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Hauerwas — How Real is America's Christianity?

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Professor Stanley Hauerwas of Duke University's Divinity School is a man who enjoys probing questions and has a habit of irritating the faithful. In a recent edition of *The Guardian*, London's famed newspaper of record for the political Left, Hauerwas assured Britons that, contrary to popular reports, America is not so religious. As a matter of fact, he argues that America is actually more secular than Great Britain.

Now, that runs counter to just about all evidence and common sense. Sociological studies indicate that Americans report far higher rates of belief in God and identification with Christianity. Americans attend church at rates that dwarf those of Britons — so much so that America ranks as one of the most religious societies on earth, while the United Kingdom is one of the least. The data is so overwhelming that sociologists have had to explain what is often called American "exceptionalism" when it comes to secularization. America is profoundly unsecular.

So, is Hauerwas nuts? Not likely. He is a provocateur, however, and he means to provoke some thinking here.

The immediate background to the Hauerwas article in *The Guardian* was the selection of Ed Miliband as the new leader of Britain's Labour Party. Miliband is an atheist, and as Hauerwas admits, that would be virtually unthinkable in the United States. "Indeed, it seems to be a requirement of political office in America that you believe in God," he acknowledges.

He then writes: "In the US, many who may have doubts about Christian orthodoxy may continue to go to church. They do so because they assume that a vague god vaguely prayed to is the god that is needed to support family and nation."

He is no doubt right about this, and this is evidence of the power of "civil religion," which is not to be confused with biblical Christianity. Britain and most of Europe also had a well-established version of civil religion until the period between the two world wars. In Germany, a tragic form of civil religion served the cause of the Nazi regime.

Hauerwas continues:

Americans do not have to believe in God, because they believe that it is a good thing simply to believe: all they need is a general belief in belief. That is why we have never been able to produce interesting atheists in the US. The god most Americans say they believe in is not interesting enough to deny, because it is only the god that has given them a country that ensures that they have the right to choose to believe in the god of their choosing. Accordingly, the only kind of atheism that counts in the US is that which calls into question the proposition that everyone has a right to life, liberty, and happiness.

Now, there is much in that paragraph to appreciate. Hauerwas wants to make a clear distinction between authentic theism and its counterfeits. Any serious-minded Christian should agree with the necessity of this distinction.



At the same time, one of the difficulties of Hauerwas's framing of the issue is what appears to be his lack of appreciation for lay Christianity and what some sociologists now define as "lived religion." While I find Stanley Hauerwas to be unfailingly provocative as a thinker, I go away from the experience of reading his books with the firm impression that the Christian in the pew is just not to be trusted as really believing much of anything. I share his concern to reject civil religion as true Christianity, but I cannot share his dismissive approach to the faith of millions in the pews, who may not be theologians, but who are faithful believers in the Lord Jesus Christ.

Stanley Hauerwas, "[How Real is America's Faith?](#)" *The Guardian*, Saturday, October 16, 2010.

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