Essay 2, Chapter 6: "Illusion, Irony, and Tragedy"

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So, #Hunter has just summarized the cultural engagement approaches of the Chr. Right, Chr. Left and the neo-Anabaptists. Essay 2, Chapter 6, "Illusion, Irony and Tragedy," begins #Hunter's critique of these three movements and their understanding of power.

First, the problems and injuries that these movements perceive are real. Secularism is alive and well in powerful institutions. And such attitudes do corrode traditional belief systems. BUT the Chr. Right has held disproportionate pol. power, and its concerns are narrow and don't represent all Christians. Their concerns have "eclipsed" the concerns of the Chr. Left. So the Chr. Left is right to be alarmed at the assimilation of Am. Christians to a consumerist culture. And the neo-Anabapts are right to be concerned about the Constantinian alliance btw Christians and the secular state and economy.

So all 3 have a point, and all 3 politicize their concerns. That's the leading strategy for engaging culture. Politics is the "social imaginary" (Chas. Taylor's concept) the frames the narrative of these 3 Christian groups. "Most people think that what matters is ideological direction of one's politics. Are you conservative? Are you liberal? These differences occupy most of our attention and argument. What is never challenged is the proclivity to think of the Christian faith and its engagement with the culture around it in political terms." (168) So for #Hunter, one of the main problems is this power and unquestioned "conflation of the public with the political."

The 2d problem grows from the 1st - all 3 Chr. movements' discourse is marked by ressentiment (narratives of injury, and a "discourse of negation" concerning opponents). By "negation" he means "nothing good comes from them - they are simply evil." This ressentiment marks all 3 as essentially Nietzschean - they are all 3 seeking domination in their own way (even neo-Anabapts).

Even though all 3 spend most time and energy in thgs *other* than politics, the belief is that the public ID of church=its politics. Chr. public affairs associations, political media coverage, voter drives, etc. have all risen in the past decades.

Why is this politicization a problem for Christian cultural engagement? Why is this politicization a problem for Christian cultural engagement? (I ought to say that here he's mainly critiquing the Chr. Right and Left, not the neo-Anabaptists).

Democracy has to do with the elected officials within the state, but the state is huge, man! Big ol' intractable bureaucracy. Decisions are not made in the state democratically, but by relatively autonomous bureaucratic specialists. You need such specialists even to get elected in a democracy! You need undemocratic elements to succeed in a democracy. This means that voters aren't in charge. The state kinda does what it wants, what it thinks is most efficient. "...political participation--both for politicians and citizens--is less about the expression of the sovereignty over the state than it is a surrender of their will to various political experts and technicians and the rules they have established." (170) So democracy =/= popular sovereignty. Rather, "democracy is led by the bureaucratic necessities of the state arguably more than it leads and directs the state." (170-71). I.e. voting in the right people accomplishes less than you think.

The 2d implication of the diff. btw. democracy and state is that politics is very limited. Good politics can change things (anti-discrimination legislation, for instance). But bad politics can truly mess things up. But for the most part, the state is a mass of compromises and and accommodation. "What the state cannot do is provide fully satisfying solutions to the problem of values in our society." (171) You cannot legislate against vulgarity, or for family values, etc. When the state does get involved, unintended consequences galore. That is to say, we expect too much of the state. It can't fix the

stuff we want fixed. Laws "do reflect values. But laws cannot generate values, or instill values, or settle the conflict over values.

The belief that the state could help us care more for the poor and the elderly, slow the disintegration of traditional values, generate respect among different groups, or create civic pride, is mostly illusory." (171) (My opinion now) - It suggests that at the root of both Chr. Right and Left lies political idolatry. (Still my opinion). We Christians need to become more disillusioned with politics (true for Americans in general).

We cannot get values via politics, because it's just about power. For politics to be meaningful (about more than power)... it needs to depend upon something besides politics - an independent moral sphere (cue Glenn Tinder's "Can We Be Good w/o God"). Not that #Hunter mentioned him, but he should have. But politicization tends to politicize values, thus eroding it as an autonomous sphere supposed to *inform* politics. Sort of like a snake eating its own tale - it can't end well. That is to say, values become reduced to political slogans. (Justice, decency, fairness. liberty, morality, etc.).

"The irony, of course, is that no group in Am. society has done more to politicize values over the last half century, and therefore undermine their renewal, than Christians--both on the Right (since the 1980s) and on the Left (1960s and 1970s)." (172) The deeper irony--the Chr. faith, which could be a source of values independent of politics, has been reduced to a pol. ideology.
In fact, #Hunter sees in the Chr. uncritical embrace of politics an evasion. It's easier to vote in a guy who'll do what you want... than to actually do it yourself. It's easier to vote in your agenda than to be faithful to do the things WE are called to do. In other words, for Christians, politics is like having a butler. It's indulgent and just too convenient.

The tragedy of politicization is that it marks a decisive accommodation (syncretism?) to the spirit of the age. Politics as the dominant witness of the ch. to the world embraces "key characteristics of contemporary political culture, a culture that privileges injury and grievance, valorizes speech-acts of negation, and legitimates the will to power." (173)
And by choosing that sort of discourse, the Chr. Right has chosen a weak ID, bc it is established negatively and thru exclusion. That is, by "accentuating the boundaries between insiders and outsiders and the wrongs done by those outsiders." (173)

The Chr. Right didn't create this type of discourse, but they have been corrupted by it. They depend upon the culture war for their identity, and soon enough, they become as ugly as the monster they fight.

#Hunter quotes David Brooks about how, on both left and right, extreme partisans "tell themselves that their enemies are so vicious they have to be vicious too. They rationalize their behavior by insisting that circumstances have forced them to shelve their integrity for the good of the country...Hyper-partisans may have started with subtle beliefs, but their beliefs led them to partisanship and their partisanship led to malice and malice made them extremist, and pretty soon they were no longer the same people." (Hunter quoting Brooks, p. 174). In other words, the worst corruption in Chr. Right activism isn't sexually falling for your secretary. It's politics as usual.

Further, the discourse of negation drowns out any "robust and constructive affirmations" that a vibrant culture depends upon. Vibrant Chr. culture needs leisure, phil. reflection, artistic creativity, scientific contributions, etc. But they all get eclipsed. Because they are not as well-funded nor as strident as the political discourse. Even worse, within the political discourse, these positive contributions aren't even mentioned. (Doesn't look good on newsletters).

"What this means is that rather than being defined by its cultural achievements, its intellectual and artistic vitality, its service to the needs of others, Christianity is defined to the outside world by its rhetoric of resentment and the ambitions of a will in opposition to others." Ouch.

And, he says, that goes for the Chr. Right, Left, and neo-Anabaptists. The neo-Anabapt. mvt is as negative as the others. Of the neo-Anabaptists he says, "*In effect,* theirs is a world-hating theology. It is not impossible but it is rare, all the same, to find among any of its most prominent theologians or its popularizers, any affirmation of good in the social world and any acknowledgment of beauty in

creation or truth shared in common with those outside of the church." (174)

So Am. Christians of all stripes are into the negation game, left, right, and neo-Anabaptist. Granted that the Bible has a stream of prophetic denunciation w/in it. But is that what the Kingdom of God should be known by? The kind of political witness Am. Christians have indulged in betrays their highest calling. Indeed, it makes it difficult to even recognize others outside their own group as human beings.

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