Essay 2, Chapter 5: "The Neo-Anabaptists"

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Essay 2, chapter 5: "The Neo-Anabaptists." Interesting ch. about a Chr. group that positions itself as an alternative to left/right. Though there are imp. similarities btw Neo-Anabaptists and Chr. Left: hostility twd the damage wrought by capitalism, they're better educated and ironic than Chr. Right, and they share the Left's contempt for Chr. Right.

But there are important diff. btw Neo-Anabapts and Chr. Left, tho it shows up more in theology than in institutional structures. Neo-Anabapts are the smallest of the Chr. groups Hunter looks at (Ekklesia Project and Potter St. Community in Philly are two e.g.). But it's popular with young, middle and upper class intellectuals who don't like Chr. Right and find Chr. Left unconvincing.

Major diff w/Left: Left blvs in a strong state, while Neo-Anabaptists keep their distance from state power. They do so out of principle, trying to copy the true NT and early Christian churches. Anabaptists want auth. Christian life. That means a commitment to simplicity, sharing goods, caring for the poor, and peace-making.

Neo-anabaptists aren't necc. from Anabaptist denominations, but they do draw inspiration from them. On p. 152, he lists some representatives. In particular, Yoder and Hauerwas are central.

The founding myth of Neo-Anabapts is the announcement of Jesus that he came to overturn the worldly powers. Ana-bapts engage the world in a way that they feel is radical, in line w/Jesus' proclamation.

The actual history of the Ch, however, is not radical, but a posture of embracing power and coercion ("Constantinianism"). The Ch. becomes the "divine legitimation" for the state. Early, ch. power used to persecute Donatists, and again in Reformation. Not Donatists that time, but Ana-baptists and 30 Years War.

For Anabapts, any time Christians seek to merge Ch. witness w/state power, the recapitulate that old error. Radical Orthodox theologians extend Constantianism to how Ch. forms alliances w/other institutions (global capitalism). Capitalism oppresses the poor and corrupts human desires, even when it is working well. We desire consumption more than God. Capitalism is coercive bc it has no common goal, just a "coincidence of indv. ends." (155). Manipulative power in pursuit of profit. For neo-Anabapts, prob. w/Am. church today is its dual loyalties to Christ and "political economy" (democracy and capitalism). For both Protestants and Catholics, it means a fatally compromised witness. God is judging the Am. Church now, they say.

There must be a complete divorce btw Church and the imperial status quo. The way back is to recognize Christ's Lordship as the very structuring principle of the cosmos, and to follow in his steps. That is - suffer as the innocent one (suffering servant, cross as mode of existence). That means rejecting all coercion and violence (pacifism), as Jesus did. He rejected Satan's offer of political power (kingdoms).

#Hunter talks a bit about the neo-Anabapt's concept of "principalities and powers," i.e. systemic patterns of "thought, behavior, and relationship that govern our lives and the spiritual realm that animates them." (157) Created good, they are now fallen. Meant for human flourishing, they now enslave us. In directing us, they lead away from God. Cf. 1 Cor. 2:6 "the rulers of this age." E.g. government. It is corrupted and corrupting, promulgating a false theology of redemption. But it also restrains human evil.

The principalities and powers cannot just be destroyed. Their sovereignty must be broken through the cross. That's what Christ did. The task of the Church is to proclaim this and live it out through an alternative community of self-sacrificial servants.

But for Jesus, the cross was a political punishment. The powers that be will see a nonconforming group as a political threat. Therefore, the community is called to suffer as Christ suffered, not by striking back. Non-violence is the prime mark of a disciple. And non-violence not just in war-time, but all the time. The problem is the self-legitimating violence of the state coercing people.

The true Church stands apart from that. For some neo-Anabapts, this means avoiding certain jobs that entangle one w/the state. Or, for that matter, jobs that would entangle one w/capitalism (a for-profit company). Or any job that would wield authority over others. Christians must serve and suffer, but never rule. That is to say, for neo-Anabapts, there is no godly use of authority or power. Period. Because all such power entails coercion. I'm pretty sure teaching for a state school would be a no-no as well. Oh well...

(My opinion now)...The question is: Is there such a thing as divinely legitimated rule (as Ro. 14 implies)? Neo-Anabaptists would strongly deny that there is. All such orders are worldly powers, and have nothing to do with Christ.

All this is to say that there is a strong dualism between the Church and the world. Recent theological efforts have included a critique of secular cultural forms w/an aim at a post-secular self-understanding. This sharp dualism is understood eschatologically, i.e. btw this age (man-cntrd, sinful) vs age to come (ctrd on Christ's redmptn). The church is to be of the latter. Incidentally, this means a total rejection of common grace. There is nothing truly good in world.

In this sense, Christians are called to be an alt. community, obeying Christ's command to pick up our cross and follow. Further, it means that the Ch. is a competing polis, and our true loyalties lie there, not w/any earthly political organization. "[The church] creates an alternative space in the world and an alternative set of practices against which the world is judged and beckoned." (161). The church reveals an other citizenship, an other ethic, an other fundamental loyalty.

Along w/ this sharp dualism comes the fear of contamination by the world (worldliness). Neo-Anabapts are clearly separatist. There is a debate w/in neo-Anab circles about *how* separatists they should be, how sectarian.

Regardless, sectarianism doesn't mean isolationism. The ch. is to be an instrument of positive social change. But that effectiveness in society is a side-effect of the church being the church, being servants and carrying their crosses. That is to say, change in culture happens through the constitutive action and identity of this alternative community.

#Hunter offers a bit of critique at this point: the frame of reference for neo-Anabapts is the same as Chr. Right and Left: politics. The true perspective on Christ is as a politically subversive figure. True Christianity is a "politics of the cross," etc. Yoder goes so far as to say only suffering bc of political nonconformism really counts as Christian suffering, versus, say, raising a child w/disabilities, struggling through a hard marriage, etc. These somehow don't count. #Hunter quotes Yoder on p. 163 about this, if you want to look it up. This is a politicization that outstrips even the Christian Right and Left!

It is true that the neo-Anabapts redefine political in a wider sense (the very existence of nonconforming communities is political). Nevertheless, their language is not innocent.They use the lang of politics to frame the basic meaning of the witness of the church. That kind of talk is going to trail linguistic baggage that you cannot just wish away.

Further, politics sets the agenda for how the church is to witness. Trying to change structures of violence or coercion (pol. structures) still frames witness in terms of the politics of this world.

In fact, they ramp up the rhetoric in eschatological terms, literally demonizing the powers of State and market. Political struggle is a cosmic struggle w/demonic powers. In a yin-yang sort of way, they

dep. on pol. powers for their identity. "Their identity *depends* on the State and other powers being corrupt and the more unambiguously corrupt they are, the clearer the identity and mission of the church. It is, as my colleague Charles Mathewes has put it, a passive-aggressive ecclesiology." (164) Zing!

That is why the neo-Anabapts are so "relentlessly negative" in their critiques. Here, he picks up on the "no common grace" thing. "...there is little good in the world that deserves praise and no beauty that generates wonder and appreciation." (164) In the theol. abstract, they say they admire creation, but in the details, only a few admirable Christian reformers (MLK, Mother Theresa, Oscar Romera, etc.) are worthy of praise.

There are two problems here, in my opinion: a deficient theology of creation, and sectarian hubris that is deaf to other Christians. E.g. Hauerwas chastises every Chr's theology that is less politically radical than his as "pale theism," "irrelevant," etc. Most Christians, it turns out, aren't as radical as they are. So they just aren't Christian enough. They don't measure up.

That is to say, their separatism entails a "discourse of negation" that ends up strengthening the politics of negation. #Hunter sees in neo-Anabaptist discourse a blend of Anabaptist and late modern themes. "the particular ways that neo-Anabaptists use the language of politics, their ideological affinities w/certain secular movements of late modernity, and their relentless hostility to all that is not God and his ideal church, distinguish neo-Anabaptism as something new; a political theology that reinforces rather than contradicts the discourse of negation so ubiquitous in our late modern political culture." (166)

As a personal note (tweet to Chris Oldfield), though I agree w/Hunter's criticism's of neo-Anabaptism, I'm no fan of Constantinianism either. There must be a diff way. Actually, that's why I'm interested in popular culture. How can Christians provide oases of spiritual refreshment and challenge prevailing spiritual currents without the threat of political coercion? Cultural witness must be involved.

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