

# Books

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## Autobiography and Politics

Stanley Hauerwas

Will Campbell and William Sloane Coffin have each written interesting and distinctive "autobiographies." Neither book, however, is strictly an autobiography. Coffin properly calls his a memoir, for, like the accounts of many statesmen, it deals primarily with his public involvement and accomplishments. Campbell's book is about his life only insofar as it relates to his older brother Joe. It is fascinating to read the books together. Each embodies an attempt to deal religiously with some of the most significant events of our time (world war, civil rights, Vietnam), and thus the accounts provide us with an invaluable source for trying to get a perspective on those events.

To read these books as a means "to gain insight on the times," however, would be to lose their significance. As James McClendon has argued in his *Biography as Theology*, the theological task cannot be separated from lives that have been formed by Christian convictions. By this he means not only that lives serve to illustrate Christian beliefs, but that without accounts of lives we lack the means to understand what those beliefs or convictions are and how they might be true. Coffin's and Campbell's respective accounts strike me as particularly important in this respect, for in each there is a struggle to find a way through the tangle of our times in a Christian manner.

In particular Campbell and Coffin represent two options for the Christian's involvement in public affairs that I suspect ultimately reflect different ways of understanding the political significance of the Gospel. Moreover, this difference accounts for the respective forms of their stories. Though both deal with public and personal life, they do so in remarkably different ways. Campbell's personal and political life are one, since the history of his brother's tragic self-destruction provides him with the insights that influence how he thinks of himself as a Christian and as a political activist. For Coffin, however, personal life seems to be in a different sphere from political life. At least they are presented that way in the book, where they impinge on one another only in terms of how much time and energy can responsibly be given to each. Thus the account of his first divorce is relegated to a brief chapter headed "On a More Intimate Note."

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On the surface, of course, the political convictions and activities of these two men look remarkably similar. They were both early advocates of civil rights, and each displayed remarkable courage in his role as chaplain (University of Mississippi and Yale). Each fought hard to see that blacks received full rights in the South. On the surface, however, Coffin appears the more radical of the two. Campbell's social involvement is limited to the civil rights struggle, while Coffin's involvement includes being a leader of the antiwar movement and a practitioner of civil disobedience. He is finally even willing to go to Hanoi to secure the release of American flyers. But if I read their stories rightly, Campbell represents the more radical perspective, whereas Coffin's social activism commits him to maintaining those in power.

This may seem a strange assertion, since the dramatic question Coffin's book attempts to address is how a former loyal member of the CIA can become a leader of the antiwar movement and practice civil disobedience. Coffin helps us to understand that such involvement is consistent with his aggressive character. After his father's death his mother moved the family to California. Coffin was thus put in a new school and immediately picked a fight with the toughest boy to establish his presence. That pattern continued throughout his life—even when the "toughest kid on the block" happened to be the U.S. Government.

*Brother to a Dragonfly*, by Will D. Campbell.  
(Seabury; 268 pp.; \$9.95)

*Once to Every Man*, by William Sloane Coffin, Jr.  
(Atheneum; 344 pp.; \$12.95)

Coffin does make it clear that there is another side to his character, represented by his early ambition to become a concert pianist. Although one finds that the aggressive Coffin is dominant, the musical Coffin (possibly also the deeply religious Coffin) keeps the activist honest. Indeed, one wishes that Coffin had told us more about his theological views. Instead he has left us with the relatively conventional portrait of a man attracted to Christianity and the ministry in his desire to transform the political realities of the world. Yet I remember vividly the Coffin whom I often heard pray at Battell Chapel and who offered prayers that seemed to reflect an expectation that God could offer much more.

In spite of Coffin's radical political activity, however, he remains rooted in the assumptions of the liberal democratic establishment. And it is difficult to see how it could be otherwise. He was born amid wealth and power and moves naturally among those who assume that the pattern of life is to attend Yale and then run the world. It is not as if Coffin ever questioned that assumption. Rather he learned to play it in a different key by becoming a minister.

Campbell, on the other hand, comes from the dirt poor South (as we used to say down home). Coffin's perspective, which included New York, Yale, Paris, and piano lessons from the great teachers of

Europe, might be only dimly imagined by Campbell. His childhood was consumed by forming a deep friendship with his brother through sharing stories, riding cows, burning outhouses, and the such. He does not recall whether he and his brother were unhappy as children, but he writes: "I do not recall our being happy. A family of six, living on a small cotton farm during the depression, growing no more than five or six bales of cotton a year which sold for a few cents a pound, did not think in those terms. Even married couples did not think in those terms. Happiness was not something promised. Happiness was not a part of the contract. If it came, we experienced it without naming it. If it didn't, we couldn't complain, not aware that we were due it or that it ever existed."

Thus it would not be expected that Will Campbell might see himself as having an effect on the world in terms of money or power. All he ever wanted to do was be a preacher. He was not sure how it happened that he came to be a preacher, but as early as he could remember it was assumed by everyone that he should become one, and he accepted the role gladly. Unlike Coffin, he did not find his way to Christianity through doubt. Southerners' characters are formed too close to violence to make doubt interesting. It was Joe who pushed out into the world and helped initiate Will into a wider society. He also helped to form Will's attitudes toward blacks, since it was at his urging that Will read Howard Fast's *Freedom Road*. After that book, "I knew that my life would never be the same. I knew that the tragedy of the South would occupy the remainder of my days."

But it took years for him to understand the tragic nature of the South, for to understand it he first had to experience his brother's tragedy. During those years Campbell went to Yale Divinity School and committed himself to bringing racial justice to the South. He was the one who originally caused the racial furor at the University of Mississippi, when he brought in a speaker identified with the NAACP. He was also chaplain during the time the university became integrated. Against Joe's advice he became field director (in the South) for the National Council of Churches during the stormiest days of the civil rights struggle.

But he also had to deal with the progressive and tragic degeneration of his brother during these years. Joe had become a pharmacist and had begun to take his own medicine. Campbell tells us that Joe had always hated pain of any kind and thought that taking pills was a good way to deal with it. "Joe took pills so he could help other people. And so he would feel good. I took on the University administration, the State Legislature, and the mores of the South to help other people. And to make me feel good. Joe took his pills because he wanted to. And because he needed them. And, even at the time, I suspected that my battle with bigotry might have to do with my glands as well as with my faith."

Even in weakness, however, Joe continued to be the one to take the lead. The agony of his brother kept Will Campbell anchored in the reality of the South. In dealing with the intractability of Joe's drug habit, Will was forced to realize that his life would be a lie if he identified with the cause of the blacks without seeing that both blacks and whites continued to stand in need of the

Gospel. As Horace Germany (a white, ignorant, Church of God pastor who had been savagely beaten by the Klan for attempting to begin an integrated school) told Campbell, "there's a whole lot more to this race thing than just segregation."

It was Joe, whose mind was so ravaged by pills that he had to be institutionalized, who forced Will to face that fact when he accused Will of trying to "use the niggers" to save himself: "What's so Christian about that? Well I thought I was going to save myself with them pills too. With speed. And, man, it worked for a long time. They took me a long way down the road. God, how great I felt. Sailing around in the clouds. Nothing big enough to worry about. But look at me now. A self-admitted nut! Your niggers are like my pills. They prop you liberals up and make you feel good. All fresh and clean inside like a dose of Black Drought. But when you crash!"

It was also Joe who, in a period of relative sanity and wishing to be remarried, objected to Will's support of "legalities" associated with the state's control of marriage. Will says he suddenly realized, "My God! He's right. Like so many innocent seeds he dropped from time to time in a moment of passion, that notion began to grow in my head. If there is a body, a community, which is truly Church, or even claims to be Church, why should it be the executor of Caesar's documents? What is a marriage license but a legal contract? Perhaps such contracts are socially necessary, but what does that have to do with us? And even if we are not Church now but want to become Church, free from the demands and legality of Caesar, why not start by returning all of his documents and refusing ever to do it again? I was never again to say, 'By the authority vested in me by the state of Tennessee.' If my authority as a priest comes from the state, then I have no authority at all."

Finally, in a scene that could easily have come from a Flannery O'Connor short story, Will goes to fetch Joe from a mutual friend, P.D. East. East, "also being between wives," had been attempting without success to care for Joe. Just as he arrives Will hears that his young friend Jonathan Daniel has been murdered by Thomas Coleman in Lowndes County, Alabama. P.D. and Will had often argued about religion, and Will had once defended Christianity in the face of P.D.'s attacks by telling him that the basic message was that "We are all bastards but God loves us anyway." In the midst of drinking much bourbon, P.D. pressed Will on whether Jonathan Daniel and Thomas Coleman were both bastards. He followed that by asking whether God loved them equally.

Suddenly everything became clear, and Will realized that his work had in the course of twenty years become a ministry of liberal sophistication—of law and not grace. It was, he states, "An attempted negation of Jesus, of human engineering, of riding the coattails of Caesar, of playing on his ballpark, by his rules and with his ball, of looking to government to make and verify and authenticate our morality, of worshiping at the shrine of enlightenment and academia, of making an idol of the

Supreme Court, a theology of law and order and of denying not only the Faith I professed to hold by my history and my people—the Thomas Colemans. Loved. And if loved, forgiven. And if forgiven, reconciled.”

In recognizing that God loved Thomas Coleman, the murderer of his friend, Will began to come to terms with his own history. Like many other Southern liberals, he had tried to deny that history or insulate himself from it through activism and education: “I had become a doctrinaire social activist, without consciously choosing to be. And I would continue to be some kind of social activist. But there was a decided difference, because from that point on I came to understand the nature of tragedy. And one who understands the nature of tragedy can never take sides. But we were right in aligning ourselves with the black sufferer. But we were wrong in not directing some of our patience and energy and action to a group which also had a history. A history of slavery. The redneck’s slavery, called indentured servanthood, was somewhat, but only somewhat unlike that of black slaves.” That insight causes Campbell to abandon forever those means of social change that might give Christians the impression they could run the world.

Will Campbell ends his story not long after the death of Joe. As director of the Committee of Southern Churchmen, serving Klanner and black alike, he realizes that there is a “lot more” to the race thing. That turns out to be sin. And as William Stringfellow suggested (thus outraging liberals) you get at that through baptism. This does not mean that Campbell has stopped being concerned with political issues, but it does mean that he has rethought what he means by it.

Thus Campbell’s life has led him to a more radical perspective on social change than that of Coffin. It is a perspective that goes much deeper than that held by those who would criticize Coffin’s almost compulsive activism. For even though Coffin was never very interested in the “theoretical” issues associated with civil disobedience, he was not the mindless activist many take him to have been. He saw earlier than most the sad implications of the fact that many in the peace movement were not committed to peace as a personal way of life. Also he was keenly aware of the danger in such slogans as “all power to the people.” In contrast he would pray “for Thine is the Kingdom, the power and the glory.”

I suspect, however, that Campbell’s sense of tragedy might help Coffin gain a new perspective on his life as well as give him a means to chart his future. Though Coffin thrives on controversy, his book seems to end on a disconsolate note. He realizes that he lives in a world that neither wants nor will put up with any new causes or movements. He leaves the Yale chaplaincy because he feels that this change in mood in the country and among students makes his work there “just maintenance.” With his second wife he explores aspects of the human potential movement, but the failure of this marriage too seems to symbolize that such movements hold little interest for Coffin. He longs for a new fight.

At the book’s end he is looking again toward New

York, where his activist friends have gathered, in hope of joining them in a continuing struggle for world justice in accordance with his new sense of human unity that defies national boundaries. He says that while he is not optimistic about the achievement of such unity, he is hopeful. “Hope, as opposed to cynicism and despair, is the sole precondition for a new and better life. Realism demands pessimism. But hope demands that we take a dark view of the present only because we hold a bright view of the future; and hope arouses, as nothing else can arouse, a passion for the possible.”

One wonders, however, if that is sufficient. Coffin’s sense of hope might well be more profound were he able to incorporate into his activism the tragic insights that he gained from his broken marriages. He relates his own lack of courage in his first marriage when he states: “...the courage I mustered to confront what I thought wrong in the life of the university or the nation—that courage simply was not there when it came to coping with difficulties at home.” Coffin is an activist, but often affairs of the heart are tragic and thus not susceptible to action. Thus Coffin tells us that what scared him about the idea of a divorce was that he had never been taught to deal with failure: “Rather I had been groomed to succeed, and since childhood I had been pretty lucky. And beyond personal failure, to fail as a Christian minister, to be a Christian minister who couldn’t keep his own marriage together—that was a possibility too threatening to contemplate.”

I suspect that Coffin’s perspective on himself and his theological convictions still make the possibility of failure too threatening to contemplate. But if the witness manifested by Campbell’s life means anything, the Christian’s involvement in the public arena necessarily involves the contemplation of failure. The hope that sustains Christians is not the possibility of a “bright future.” Rather it is a hope sustained by a God who forgives even one such as Thomas Coleman—a God who can help even a loser to live through the tragedy of a loss that threatens to encompass his entire life.

It may be that the tack I have taken in this review has been unfair to Coffin, for it may well be unfair to compare anyone to Campbell. Moreover, Campbell’s book is inherently more attractive than Coffin’s because of the Southern gift for telling stories. Because I am also a Southerner, Campbell’s tale strikes a chord in my soul that runs deep (my mother was raised in Attala country, not far from Campbell’s East Fork). Only another Southerner would know what it means to be the one always charged with “saying the prayer.”

Yet I am convinced that neither Campbell nor Coffin will be unhappy with the comparison I have drawn between them. They are men who have been moved by that power that “moves the sun and the stars.” I suspect that Coffin represents some of the best of what we were, and Campbell the best of what we should be, and I am convinced that we would all be the poorer as Christians if we lacked the presence of either.