

# THEOLOGISCHE REVUE

120. Jahrgang

– Mai 2024 –

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**Haslinger, Herbert: Macht in der Kirche.** Wo wir sie finden – wer sie ausübt – wie wir sie überwinden. – Freiburg i. Br.: Herder 2022. 600 S., geb. € 28,00 ISBN: 978-3-451-38394-6

This book presents us with a massive study on a central issue in the theol. and ecclesial debates in the Cath. Church: power and its phenomenology, beyond the spiritualization of authority in the Church that are often justifications of the *status quo*. It is an issue that has acquired new centrality in this particular Cath. moment because of the global “synodal process” 2021–2024 and also because of the special role that German Cath., German Cath. theol., and the “Synodaler Weg” play in it.

The book is structured in eight long chap.s. Chap. I, titled “Is there power in the Church at all? A biographical answer” (17–31), provides the context for writing this book. This book introduces itself, from the very beginning, also as a response to the current debates, sometimes with references to specific, prominent voices and their theol. thesis: the author states, “Allow me to offer a very personal response to Pope Francis, Cardinal Mueller and all who share their views on power in the Church” (18). Herbert Haslinger (born in 1961, currently prof. of pastoral theol., homiletics, pedagogy of religion and catechesis at the Theol. Fak. in the Univ. of Paderborn), locates his scholarly effort in a history of negative experiences of encounter with power in the Church both as an academic and as a Cath. since a very young age, as a pupil in a minor seminary and then in other church-run institutions of education.

Chap. II, “The eruption of the issue of power” (32–95) analyzes the major socio-historical changes that European Cath. has gone through in the last centuries: from Christendom to “Milieukatholizismus”, to an individualistic and pluralistic society dealing with uncertain trajectories of secularization. This is key because the author notes that “in the church, power is not reduced to a minimum”, on the contrary, “power becomes bigger in the hands of those who have the function to exercise it” (37), and those functions are found in the context of a given system of power in our societies. Power is a social phenomenon and this book’s aim is a critique of forms of exercise of authority and a counterpoint to those theol. narratives that tend to spiritualize the role that power dynamics play in the Church.

Chap. III, “What is power from the point of view of the social sciences?” (96–139), analyzes different kinds of power in terms of their markers, foundations, ideal-types, and processes of power-building. It also makes important and classical distinctions – linguistically arduous to render in English – between *Macht*, *Herrschaft*, *Gewalt*, *Willkürmacht* – and concludes with an excursus on *Pastoralmacht* according to Michel Foucault where H. warns us against the confusion between the

“pastoral” power typical of the modern State and what is understood as “pastorality” in Cath. theol. parlance.

The very long chap. IV, “How does power work in the Church?” (140–348), is almost a book in itself with a series of sections on social, legal, spiritual, and ecclesiastical characteristics of power in the Cath. Church, in a *crescendo* from the “the principle of mercy” to “violence in the Church”. Chap. V, “The socio-structural character of power” (349–429), addresses power from a systemic point of view, in the church as a social system with particular mechanisms of reproduction, relativization, and totalization of power, with interesting distinctions between structure, system, organization, and institution. There is an even more interesting section about the role of “movements” (in the sense of the new lay/ecclesial movements founded in 20<sup>th</sup> century Cath.) and what their experience and role have to say about the issue of power in the Church.

Chap. VI, “Sexuality, power, and ordained ministry” (430–515), addresses sexuality (teaching on sexuality, disciplining, images, and models) as a typical issue of power in the Cath. Church, with sections on homosexuality, the priestly celibacy, the seminary for the formation of the candidates to the priesthood, and of course on the sexual abuse crisis. Chap. VII, “Women, power, and ordained ministry” (516–585), goes through the various arguments in favor and against the ordination of women, from the patriarchy to the historical contingency that have created the Cath. tradition in a certain way. The author identifies “the real problem” with “clerical power”, because the opening of ordained ministry to women threatens to destroy the ecclesiastical system of male power, which H. sees as being built on the idea of the woman as symbol of sinful sexuality. In this sense, he says, “the exclusion of women from ecclesiastical ordained ministry is not even a theological problem, at least not in its core” (585).

Chap. VIII, “The end of formal power” (586–600), serves as a conclusion. H. correctly sees the issue of power in the history of macro-changes in the position of the Cath. Church in Western-European societies: “This form of church practices and structures – developed with the modern processes of transformation brought about by the Protestant Reformation, the Enlightenment, the secularization and industrialization, together with the epoch-making cultural revolutions since the 1960s – has experienced in the Western-European societies a paralysis” (587). There are five key elements in this massive development: (1.) the end of the role of the church as a leading institution in education and formation; (2.) the missing legitimizing foundations of church power in the modern and post-modern, liberal-democratic order; (3.) the role of the institutional form of the church in making possible (and covering up) abuses; (4.) the disappearance of the possibility of sanctions and punishments except for a very small fraction of the members of the Cath. Church; (5.) the irrelevance of the issue of the church’s power, if not the irrelevance of the church itself, for the lives of many Christians.

The table of contents is very detailed, but this very complex book of six hundred pages is not supplied with either an index of names or a bibliography of the cited literature.

This is a very rich book that is hard to synthesize in a short review. It is a critical study of power in the Church, a militant study that must be situated in this particular moment in the life of the church. This analysis needs to be read, in my opinion, together with critical studies on power in our Western liberal-democratic order, which is still a model for church reform. The current predicament of the ideals of democratic participation in politics has something to say also to those who work for a new model and exercise of power in the Church.

The conclusion by H. is stark, formulated in a sentence which sounds like a verdict: “Despite all the measures and invitations with which the Church wants to be attractive again and win back men and women for the church [...] they sense that the tamers want to continue being tamers and nothing else. This game does not work anymore. This power game is over” (600). This is the very last line printed in the book, and it is quite a bleak ending that says something about the cataclysmic situation in which the Cath. Church finds itself today, maybe especially in Germany.

Über den Autor:

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