

Only in the last several years have I become aware of the natural law tradition in theology that informs much contemporary Christian ethical and political debate; my interests and readings did not cross paths with natural law until I participated in a number of Acton Institute conferences that included natural law in some of the readings.

Reading the works of John Howard Yoder and Stanley Hauerwas I have come across their opposition to natural law theology. For example, in *The Politics of Jesus* (2nd ed., 1994) Yoder argues that “It would not be too much to claim that the Pauline cosmology of the powers represents an alternative to the dominant (‘Thomist’) vision of ‘natural law’ as a more biblical way systematically to relate Christ and creation” (159). More pointedly, the entirety of ch. 1, “The Possibility of a Messianic Ethic,” is a rejection of natural law theology as a sufficient source of ethical knowledge. For Yoder ethics are essentially Christological in that they source directly from the teachings of Jesus, where natural law theology occludes Jesus in search of a rationally derived ethic.

Hauerwas, in *Approaching the End*, engages at some length Jean Porter’s defense of natural law (“The End is in the Beginning: Creation and Apocalyptic”). Hauerwas notes that Karl Barth rejected natural law because he does not think we can draw ethical conclusions from our flawed knowledge of creation, but, even more importantly, we can know creation and the demands of God as Creator only through our knowledge of Christ; in other words, Barth sees ethics as essentially Christological (12-13). Essential to Barth’s understanding is that “the beginning Christ has inaugurated is the end of the beginning. Real time, eschatological time, is the life-time of Jesus Christ” (11); an essential component for Barth was the eschatological import of Jesus’ life and work. Porter notes that the scholastics situated natural theology in an overall theology in which the person and work of Christ were central, but they did not think that Christology was directly relevant for shaping a natural law ethic. Hauerwas, in concord with Yoder, notes that “[p]acifists can base Christian ethics only on Jesus Christ,” where Porter notes that the scholastics had no theological stake in the uniqueness or distinctiveness of Christian morality (16). Porter admits that there is some truth to the charge that she is arguing for “essentially a baptized version of secular liberalism”, in that she has strong liberal sensibilities and her theology is shaped to some degree by liberalism. Significantly, “Porter’s account of creation and correlative understanding of natural law in comparison to Barth is surprisingly a-historical” (17). In contrast to Porter’s a-historicity, Hauerwas’s emphasis is on the eschatological character of the doctrine of creation that is missing in her work (19).

Although the kingdom of God is implicit in both Yoder’s and Hauerwas’s larger work, the unnamed dimension that seems missing in their arguments cited above is the coming kingdom of God as the origin of the ethics for which they argue. The ethics of Jesus are indeed a radical turn, a turn that is integral to the inauguration of the kingdom of God as an eschatological reality of our existence. The inauguration of the kingdom as an “already/not yet” reality fundamentally changes how we his followers relate to the entirety of creation, as well as the social orders in which we live. Where natural law seeks to find common ground with the world at large in establishing a moral order and polity, it seems to me that, precisely to the extent it is not anchored in the life of Jesus of Nazareth as the eschatological inauguration of the kingdom of God, natural law reasoning does not have the capacity to grasp “God’s hidden wisdom, his secret purpose framed from the very beginning to bring us to our destined glory. None of the powers

that rule the world had known that wisdom; if they had, they would not have crucified the Lord of glory" (I Cor. 2:7-8, REB). This wisdom of God was revealed in Jesus' rejection of political power *tout court*, which was essential to his confronting the powers of this world and utterly defeating them; we as his followers are called to that same weakness before the world's powers. From this perspective Hauerwas's counter of Porter's natural law arguments as insufficiently eschatological seems exactly right. Because we understand that we are living in anticipation of the kingdom that could be consummated at any time, our task as the church is to live the reality of the kingdom by following Jesus' eschatological ethics as best we understand; however, that cannot include seeking to establish some sort of Christianized liberal order, because this world's order is passing away (I Cor. 2:6, 7:31).