The Hauerwas Reader

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Edited by John Berkman and Michael Cartwright
“Taking Time for Peace: The Ethical Significance of the Trivial” (1986), in CET
“The Ninth and Tenth Commandments,” with William H. Willimon (1999), in TG
“The Retarded, Society, and the Family: The Dilemma of Care” (1982), in SP
“Abortion, Theologically Understood” (1991), essay 31 in this volume
“Must a Patient Be a Person to Be a Patient? Or, My Uncle Charlie Is Not Much of a Person but He Is Still My Uncle Charlie” (1975), essay 30 in this volume
“A Child’s Dying” (1990), in NS
“Medicine as Theodicy” (1990), in NS
“Communitarians and Medical Ethicists: Why I Am None of the Above” (1994), in DF
“Hating Mothers As a Way to Peace” (1993), in US

Originally appearing in the Charlotte Observer newspaper during the controversy over whether gays should be allowed to serve in the military, this polemical editorial seeks to expose some of the inevitable incoherencies of moral positions staked out under the assumptions of political liberalism. Drawing on the example of traditional Catholic just war theory, Hauerwas challenges his fellow Christians to acknowledge some of the radical demands of the Christian Gospel, including those that may well conflict with the reigning ethos of their society. In this respect, this essay is as much about what it means to be the church in a secular world as it is a response to public policy debate about gays and lesbians in the military.

I am ambivalent about recent discussions concerning gays in the military. I see no good reason why gays and lesbians should be excluded from military service; as a pacifist I do not see why anyone should serve. Moreover, I think it a wonderful thing that some people are excluded as a group. I only wish that Christians could be seen by the military to be as problematic as gays.

The groundswell of reaction against gays serving in the military is no doubt due to many factors. The response is not due, however, to the threat that gays might pose to our moral or military culture. Discrimination against gays grows from the moral incoherence of our lives; people who are secure in their convictions and practices are not so easily threatened by the prospects of a marginal group acquiring legitimacy through military service.

Gay men and lesbians are being made to pay the price of our society’s moral incoherence not only about sex, but about most of our moral convictions. As a society we have no general agreement about what constitutes

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marriage and/or what goods marriage ought to serve. We allegedly live in a monogamous culture, but in fact we are at best serially polygamous. We are confused about sex, why and with whom we have it, and about our reasons for having children.

This moral confusion leads to a need for the illusion of certainty. If nothing is wrong with homosexuality then it seems everything is up for grabs. Of course, everything is already up for grabs, but the condemnation of gays hides that fact from our lives. So the moral “no” to gays becomes the necessary symbolic commitment to show that we really do believe in something.

But in some way this prejudice against gays has worked in their favor. They at least know more about who they are and who their enemy is. If only Christians could be equally sure of who they are. If only the military could come to view Christians as a group of doubtful warriors.

What if Catholics took the commitment to just war seriously as a discipline of the church? Just war considerations might not only raise questions about targeting strategies of nuclear weapons, but also question whether we should even have a standing army. A just war stance requires discussion in order to secure genuine conscientious participation. The very fact of our standing army means too often such discussion is relegated to politicians who manipulate the media to legitimate what they were going to do anyway. If Catholics challenged the presumption of a standing army, or at least one the size of the American army, they might not be so quickly received into the military.

Consider the implications of Catholic Christians trained to press issues of discrimination in terms of battlefield strategy. Would the military welcome pilots who worried if bombing drops might incur civilian casualties? Even concern with the distinction between direct and indirect intention for dealing with such a matter is, I suspect, more than the military wants to address on a daily basis.

Imagine Catholics, adhering closely to just war theory, insisting that war is not about killing but only incapacitating the enemy. They could participate only in wars designed to take prisoners and then, if that is not a possibility, only to wound. Killing the enemy is a last resort. What would military training look like if that were institutionalized?

Concentration on just war reflection is probably too abstract a way to imagine how Christians as a group might become suspect for military service. Far more likely are Christian behaviors and practices. Christians, for example, might be bad for morale in barracks. For example, non-Christians may find it disconcerting to have a few people gathering nightly holding hands with heads
bowed. God knows what kind of disgusting behavior in which they might be engaged.

Even more troubling is what they might say to one another in such a group. Christians are asked to pray for the enemy. Could you really trust people in your unit who think the enemy’s life is as valid as their own or their fellow soldier? Could you trust someone who would think it more important to die than to kill unjustly? Are these people fit for the military?

Prayer, of course, is a problem. But even worse is what Christians do in corporate worship. Think about the meal, during which they say they eat and drink with their God. They do something called “pass the peace.” They even say they cannot come to this meal with blood on their hands. People so concerned with sanctity would be a threat to the military.

Having them around is no fun. They think they ought to keep their promises. They think that fidelity matters. They do not approve of the sexual license long thought to be a way of life and legitimate for those facing the danger of battle. Their loyalty is first to God, and then to their military commanders. How can these people possibly be trusted to be good soldiers?

Finally, consider the problem of taking showers with these people. They are, after all, constantly going on about the business of witnessing in the hopes of making converts to their God and church. Would you want to shower with such people? You never know when they might try to baptize you.

If gays can be excluded as a group from the military, I have hope that it could even happen to Christians. God, after all, has done stranger things in the past.

However, until God works this miracle, it seems clear to me that gays, as a group, are morally superior to Christians.

Further Reading

* "Gay Friendship: A Thought Experiment in Catholic Moral Theology” (1996–97), in *STT*

* "Understanding Homosexuality: The Viewpoint of Ethics,” in *Pastoral Psychology* 24, no. 3 (spring 1976): 238–42.

* “The Politics of Witness: How We Educate Christians in Liberal Societies” (1991), in *AC*

* “The Politics of Sex: How Marriage Is a Subversive Act” (1991), in *AC*

* “Life in the Colony: The Church as the Basis for Christian Ethics” (1989), in *RA*