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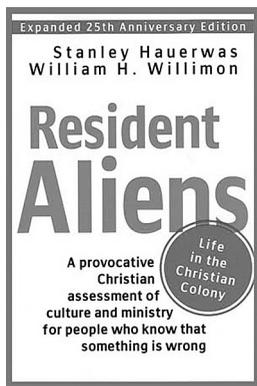
It Just Takes Time

Resident Aliens: Life in the Christian Colony
25th Anniversary Edition

by Stanley Hauerwas
and William Willimon

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by Gregg Brekke



Much has changed in the 25 years since *Resident Aliens: Life in the Christian Colony* was first published by the emerging Christian intellectual Stanley Hauerwas and his young Duke Divinity School colleague, and Methodist pastor, William Willimon.

For starters, Hauerwas is now acknowledged as one of the greatest voices of practical theology in our age.

TIME magazine even conferred the title “America’s Best Theologian” on him in 2001. Those familiar with Hauerwas and his affably cantankerous quips won’t be surprised to hear that he responded to this accolade by saying, “Best’ is not a theological category.”

Willimon, for his part, continued teaching and writing in addition to rising through the ranks of the United Methodist Church. He became bishop of the UMC’s Northern Alabama Conference in 2004 and held that position until he retired in 2012.

In addition to these personal changes, the world and church Hauerwas and Willimon were addressing

have also changed. Globalization, and the growth of pluralism in ideas and religion that the authors could have only imagined in 1989, is now firmly established. The “liberal Protestant” church that was at the center of most of the book’s critique has declined even further in numbers and influence, morphed in its structure, and, in many ways, has made an even stronger alliance with secular political influences. This political allegiance came as religious conservatives took center stage in the national dialogue on morality, war, health care, education, and, well, just about everything.

Looking back we can see that as Hauerwas and Willimon encouraged mainline Protestants to find new ways of expressing political influence, evangelical conservatives were making a stronger push to express their representation within government. One critique is that the “Christian Colony” the authors advocated, in some senses, abdicated national political influence to the types of people they were encouraging Christians NOT to be – people seeking to exert their interpretation of Christian ethical and moral values through legislation. Not that anyone is blaming Hauerwas and Willimon for the steady march of the Religious Right or the rise of quasi-religious Tea Party, that movement was already underfoot. Still, it’s fair to say that what *Resident Aliens* asked of the North American church in 1989 could not account for the turning of the political tide toward binary absolutism.

But what stands the test of time is the critique of the church and the challenge to the faithful offered by the original *Resident Aliens* and still presented, with subtle nuance for a new era, in the 25th anniversary edition. This dynamic duo continues to endorse what was written a quarter of a century ago, contending their effort to encourage the church to participate in a new type of politics has never been more important. In an updated foreword, Willimon credits Hauerwas with introducing John Howard Yoder to a larger audience, especially in the discussion of his seminal work *The Politics of Jesus*. *Resident Aliens* found its genesis in Yoder’s work—grappling with one’s identity first as a Christian, then engaging as a citizen of the state.

Willimon also reflects on the book’s purpose as one of ecclesiology, helping the church understand how it is to be present in society:

Looking back, I now believe *Resident Aliens* is mainly a work of ecclesiology by two erstwhile

Barthians who some thought to have an adequate ecclesiology... We called upon the church to be more deeply, aggressively “political,” as we redefined politics. What Barth had thundered, we polemicized—“Let the church be the church.”

Their “adequate ecclesiology” and polemic on how the church is to be the church endures as a call for reformation. Being the church in the middle of the polis, or city/state, is a key theme of *Resident Aliens*. It has inspired myriad Christian communities to proclaim their faith through Christ-like actions rather than overt political participation. It has changed the questions many Christians ask from “how can we influence policy?” to “how can we serve our neighbor?”

Another fundamental concept of *Resident Aliens* is that the church, if properly understood and motivated by the life and teachings of Jesus, is a more powerful influence than government. To be sure, Hauerwas and Willimon aren’t advancing a sectarian or utopian view of Christians as apolitical beings. What they are arguing against is the co-opting of the church as a mouthpiece for or tool of the state, what Hauerwas calls the “Constantinian church.” This reference to the Roman emperor Constantine who made Christianity the religion of the empire is, for many, seen as the beginning of a long arc of collusion between Christianity and the political state.

This leads into a primary critique offered by *Resident Aliens*, that North American mainline denominations can often be viewed as merely the religious wing of liberal political parties. A seminary professor of mine described this best as he told the story of a colleague who had recently returned from the national gathering of a liberal mainline denomination in the US. When asked how the meeting, deliberations and policy proposals had gone, the colleague responded, “It was anniversary edition. This dynamic duo continues another successful meeting of the Democratic party at prayer.”

In a phone interview with Professor Hauerwas, he lamented that *Resident Aliens* had not inspired the sort of revolution in the mainline church that he and Bishop Willimon had hoped:

“The [mainline] church is so concerned about survival that they haven’t really been ready to rethink what it means to live as a non-Constantinian church. Survival means continuing to live as a Constantinian church. By that, I mean they assume that to be a

Christian and a good American are pretty much commensurate,” he said. Hauerwas noted that evangelicals, in trying to be a sort of alternative to the mainline church have employed the same empire-based strategies, joking “they just have more energy.”

When asked if, looking back, they would have approached the writing of *Resident Aliens* any differently, Hauerwas said, “I think we let ourselves be defined by what we’re against. We probably needed to be more imaginative about what we are for.”

In this regard, one wish Hauerwas has for *Resident Aliens* is that it would have better conveyed “a sense of the joy and beauty of being a Christian.” He says, “[we are] being grafted into God’s people, and that gives one a sheer beauty of the world. That wasn’t what the book was about, but it is about how all creation praises God and creates beauty through that.”

Another area Hauerwas would explore more in positive terms is the concept of war as it relates to people of faith. Christians have a problem with war, and justify sending people to fight wars, but aren’t willing to discuss it in theological terms. “I’m not saying you need to be a pacifist, I’m saying we have a problem with war,” he says.

Hauerwas finds hope in expressions of church that are rooted in neighborhoods and local communities. “We are learning how to recover the significance of the everyday, how Christians are formed to recognize that we live as Christians in an alternative world. It just takes time.”

Professor Hauerwas ended our interview by reflecting on the legacy of *Resident Aliens*. “I suppose the most important thing about *Resident Aliens* is that this is about God,” he says. “It’s about the God who is found in the crucifixion and resurrection of Jesus Christ. The Christological message is at the heart of the ecclesial renewal that Will and I are about in the book.”

Here’s hoping *Resident Aliens* continues to inspire another generation of Christians to rethink the church’s place in society, bringing the message of sacrifice and renewal Hauerwas and Willimon intended for the transformation of the Christian Colony and the world.

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