This argument, reiterated throughout the text, is most succinctly stated in the introduction, and is worth quoting at length:

...the title is meant to indicate that universities as we know them, public and private, secular or religious, produce and reproduce knowledges that both reflect and serve the state. The university is the great institution of legitimation in modernity whose task is to convince us that the way things are is the way things have to be. The specialization, what some would describe

as fragmentation, of the knowledges that constitute the curriculums of the modern university is crucial for the formation of people to be faithful servants of the status quo... (p. 6).

For those interested in take-no-prisoners critiques of modernity in general and what Hauerwas calls the university's "epistemological conceits of the knowledges" in particular, this book delivers on almost every page. In my judgment, chapters one, three, five, and eight are especially powerful in this regard, as Hauerwas relies on contemporaries Alasdair MacIntyre in general and Stanley Fish in particular (chapter five) to help pinpoint his analysis and critique. Before Christians have time to inflate their chests proudly in support of Hauerwas' dismantling of the secularism of the academy, Hauerwas delivers a comparable blow to them. That is, Hauerwas laments that many churches, Christians, and Christian colleges have all too willingly and eagerly been fully duplicitous in preserving and furthering counterfeit knowledges in service to the state. That is, Hauerwas contends that Christian scholars have not worked diligently to consider "a knowledge that is formed by the Gospel" (p. 8). Further, Hauerwas wonders if Christian colleges, despite their extant catalog rhetoric, may be graduating "not only students who are unable to recognize when they are serving powers foreign to the Gospel but even more discouraging, the same students in fact desire to aid the rule of those powers" (p. 124).

Ah, now there is the rub. In Hauerwas' words, "...the challenge is whether any of us live lives as Christians that are sufficient to force us to think differently about what is and is not done..." in the academy (p. 32). Or, equally forceful, "If Christians are a people with an alternative history of judgments about what is true and good (i.e., a unique knowledge, emphasis mine) they cannot help but produce an alternative university" (p. 91). What readers may quickly and accurately note is that some of the key descriptors that Hauerwas may use to describe Christians are different, alternative, and counter-cultural. What readers may not as quickly cull is that Hauerwas takes pains to emphasize (particularly in chapters two, four, and seven) that Christians must not flee the world, but be Gospel-rooted, clear-minded "heralds" of another empire (namely, the coming kingdom of God, relying on John Howard Yoder's compelling work) as they labor in the current empire. More specifically, in chapter seven, Hauerwas artfully uses the image of stone carving. He suggests, in the same way that apprenticeship is absolutely critical to one becoming an expert stone carver, that Christians must not faint in apprenticing themselves to "the grammar" of religious traditions, of faithful people, and ultimately of Jesus.

Those interested in politics will find chapter 10 and the final appendix ("Ordinary time: A tribute to Rowan Williams") worth the read. And the concluding sections of chapters 11 and 12—respectively titled "Prayer as a form of resistance" and "A university of the poor"—are extremely valuable contributions to the book. The former section reminds me of a presentation I heard long ago in which the speaker suggested that prayer, rightly understood, was "a wrestling with the demonic." Hauerwas seems to echo that sentiment when he writes:

Prayer...presupposes a time that cannot help but challenge secular time... As a discipline of the church it may well mean that how Christians do history,

literature, politics, economics, physics, biology...maybe different than how those disciplines are recognized or practiced by those who are not shaped by a life of prayer (p. 183; pp. 185-186).

Stanley Hauerwas' book likely will not be a book many *Growth* readers will have already rushed out and purchased. May I suggest, however, that we must never faint in considering the ways that other "knowledges" (to use Hauerwas' term) unwittingly or knowingly show up, not only in what might be called our personal comings and goings, but also in the institutions in which we serve; in mission framing and execution, in curricular structures, in faculty governance systems, in course development and pedagogy, in athletics programs, and in all other out-of-class initiatives. How might we become more faithful heralds—apprenticed well in "the knowledge of God" through our faith traditions, guides, churches, and scriptures—as we muse about (with one another) and implement plans, processes, and practices in the rooms of God's house called colleges and universities? Hauerwas has some ideas worth considering and we have high callings worth pursuing to this end. *Soli Deo Gloria.*

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