Essay 2, Chapter 7: "Rethinking Power: Theological Reflections"

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#Hunter: Essay 2, chapter 7, "Rethinking Power: Theological Reflections" continues his critique of Am. Christian's understanding of power.

#Hunter starts by considering political myths, beliefs that energize political action. They can be constructive, or dangerously destructive. As myths, they are safe from refutation. But they are "combustible," that is, they can inflame passions that lead bad places. For the religious, pol. myths often invoke other-worldly justifications for this-worldly action.

We have an even more problematic situation when the social situation contains have *competing* myths. Each of the 3 pctvs we've been considering (Chr. Right, Left and neo-Anabaptists) can produce theol. justifications for their myths.

Which makes it imperative to question how much weight we put on politics and political myths. #Hunter says such emphasizing politics "gives expression to the nihilism of the dominant culture," i.e. they are Nietzschean grabs for power. So we need to stop and reflect on them.
#Hunter's first point is the disconnect between our undstg of God's power (transcendent, pure) and human power (brutal, pragmatic). And yet in history as Gd's people engage culture, "power is always an important subtext -- ever present, always essential." (177) How we engage is shaped by how we relate to power. Power is just a part of the equation.

Drawing from philosophical anthropology, he asserts that power comes from our indeterminate relationship w/the natural world. We have freedom from instinctual patterns other animals don't. That gives us leeway in negotiating the threats and poss. of nature.

And that goes not just for nature, but for our relationships with each other. We are inherently interdependent. But those relationships of interdependent are inherently "asymmetrical." Some will always have more power to act than others.

Power saturates our social being. His definition of power: "Power, in short, is inherently relational, interactive, dynamically shared, and contentious, and it plays out at every level of society -- not just among individuals but among social groups, institutions, and local and national communities." (178)

Social power at its most effective is not overt and abusive. Power works best when it defines common sense reality, unnoticed by us. This is what political scientists call "soft power," power deployed symbolically and culturally. In this way, it guides human action and values.

But even here, it is asymmetrical; some have more of this kind of power. #Hunter terms this asymmetricality of power "symbolic violence" because it is a subtle form of coercion. It undermines resistance to power.

#Hunter terms this asymmetricality of power "symbolic violence" because it is a subtle form of coercion. It undermines resistance to power. It is not all there is to human life, but it's always there, in our myths, stories and assumptions that legitimate its use.

3 observations flow from this understanding of power:

1. Power tends to become an end in itself. Having power brings material advantages. Charitable organizations try to keep power, even when it hurts those it seeks to serve!

2. Because power is relational, it is always met by resistance. The power to defy or subvert power is inherent in the relationship.

3. Power, hard to reverse, always invokes the law of unintended consequences. It never acts quite the way we thought. E.g. technology, which gives mastery over nature/time/communication, etc. Every one of them develops by its own logic. The very things we thought would free us become our masters (cue Mickey Mouse as "Sorcerer's Apprentice).

#Hunter opened this chapter w/some reflection on "homo potens," man the maker/user of power. Such reflection is the necessary context for changing our thinking about how we use/abuse power. E.g. the 3 traits of power he mentioned earlier (its "inherent relationality, inherent asymmetry, + unintended consequences) highlight the problems with neo-Anabaptist's pacifism as eschewing power (and so relinquishing coercion).

But #Hunter points out the naivete of that stance. "Only by narrowing an understanding of power to political or economic power can one imagine giving up power and becoming 'powerless.'" (181) That is, no one gives up power w/o artificially narrowing the definition of power. If the church is in society, it is enmeshed in networks of power, despite its self-definition as the "community of the powerless." While the church is a community, it is also an institution, and thus imbued and enmeshed with power of various sorts. Even in subtle ways. It's not just irony that the guys who are writing theologies of powerlessness come from elite backgrounds.

The way #Hunter formulates it, every discourse, every action partakes of asymmetrical power flows. You can't get away from it, willy-nilly. "[E]very grammar and every narrative is an imposition; every source of inequality in power is a source of intimidation and force; even love itself has force -- for it draws and compels people in ways that they may not desire in themselves. Thus, as long as the church is constituted by human beings and is a human institution, it will participate in the structures of power at work in the world and will exercise a power that is spiritually and ethically ambiguous at best." (182) The neo-Anabaptist perfectionism is, to put it bluntly, screwed.
That is to say, you can't "draw a sharp line between the church and the world," because they both share similar power dynamics. Even for a self-styled "community of the powerless," powerlessness "can only be relative." (182)

To approach the same topic theologically is to realize that the cultural mandate is a mandate to use power in the world. After the Fall, using power with integrity has been thoroughly compromised. And redemption in Christ completely change that. "While Christ's life, death, and resurrection does fundamentally alter the relationship of believers to the 'powers' and to power itself, in the time while believers wait for the *eschaton*, power is inherently tainted and its use inherently compromising of the standards to which Christ beckons." (183) In other words, our use of power is ineluctably tainted.

#Hunter goes on to say that Xns must exist in this eschatological tension between the divine/transcendent and the historical/compromised. So my question to #Hunter: It sounds as if Christians have no choice but to be stained, that there is no wholly innocent use of power. If that is the case (still me asking), then is this sin? Can it be called sin if innocence is no longer an option? Are we structurally predisposed to compromise, and nothing we can do can change that? Sounds kinda fatalistic to me.

OK, end of rant/questioning. He does have a good point when he says that Christian groups try to lessen this tension by Christianizing their ideals of the social order (whether that's liberal soc. justice, or conservative family values). And each of the 3 (Conservatives, Liberals and neo-Anabpts) measure faithfulness by adherence to their social vision. Which is why each eyes the other two suspiciously as not really being Christian. "Yet the call 'to be in the world but not of it' is a call to abide in the will and purposes of God in the present world disorder with integrity, and the only way to reach for that integrity is to recognize the tension and to reside within it knowing that failure is inevitable, forgiveness is ever available, and the work of the Holy Spirit to transform and sanctify our efforts is always inscrutably at work." (183-84)

So perhaps #Hunter isn't saying we necessarily sin by being involved in power. Rather, sin is using

power w/o humility. That is, using it w/o understanding the compromise involved, by being overly sure of ourselves in this tricky, power-filled world. The Church is, as a worshiping community, distinct from the world, but not absolutely so, bc like the world, it possesses power. The real question, then, is not about choosing btw power and powerlessness, but rather: "how will the church and its people use the power they have?" (184)

However, just because we are always tangled in power as Christians does not entail fatalism or acceptance of the status quo. Rather, he urges that Am. Christians seek a better relationship with power (and "the powers"). It also means we need humility. "Christians must operate w/as much grace and forgiveness as possible because failure to use power rightly is, as I say, unavoidable." (184)

#Hunter singles out two essential tasks for the Am. Church. 1) Disentangle the life and ID of the Church from the life and ID of Am. society. That is, the neo-Anabaptists are right - the Am. church is far too Constantinian to be healthy. On both right and left, Xns are far too comfortable legitimating the dominant political ideologies. And they are far too comfortable w/the status quo economic structures.

In fact, the neo-Anabpts don't go far enough. We need to rethink every cultural assumption to see where we compromise w/the world. Things like courtship, marriage, entertainment, work, retirement...EVERYTHING needs a rethink. Of course, it's imposs. to disentangle the church from the culture or politics entirely. But that doesn't mean we shouldn't try.

So, task 1) = get critical distance from political, economical and cultural assumptions of the good ol' USA. Task 2): Decouple "public" from "political." Stop narrowing public life down to politics. It's a tragic oversimplification. We've narrowed our imaginations to politics. "Politics is just one way to engage the world and, arguably, not the highest, best, most effective, nor most humane way to do so." (185). #Hunter isn't saying don't be politically engaged. But he is saying we must "demythologize politics," and see it for what it really is. No more political messiahs, OK?

An overestimation of politics leads the church to a primarily political witness. And that's been a disaster. Because political witness of the church is often the "crudest, most manipulative, and arrogant" (186). So #Hunter suggests that we, as a Church, have a season of political silence. Shut up until we learn how to do it better. Or as #Hunter puts it: "it would be salutary for the church and its leadership to remain silent for a season until it learns how to engage politics and even talk politics in ways that are non-Nietzschean." (186)

That silence will open up a space for other types of engagement, w/o political static. To which I say, Amen. Of course, there are those who engage culture the way they engage politics: w/a view to domination. We need to find a diff. way. Some think we need to broaden the definition of politics. But the current definition will ultimately prevail. So, bad move.

Next, #Hunter turns to a meditation on Jesus vis-a-vis this "postpolitical understanding of power." (187) That is, given that power is about more than politics (relational, social power), how did Jesus use it, negotiate through it? How did Jesus deal with power and "the powers" (the institutions and power-brokers in the world)?

First, note that Satan offered Jesus the authority that was he had over the worldly powers (Mt. 4:8). Importantly, Jesus didn't dispute Satan's claim. This fits w/John's definition of "the world" as being under Satan's control. #Hunter interprets this as the default condition of power in a post-fall world is towards manipulation, abuse, self-aggrandizement. "The spirit that animates worldly power" is messed up, distorted and wielding a distorting influence over all it touches.

And it is precisely that spirit that Christ came to break (Col. 2:13-15) by laying their illusions bare. Worldly power produces the illusion of necessity, the way things *must* be. But this can be, must be, challenged. In his incarnation, and especially in his crucifixion, Christ exposed these powers for what they were, and thus disarmed them. And in his resurrection, he liberated his followers from them so they could participate in his kingdom.

Jesus did all this by "embodying and exercising a fundamentally different kind of social power." (188) How did he do that? Four ways. 1) Jesus' power was derived from intimacy and submission to the Father.

2) Christ's use of social power rejected the status and privilege that power normally gives (Php 2:6, servant-power). Christ's "kenosis" (self-emptying) was most intense at his death (dying as a criminal), but it was expressed day-to-day in his life. Christ rejected the symbolic capital that comes with social power. He washed his disciples' feet, for crying out loud! And not just his disciples. The man hung out w/the blind, lame, disreputable, poor, etc. Jesus is a publicist's nightmare.

Sorry, messed up. Rejection of symbolic capital was number 2. Number 3 was why he rejected it: compassion, serving others. 3) Jesus used power to serve others, to heal them, equip them to flower as human beings. That is the essence of J's compassion.

4) Christ used social power in ways that were non-coercive to those outside the community of faith. Jesus made himself a slave to all, Jew and Gentile alike. His dealings w/Samaritans is instructive here. Contact w/Samaritans was considered socially contaminating, yet Jesus healed them, talked w/them, used them as examples. See the parable of the Good Samaritan (Luke 10:30-37). He had the same attitude towards other non-Jews. Christians should share Christ's attitude towards outsiders, and eschew all forms of coercion. #Hunter concedes: "In the present world disorder, some types of coercion are probably inevitable" and necessary to defend the defenseless; a means to achieve a lesser of various evils. But even then it cannot be justified 'in the name of Jesus' or put forward as 'the Christian way' because force and coercion are not part of and cannot bring about the kingdom of God." (192-93)

In sum, Jesus brought a new way of using power, one that "operated in complete obedience to God the Father, it repudiated the symbolic trappings of elitism, it manifested compassion concretely out of calling and vocation, and it served the good of all and not just the good of the community of faith. In short, in contrast to the kingdoms of this world, his kingdom manifests the power to bless, unburden, serve, heal, mend, restore, and liberate." Clearly, if we are to follow Christ, we must follow his lead in how he used power (cf. Keller's "Upside-Down Kingdom").

What this looks like positively and practically is the subject of the third and final essay.

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