

Power: Its Nature and Abuse

Jonathan Andreas

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NOTE: Direct quotes herein are italicized and end noted. Authors' italics are italicized and bold.

Moderator [M]: Ladies and gentlemen, welcome to the 2014 Theology-in-the-Round Discourse held at Edinburg Theological Seminary here in beautiful Edinburg, Texas. [Applause.] Allow me to introduce our distinguished guests. On my right, having made a special trip here from the Beyond,¹ is the French sociologist and lay theologian, Jacques Ellul, formerly Professor Emeritus of Law and of the History and Sociology of Institutions at the University of Bordeaux, and the author of more than forty books. Welcome, Professor Ellul. [Applause.]

Jacques Ellul [JE]: Thank you. [To the audience.] *Merci*. Thank you.

M: And on my left is Walter Brueggemann, the William Marcellus McPheeters Professor Emeritus of Old Testament at Columbia Theological Seminary, an ordained minister in the United Church of Christ, and the author of dozens of books and hundreds of articles. Welcome, Professor Brueggemann. [Applause.]

Walter Brueggemann [WB]: Thank you. My pleasure.

M: The topic before us today is "Power: Its Nature and Abuse." This is not a new topic, of course; the appropriate use of power is a question as old as humankind. And yet today, our power over nature and over each other's lives through invasive technology is unprecedented. Prof. Ellul, might you begin our discussion with your thoughts on our contemporary situation?

JE: *Avec plaisir*, but of course. It is, how do you say, an implacable situation in which you find yourselves today. Your *golden calves*, as they were in my time, are *money, the economy, ...capitalism, science...* All these are supposed to grant [you] happiness in virtue of their abundant creative force. These calves, too, are in the hands of the state, which uses them as a religious power to promote ultimately its own grandeur and the effectiveness of its policies.²

M: It's interesting that you call this a "religious" power. Professor Evan Runner used the term "religion" similarly when he said that *life is religion, that religion is not just one aspect or dimension of our lives; it's the ultimate horizon of our personal and communal lives.*³ In this case, Prof. Ellul, you're saying the state's "religion" is self-promotion? [JE nodding; WB lifts a hand.] Prof. Brueggemann?

WB: If I may, Prof. Ellul's observation is a salient point, although what he calls the state I would call *the rapacious capitalist-consumerist economy of our society*. Either way, [t]he drive for more is rooted in **anxiety**. The goal of more is **monopoly**. And the means of more is *exploitative production that readily shades over into violence*. This sequence of anxiety, scarcity, accumulation, monopoly, and violence constitutes, for example, the story of Pharaoh in the exodus narrative,⁴ and it is as true today as it was then.

M: [To Prof. Brueggemann.] Are you suggesting that President Obama is a type of pharaoh?

WB: [Chuckling and shaking his head.] What I'm suggesting is that our *world of militant consumerism*⁵ is a totalizing environment. The huge concentration of power and wealth in the hands of small number of predators—reinforced by a government that is responsive to that concentration of wealth and power and very much legitimated by established religion—has created an environment that contains all the socio-economic possibilities and yields an ideology of conformity that is expressed as consumerism and supported by the mantras of militarism.⁶

JE: [Nodding vigorously.] *Exactement!* And where is the church? Where is the prophetic voice of the kingdom of God? *We seem to have here the typical retreat of the Christian from reality.... The Christian is a coward who when confronted by difficulties takes refuge in the bosom of his God, in false hopes and an illusory protection. This is what Marxists regard as ideological opium and psychologists as infantile regression and sociologists as artificial cultural reassurance. But in the face of these human judgements Scripture speaks differently, and perhaps it would be as well to listen to it.*⁷

M: The prophetic voice of the kingdom of God?

JE: *What constitutes the prophet is exact and rigorous proclamation of what God does, of God's decision, today.... There is something more important than trying to engage in trade, or to support oneself...or to punish criminals: stop all that.*⁸

M: Stop all that?

JE: *Oui*, stop it long enough to hear God's word, a *Word relevant to the actual situation of man, a Word which will be a solution, but which is completely irrational and unexpected*—⁹

WB: An absurd Word, *an absurdity that may be the very truth of obedient imagination.*¹⁰

JE: Yes, *it is always thus when the Word of God comes to us. A priori it necessarily seems to be absurd, for it is of a different order. And our conversion does not consist in assimilating this Word so that it becomes reasonable. The absurd element persists, but from this moment what becomes absurd is the world, its wisdom, its intelligence, its power, its politics, its experience.*¹¹

M: For the foolishness of God is wiser than the wisdom of man. [JE and WB nodding.]

That reminds me of Professor John Caputo's book, *The Weakness of God*, in which he says that we are—or should be—the fools of God (*from the world's point of view*) who judge things *not in terms of the logic of excellence [arete], but...the mad logic...of the cross.... God crosses one sort of "kingdom," a worldly kingdom, a kingdom in the straightforward sense, with another paradoxical, irregular, even ironical kingdom in which the rule of everything, all too human has been shattered.*¹²

WB: The fools of God. Holy fools. Like Elijah and Elisha, *the "holy has migrated" from royal office to these uncredentialed agents.... Like Nelson Mandela or Dietrich Bonhoeffer or Oscar Romero. The key players, it turns out, are those who refuse to be credentialed or curbed by traditional modes of power, who understand that the transformative power of truth is not a credible companion for consolidating modes of established, but that truth characteristically runs beyond the confines of such power.*¹³

M: And has the church run beyond the confines of that power?

WB: As Prof. Ellul said earlier, the church is largely absent. *The contemporary American church is so largely enculturated to the American ethos of consumerism that it has little power to believe or to act. That enculturation, by the way, is true not only of the institution of the church but also of us as persons. Our consciousness has been claimed by false fields of perception and idolatrous systems of language and rhetoric.*¹⁴

M: That sounds insidious.

WB: It is. I would go so far as to say that *the enmeshment of the United States church in the raging force of globalization and the easy accommodation of church faith and practice to consumer commoditism make the urgency of "prophetic*

consciousness” palpable among us.¹⁵ The theological crisis in the church—that shows up in preaching and in worship as elsewhere—is that the church has largely colluded with the totalism of the National Security State. Or more broadly, has uncritically colluded with Enlightenment reason that stands behind the National Security State that makes preaching Easter an epistemological impossibility.¹⁶

M: Our ears are closed, our hearts hardened.

JE: *We are thus put in a cruel dilemma. God makes his will known to us. We must will it and do it ourselves. We must decide on our own to do it. This is unquestionable. Nevertheless, we must not take over God’s Word. We must not substitute our own intention, time, or means for those of God, which alone are good and right.¹⁷*

M: How do we know? How do we know when we’re substituting our own will?

JE: *We choose our own acts for human motives at the level of reason or intuition.... [M]an is not “mechanized” or “inspired” by God. Each man chooses his own way for his own reasons.¹⁸ We certainly cannot say that every time a man acts without thinking, that every time he follows his instinct, he executes a divine judgment. Nevertheless, one has to consider that this is also possible; it cannot be ruled out.¹⁹ We always have voluntary action. Wittingly or unwittingly man obeys his calculations, his needs, his passions, and his fears. God grants man freedom to do other than God expects, that is, to do evil. He grants him the freedom to choose. All the same, everything man does is within the global plan of God.²⁰*

M: So, are you saying that God’s will and ours is a kind of mixture?

JE: *No, not...a mixture or fusion of God’s will and man’s. Everything that is perfect, everything that is of eternal validity, is God’s will. But none of it is done by anyone*

*but man. Not that man can do anything perfect or holy in and of himself. But God takes from man's work that which he will make perfect and eternal.*²¹

M: Spoken like a true Calvinist. [All, including the audience, chuckle.]

WB: Allow me to try and explain this dilemma in another way.

M: Please.

WB: First of all, our *relationship* to God is one *that is characterized by inscrutability and mystery*,²² yet we readily recognize it in those uncredentialed ones I mentioned earlier—prophets—who are *child[ren] of the tradition...of faith*. In other words, they are *so at home in that memory, their field of perception and system of language* so impacted by God's reality, that they cannot help but speak out with *urgency* against a *church* that has become too *enculturat[ed]*.²³ Elisha is a good example of this interaction between God's will and an individual's. Elisha, whose *name...means, "my God saves,"*²⁴ is an embodied message of God's power, of a power very different from the potentates of the day, more like the power displayed in Moses' life, a power that *wades into an acute economic crisis that features the haves devouring the have-nots and their children, that breaks the social disease of scarcity by an awesome act of abundance* [2 Kings 4:1-7], that *has no hesitation about moving into the zone of death* [vv. 8-37].²⁵ *Thus we have a narratively constructed world that features **inexplicable transformations** wrought by an **uncredentialed character** who bears the truth concerning God's power in the world to the **exclusion of the king**.*²⁶ In other words, *the transformative power of [Yahweh] is performed through human agency to effect such change in the world.*²⁷

JE: [Lifting his hand.] May I?

M: Absolutely.

JE: Elisha is a wonderful example. *He is the visible and active presence of God himself. At every instant he carries consolation for the poor and afflicted. He is the constantly renewed miracle of an incarnate Word. He can grant consolation to the people in every crisis, for he is the sign and proof and witness that God has not abandoned his people.*²⁸

M: Would you say he is a type of Christ?

JE: Yes.²⁹ Even so, *Elisha simply knows that God's will is at issue, and he passes on this will. He does not use any sign or personal power. The power which will be expressed does not reside in Elisha. It is not his person which heals or which makes kings.*³⁰ *He affirms that God is King. His acts and interventions signify the universality and the proximity of the kingdom of God.... God is the God of all peoples. He reigns over all kings.... Like all the prophets of Jesus Christ, he indicates and bears witness only to a second and relative aspect of what Jesus Christ will be and do,*³¹ a political aspect.

M: And with this political aspect...

JE: *The prophet constantly brings us back to zero. It's the same with the spiritual situation. Our spiritual life is constantly brought back to the decision of faith:*

[Speaking dramatically, using two different voices.]

Yes or no, this time, will you listen to this Word of God?

But I already heard it yesterday.

We are now living today.

It's all the same.

*But you are not the same, you have to decide today.*³²

M: [Laughing.] Brilliant!

JE: *The prophet does not attack people.... He maintains solidarity with the people.... This does not mean, however, that he is all sweetness, hope, and charity. He proclaims judgments...against those in power.*³³

M: A subversion of power.

JE: Indeed.

M: Prof. Leland Ryken writes about the **strong subversive element** in Jesus' discourses, how *Jesus repeatedly assaults our patterns of deep thought and undermines our conventional way of thinking and valuing.*³⁴ Prof. Brueggemann, you've also written about the subversion of power.

WB: Oh, yes. Jesus stands in a long line of subversion. *The whole book of Esther is a huge act of subversive, dissenting imagination.*³⁵ Also Daniel. *These Jews are skilled in the tricky practice of faith wherein truth speaks to power; such speaking is characteristically an act of daring and cunning and sometimes a risky act of defiance.*³⁶ *The task of prophetic imagination and ministry is **to bring to public expression those very hopes and yearnings** that have been denied so long and suppressed so deeply that we no longer know they are there. Hope, on the one hand, is an absurdity too embarrassing to speak about, for it flies in the face of all those claims we have been told by facts. Hope is the refusal to accept the reading of reality which is the majority opinion; and one does that only at great political and existential risk.*³⁷

M: Risk of life and limb!

WB: Exactly! *On the other hand, hope is subversive, for it limits the grandiose pretension of the present, daring to announce that the present to which we have all made commitments is now called into question.*³⁸

M: All of us?

WB: Yes.

M: Speak for yourself. [Everyone laughs.] But, seriously, how subversive can hope be?
It's just words, thoughts, an ephemeral wish?

WB: *The hope-filled language of prophecy, in cutting through...despair and hopelessness, is the language of amazement, of doxology. It is a language that engages the community in new discernments and celebrations just when it had nearly given up and had nothing to celebrate.... I believe that, rightly embraced, no more subversive or prophetic idiom can be uttered than the practice of doxology, which sets us before the reality of God, of God right at the center of a scene from which we presumed he had fled.*³⁹

JE: God never leaves. *God opens a door as it were, and the passion of man is unleashed.*⁴⁰

WB: [To Prof. Ellul.] Wouldn't you agree that *the possibility of passion is a primary prophetic agenda?*⁴¹

JE: *Oui*, yes.

WB: *Passion as the capacity and readiness to care, to suffer, to die, and to feel is the enemy of imperial reality. Imperial economics is designed to keep people satiated so that they do not notice.*⁴²

M: Bread and circuses. "American Idol" and Facebook.

WB: [Nodding.] And imperial *politics is intended to block out the cries of the denied ones.*⁴³

M: Out of sight, out of mind. [Prof. Brueggemann nods.] Well, we've covered passion, hope, subversion—the elements of a prophetic ministry in the face of overwhelming, imperial power. As our time draws to a close, any final thoughts?

WB: I'd like to go first, if I may, and allow Prof. Ellul the last word. [Prof. Ellul smiles.] The way I see it, the *immense technological power of the United States makes the formation and maintenance of sub communities of resistance and alternative in the [US] exceedingly difficult. Moreover, for all of our treasured talk of "individual freedom," the force of homogeneity is immense—partly seductive, partly coercive, partly the irresistible effect of affluence, in any case not hospitable to "difference."*⁴⁴ Nonetheless, the church's prophetic task, **our** prophetic task, is to *nurture and nourish* a different consciousness, an *alternative consciousness* that, on the one hand, like *the liberal tendency, engage[s] in a rejection and delegitimizing of the present ordering of things*, and, on the other hand, like *the conservative tendency, live[s] in fervent anticipation of the newness that God has promised and will surely give.*⁴⁵ May our liturgies never *domesticate God, reduce God to a commodity*,⁴⁶ but rather remain *inherently subversive*⁴⁷ as *act[s] of faithful imagination that buoyantly and defiantly mediates a counter world that is a wondrous, demanding alternative to the world immediately and visibly at hand.*⁴⁸ [Spontaneous applause from everyone.]

M: Amen. Prof. Ellul?

JE: Viva la Révolution! [Prof. Ellul raises his fist and everyone laughs.] What can I say after that? [Pointing to Prof. Brueggeman. More laughter, then an expectant pause.] Tell me this. In the face of God's power, *when the most basic thing of all is already achieved and already attained in Jesus Christ, when in the long run the goal will inevitably be attained, when it is always ultimately God's will that is done, how can one not be seized by a profound sense of the inutility and vanity of human action?*⁴⁹ Inutility, *worthlessness*. But *[w]hy are we so concerned about*

utility? The views of this age and century and technology are that [e]verything has to serve some purpose. We are driven...by the importance of results. God does not judge us thus. [He] loved us because he is love and not to get results. We must fix our regard on another dimension of these acts. If we act, it is because God has loved us, because we have been saved, because God's Spirit dwells in us,...and not at all in order that we may be saved, or that others may be converted, or that society may become Christian or happy or just or affluent, or that we may overcome hunger or be good politicians. No. Free from worry about usefulness, may our lives be a parable of the freedom of the love of God. This is the only possible meaning to human life.⁵⁰ [Audience applause.]

M: Bravo. Thank you, Prof. Ellul [Shaking hands.] and Prof. Brueggeman [Shaking hands.] and [To the audience.] thank you for joining us today for Edinburg Theological Seminary's 2014 Theology-in-the-Round Discourse on "Power: Its Nature and Abuse." Have a good night. [Background music: ETS Men's Choir singing "Rise Up, O Men of God."]

Endnotes

¹ Ellul died in 1994.

² PGPM, 126.

³ In De Graaf, PD1, xiii.

⁴ TSP, 57-58.

⁵ OT, 423.

⁶ TSP, 158.

⁷ PGPM, 165.

⁸ Ibid., 49-50.

⁹ Ibid., 50.

¹⁰ PI, xv.

¹¹ PGPM, 30.

- ¹² WG, 47.
- ¹³ TSP, 85-86.
- ¹⁴ PI, 1.
- ¹⁵ Ibid., xi.
- ¹⁶ TSP, 165.
- ¹⁷ PGPM, 114.
- ¹⁸ Ibid., 64.
- ¹⁹ Ibid., 67.
- ²⁰ Ibid., 69.
- ²¹ Ibid.
- ²² OT, 348.
- ²³ PI, 2.
- ²⁴ TSP, 90.
- ²⁵ Ibid., 92-93.
- ²⁶ Ibid., 102.
- ²⁷ Ibid., 103.
- ²⁸ PGPM, 90.
- ²⁹ Ibid., 98.
- ³⁰ Ibid., 97-98.
- ³¹ Ibid., 11.
- ³² Ibid., 50-51.
- ³³ Ibid., 52-53.
- ³⁴ WD, 461.
- ³⁵ OT, 382.
- ³⁶ Ibid., 386.
- ³⁷ PI, 65.
- ³⁸ Ibid.
- ³⁹ Ibid., 67-68.

- 40 PGPM, 102.
- 41 PI, 35.
- 42 Ibid.
- 43 Ibid.
- 44 Ibid., xvii.
- 45 Ibid., 3.
- 46 TSP, 66.
- 47 Ibid., 89.
- 48 OT, 46.
- 49 PGPM, 190.
- 50 Ibid., 198-199.

Resources

- Brueggemann, Walter, *The Prophetic Imagination* [PI], 2nd ed., Minneapolis, MN: Fortress Press, 2001.
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