Essay 2, Chapter 4: "The Christian Left"

Chapter 4: The Christian Left

We're still thinking through how American Christians understand power and cultural change. Coming up: ch. 4 - "The Christian Left." Because yesterday, I outlined #Hunter picking on the Christian Right. Now it's the left's turn (and then neo-Anabaptists).

Political progressives, like pol. conservatives, work out of a matrix of myth. In the left's case, it's the French Revolution's "Liberty, Equality, Fraternity," though lefties nowadays have less to say about "fraternity/community" (save socialism). Secular progressives define liberty in terms of rights, personal autonomy vis-a-vis sexual identity, relationships, entertainment. Rel. progressives tend to emphasize community more, esp. solidarity w/ the oppressed. Liberty means liberation from poverty, etc. As well as solidarity across social divides (ethnic, gender, sexual orientation, class).

Chr. progressives point to the biblical tradition in both OT and NT concerning the wealthy's abuse of the poor. Lots of refs on 133. Of course, the Chr. Left doesn't just look back to prophetic trad., but also forward to the eschaton they're working towards. #Hunter doesn't explicitly say, but he implies that the Chr. Left has a post-mil orientation: We will bring in the Kingdom of God... #Hunter calls this (selective) reading of history "myth," and it is used in a similar way to the Chr. Right's mythic stance. For Chr. Left, history's high points: Soc. Gosp. movement, women's suffrage, desegregation and Civil Rights movement, etc.

The Chr. Left peaked in the mid 20th c., along w/mainstream Prot. denominations. They were closely identified w/ leftist politics. Outside the U.S., Chr. Left's made itself felt in liberation theologies in the 3d world, esp. in Latin America. Such theologies share affinities w/the feminist and black theologies. Institutionally, since 1960s, it's been mainly Catholic. He's still talking about liberation theology, not the Chr. Left as a whole. Since the 1980s, it's been in decline because of conservative Catholic leadership who took a hard line against it. Not dead, but weaker for sure. In the U.S., Protestant progressive social activism declined w/the decline of mainline Protestantism. But their decline is also due to the fact that they achieved so many of their goals (civil rights, women's rights, anti-Vietnam). Since the 1980s, these leftist Chr. groups have been more and more irrelevant...until recently.

In the early years of 21st c., there's been a resurgence of the "spiritual left" (New Age, Buddhist, Unitarian, liberal Jews, etc.). But the Chr. Left keeps its spiritual distinctiveness. Among participants: Jim Wallis, Ron Sider, John Perkins, Brian McLaren, etc. As you can see, #Hunter defines the Chr. Left quite as broadly as he did the Chr. Right. It's also interesting to see McLaren in the lineup. H claims he's "post-lib/conservative." But fact is, he's thoroughly liberal.
It's also interesting to see McLaren in the lineup. H claims he's "post-lib/conservative." But fact is, he's thoroughly liberal. It's a pretty amazing interview. [1] ... After hearing Jim Wallis' position, Stewart quips: "Faith w/o works is dead, but works w/o faith is...still pretty good!" Zing!

OK, back to #Hunter: the key to the resurgence of the Chr. Left is evangelical progressives who played a big role in the last campaign. Thanks to them, the Democratic party has found religion and is speaking the language of faith.

Like the Chr. Right, the Chr. Left believes that harm is being done to Am. The diff. is what harm they focus on: the disadvantaged. "There is, in this renewal [of Chr. progressivism], no departure from the liberal and old-fashioned socialist tradition." (138) That's what you'd expect bc of their concern for equality (for women, gays, minorities, immigrants, and esp. the poor).
Acc. to leaders of the Chr. Left (Wallis, Campolo), God is angry w/America bc of its treatment of the poor. Acc. to Chr. Left, Am. cannot be great until there is social justice for all.

Though the Chr. Left is diverse, they find common ground in their hostility to the Chr. Right. The stronger the Chr. Right became, the more hate for them came from the Chr. Left. For them, Chr. Right has harmed the faith. They have "hijacked" the faith and promulgated a "false gospel" of neoconservative ideology. It's not just hurt the faith, but Am. Acc. to the Chr. Left, the language of the Chr. Right has polarized the nation and undermined democracy.

In this way, the Chr. Left also shares its litany of wounds suffered at the hands of the "enemy" (the Chr. Right). The sense of wounding in the Chr. Left in seeing the Chr. Right's "dangerous liaison of religion and political power" has a subtext. That subtext is: the waning of the Chr. Left's power w/the ascendancy of the Chr. Right. The Chr. Left believes it is better and smarter than the Chr. Right, yet lags in influence. What gives? The Chr. Left feels it must "take back the country" from the Chr. Right, and reclaim the lang. of Christianity from them.

Sound familiar? (If you were reading this feed yesterday, it should). This call to war is used to mobilize their membership to political action (again, faith placed in politics). "No one doubts the sincerity of their motives or the high-mindedness of the cause. There is also no doubt that the underlying call to 'take back' the faith and the nation is a basic will to power that is not unlike what one finds within the Christian Right." (144) You become like what you make your enemy. #Hunter quotes journalist Katha Pollitt: "In this sense, Wallis' evangelicalism is as much a power play as Pat Robertson's... By a remarkable act of providence, God's politics turn out to be curiously tailored to the current crisis of the Democratic Party." That quote is found on 144 of Hunter.

Though Wallis claims to be non-partisan, he is as much pro- Dem as Jim Dobson is pro-Rep. Same w/McLaren (as I mentioned). "With the possible exception of abortion, there is little in the actions and writings of the larger Chr. Left that would be objectionable to the progressive wing of the Democratic Party." (144).

Though they do rebuke the secular left for not taking religion (read: the Chr. Left) seriously. "Yet, in substance, the perspective they offer is not an alternative to the ideology of the secular left, but a faith-based extension of its discourse; the soc. movement they want to lead, its popular base." (145) Wallis is upfront about trying to gather momentum from a popular movement. He wants to create a new spec. interest group 4 the poor.

The Chr. Left accuses (rightly) the Chr. Right of promulgating a civil religion instead of biblical Christianity. Civ. rel.=a mixture btw religion and nation wherein the mission of the church and mission of the nation are conflated. So the Chr. Left berates the Chr. Right for using civil religion, conflating national and religious agendas. E.g. the Chr. Right's use of biblical texts to further their political ends, like defining marriage as heterosexual union. But #Hunter says the Chr. Left does the *exact* same thing in the use of the Bible to promote social justice issues. Wallis even at one point called a Bush administration federal budget that was being passed "unbiblical."

The problem w/citing the prophets re: soc. justice is that the biblical prophets were living in a theocracy, not a modn democracy. The Chr. Left does exactly the same thing as the Chr. Right, but can't see it. "Both Right and Left, then, aspire to a righteous empire. Thus, when [Wallis] accuses Falwell and Robertson of being 'theocrats who desire their religious agenda to be enforced through the power of the state,' he has established the critiera by which he and other politically progressive Christians are judged the same." (147)

Fact is, both are selective in their use of Scripture. And both are similar in their "framework, method, and style of engagement." And like the Chr. Right have become Republican tools, the Chr. left has become a tool of the Democrats (he uses "instrumentalized"). The Dems in the last election "got religion," but not as a foundation for a new political vision, but only as marketing rhetoric. "The political goals are different but the *realpolitik* is, in essence, identical to the long-standing instrumentalization of the Christian conservative constituency by the Republican Party--control over the power of the State." (149)

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