

A challenge for academia

By [Timothy Mark Renick](#) in the [September 9, 2008](#) issue

In Review



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

Stanley Hauerwas
Blackwell

American Christians are changing. By most measures, they are becoming ethnically more diverse, with double-digit increases in the percentage of Christians who are Hispanic or Asian in the U.S. over the past 20 years. They are becoming older, as greater numbers of young Americans elect to wait until their 30s to get married and return to church. They are becoming more evangelical—up from 17 percent of the U.S. population in the 1970s to about 25 percent today (though, by some indicators, this growth has tapered off considerably in recent years).

Each of these trends has been well chronicled, and the implications have been widely debated. Not merely congregations but entire denominations have sprung up in response to changes in the ethnic and cultural landscape; pastors are trained—many as early as their time in seminary—to deal with the graying of their flocks; and evangelicalism has become a major player in the national debate on a range of social issues, tipping elections in the process.

But there is another trend that has received significantly less attention. American Christians are becoming more educated. In the 1950s, only one in seven members of Baptist, Lutheran and Catholic churches in the U.S. was a college graduate. Today, the number has tripled. In many urban and suburban congregations, college graduates constitute a significant majority. If Duke University professor Stanley Hauerwas is correct in his latest book, *The State of the University: Academic Knowledges and the Knowledge of God*, education level may constitute the most significant, and potentially the most challenging, demographic shift of all.

At first glance, the growth in university education among Christians would seem to be an unqualified good. As early as the Reformation, Luther and Calvin provided a potent theological justification for literacy: saving one's soul. The individual believer with the Bible (and no intermediary) emerged as the starting point for the Protestant vision of salvation. By the time of the American Revolution, a civic rationale was added: educated people are better able to "be their own Governors," in the words of James Madison. Thomas Jefferson wrote in 1787, "Your own reason is the only oracle given you by heaven, and you are answerable, not for the rightness, but uprightness of the decision." To be educated became not only part of being a good Christian; it became essential to being a good citizen. America has never looked back; college education has been packaged as an essential component of the American dream.

Hauerwas, however, has grave concerns about the type of education that American Christians are receiving—and about the impact this education is having on Christianity. When former Yale president Richard Levin says that the essence of a liberal education is “to develop the freedom to think critically and independently, to cultivate one’s mind to its fullest potential, [and] to liberate oneself from prejudice, superstition, and dogma,” Hauerwas’s concerns are twofold. First, he wonders how such an education fits within the framework of Christian belief. Second, he questions whether Levin’s words have anything to do with the reality of the modern university.

Hauerwas’s chief objection to liberal education is the very thing Levin cites as its greatest benefit: that it seeks to establish in students the freedom to think independently. In presenting themselves as the forums in which all intellectual perspectives receive a fair hearing, modern universities have given up their ability to morally guide students. This makes liberal education incoherent: there is nothing around which its teachings can cohere.

As Hauerwas writes, “The work done in the humanities depends on normative commitments that the contemporary university cannot acknowledge because any such acknowledgment would betray the neutrality of the universities.” When courses in philosophy, ethics and religion are taught at all, they become nothing more than litanies of opposing positions—each worth mentioning solely because it is different from the one before. And most universities squeeze even such compromised humanities courses to the margins in favor of the “true” knowledge offered by the sciences and economics.

Such an education may change lives, but not in the sense of directing students toward the one truth that Hauerwas believes should matter, the Christian good. Rather, students are left to doubt that any belief can be true in a meaningful sense. To the extent that Christians embrace the modern university, Hauerwas suggests, they are embracing a form of Constantinianism. They partake of an institution that, like the state in Constantine’s day, offers a thin Christian veneer over a secular core.

For Hauerwas, the state always has had a need to stop Christians from living the truly subversive life dictated by their faith—a life ultimately dedicated to God and not to Caesar (or Constantine). The modern university has become just another tool of the state—teaching students that debate is to be valued over doctrine, that compromise is more important than conviction, and that the only truths that matter are utilitarian ones.

Furthermore, the modern university lies about its commitment to the liberal ideal, Hauerwas argues; American universities are committed neither to objectivity nor to free discourse, but to the status quo. Under the guise of creating free thinkers, universities create citizens who “will have greater earning power.” This predicament is not anyone’s fault, Hauerwas tells us. “It is just the way of the world.” Money and power run the world, and institutions quite naturally (if also quite tragically) come to reflect the world that sustains them.

Lest anyone think that these arguments are aimed only at secular universities and liberal arts colleges, Hauerwas adds that religious schools—especially seminaries—are often the worst offenders. Seminaries promise a Christian education, but, afraid to take a stand on what Christian truth really is and beholden to market considerations, they increasingly replace academic courses on Christian theology with professional courses on pastoral care. Ministers are taught that it is more important to be nice than to have deep grounding in the bases of Christian truth.

What is to be done? Hauerwas urges Christians to “create . . . alternative structures to the knowledges produced and taught in universities that are shaped by the fear of death.” While he avoids offering details about the specific shape of such structures, he does warn that they might “mean that our children cannot presuppose that the education they receive will make it possible for them to be successful actors in a world shaped by quite different cultures.” The cost of being a true Christian often is to be rejected by a world ruled by opposing standards.

For readers familiar with the writings of Hauerwas, these arguments are not new. His criticisms of liberal education directly parallel those he has long offered of democracy—another institution that, he thinks, prizes compromise over truth. What is striking in this context is how Hauerwas’s Augustinian tendencies come to the forefront. Hauerwas believes that the very idea of liberal education fails because it rests on a false premise—namely, that people arrive at the truth through open debate and a critical assessment of the various alternatives.

Unlike Aquinas and Jefferson—figures who believed that the innate light of reason implanted in us by God leads humans to find the truth through intellectual discourse—Augustine held that education is needed as a check on our sinful human nature. Hauerwas echoes this perspective: “I assume that the most important lesson undergraduates should be taught is that they are not yet well enough formed to

know what they should and should not want.”

This alliance is ironic. Not merely is Augustine, in so many ways, the theological instantiator of the Constantinianism Hauerwas reviles, but Augustine’s dark vision of human nature is the ground for a Christian realism that Hauerwas fiercely opposes. The central question posed by *The State of the University*, then, is not merely what kind of people we want our children to be, but what kind of people we think they already *are*. It is in the answer to this last question that the future of the modern university may rest.