ESSAY REVIEW

James Davison Hunter, *To Change the World: The Irony, Tragedy & Possibility of Christianity in the Late Modern World*


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One commonplace of the various Christian subcultures in the United States is their model of engagement with the larger national culture; most of these subcultures expect their societal action to somehow change their world for the better. James Davison Hunter, LaBrosse-Levinson Distinguished Professor of Religion, Culture, and Social Theory at the University of Virginia, considers these models of engagement from a sociological perspective. Though this volume has relevance to those who are worldview can be integrated into the curriculum, it will be most interesting and important for those who keep cultural issues and effectiveness in mind. Though written from a sociological perspective, the focus of this book is less on the relevance of sociological theory to Christianity, and more on how sociological perspectives might inform the ways in which Christians undertake to engage with and change the cultures in which they live. Part of this analysis is practical, and part is abstract, but its theological grounding and sociological insights stimulate critical thinking about how individuals and groups effectively undertake the task of integrating their faith into their lives, knowledge, and work.

In the first of the three essays that make up this volume, Hunter sets up the historical and theoretical background for considering Christianity’s relationship to culture and cultural changes. In the second essay, he concentrates on the issue of power and politics in U.S. culture and how that plays out in the engagement paradigms of what he calls “The Christian Right,” “The Christian Left,” and “The Neo-Anabaptists.” Essay three presents Hunter’s ultimate thesis concerning Christian engagement with culture, an approach that he calls a “theology of faithful presence.”

The first essay begins by laying the theological foundation for the divine call to “cultivate and keep” the Earth (Genesis 2:15). He argues that this “creation mandate” lies at the heart of any Christian approach to engaging culture: Christians must be “salt and light,” and are agents in bringing the fullness of God’s Kingdom to ultimate fruition. However, he contends that “the dominant ways of thinking about culture and cultural change are flawed, for they are based on both specious social science and problematic theology. In brief, the model on which various strategies are based not only does not work, but it cannot work” (p. 5).

Chapters 2 and 3 of the section take on the relationship between worldview formation and culture change. Against such thinkers as the late Charles Colson, Hunter argues that even if a preponderance of individuals live out the “right” values and have the “right” worldview, it may matter little to culture change, because the structures crucial to such change are usually institutional with their own traditions and hierarchies, which Christians have often failed to penetrate effectively. Not only that, the primary agents in most Christian accounts of culture change are individuals, leaving no room for the institution of the church, which Hunter argues is a key cultural institution with its own important traditions and structures of power.

A key chapter of the essay, chapter 4, puts forth eleven propositions concerning culture and cultural change. As the central element of Hunter’s argument about culture, this chapter is indispensable, and his final conclusions about culture (p. 45-47) are highly suggestive, though they depend on a sociological perspective that downplays the importance and effectiveness of individual action. Of the eleven propositions which outline Hunter’s paradigm of culture, some seem debatable. The most debatable, in the reviewer’s opinion, are these:

Proposition 5: “Cultural production and symbolic capital are stratified in a fairly rigid structure of ‘center’ and ‘periphery’” (p. 36). This would indicate (as Hunter argues) that there are cultural elites (both economic and intellectual) without which cultural change cannot occur. As an example in current
terms, if an intellectual cultural change does not involve, say, at least some of the fifty most important research-extensive universities in the United States, then it will have no staying power.

Proposition 8: “Cultures change from the top down, rarely if ever from the bottom up” (p. 41). Hunter will later argue (in chapter 5 of this essay) that such was the case for the history of Christianity, but as one considers important cultural changes in American history, like the American Revolution and the Civil War, this proposition is perhaps less convincing (even allowing that this is the case for Christianity). This relates to one of Hunter’s other foundational principles, that (contrary to many historical narratives) “the key actor in history is not individual genius but rather the network and the new institutions that are created out of this network” (p.38).

Finally, one of his chapter-concluding observations, that profound changes in culture do not happen in the course of one generation (p. 45), seems belied by current events that he actually mentions in the course of the analysis.

The final chapters of the essay are taken up with an historical analysis of cultural change and Christianity, with the last two chapters focusing on American Christianity. Chapter 5, as mentioned above, summarizes the relationship between culture and Christianity from the earliest church to the Enlightenment. Hunter calls this a “brisk overview” (p. 48), and, as such, specialists in the periods under study may find much to argue with, in terms of specific historical facts and chronology, as well as the apparent theoretical assumptions that underlie the analysis. The point of the chapter appears to be that causationally, ordinary individuals are not critical to social change, nor are ideas, nor is technology. Instead, patronage, intellectual elites and communication networks are. One must agree that none of the elements Hunter mentions, in and of itself, is a sufficient cause of cultural change, but one could argue that all these elements are necessary causes, and to single out a subset as the only necessary ones reflects a disciplinary bias. Chapters 6 and 7, however, use the framework developed in Chapter 5 to more positive effect, analyzing the current state of American Christianity in terms of “cultural economy” (p. 79), the structure of patronage, elites, and networks that produce culture change. Especially helpful are several graphs which chart the importance of key cultural networks (charitable foundations and cultural matrices).

At the end of Essay One, Hunter has identified the concept of power relations as a key to explaining Christian subcultures. Essay Two extends this analysis of power, pointing it out (in Chapter 1) as a problem with which Christian subcultures, in their quest to change the world, must grapple. Chapter 2 asserts that “a turn toward politics” (p. 103) and its relations of power and coercion is the primary way Christians have attempted to affect larger American culture during a time of thinning political and ideological consensus. In fact, he claims that many cultural institutions (Hunter mentions the family, education, and sexuality, among others) have now become thoroughly politicized: Issues in these areas are presented as political and legal problems with political and legal solutions. As public life becomes increasingly conflated with the political, he argues, the forces that shape politics—the will to power, and “ressentiment”—increasingly shape Christian responses to cultural interaction. Ressentiment (which Hunter asserts “has become the distinguishing characteristic of politics in modern cultures “[107]), he defines as “ressentiment, but [] also involv[ing] a combination of anger, envy, hate, rage, and revenge as the motive of political action” (p. 107). He further asserts that ressentiment is grounded in a narrative of injury and personal injustice. He will point to narratives of ressentiment as foundational to contemporary American Christian perspectives on cultural engagement.

Chapters 3, 4, and 5 of this essay focus on three major perspectives in Christian cultural engagement: the Christian Right, the Christian Left, and the Neo-Anabaptists. For each, he attempts to objectively outline the relationships of power and ressentiment that he observes as critical to the perspective, using examples from the writings of important exponents of each position.

He closes Essay Two with a set of reflections on the shortcomings of perspectives which depend on the will to power and ressentiment. He teases out the implications of the perspective held by theorists on both the Christian Left and Right, “that in the modern world, democracy and the state are two different entities that overlap with one another in some ways, but in the end, they each operate according to their
own imperatives” (170). The first implication is that “the state is not subject to electoral will” by virtue of the fact that democracy as a cultural network compels individuals to “surrender [] their will to various political experts and technicians and the rules they have established” (p. 170). The second is, “there are no political solutions to the problems most people care about” (p. 171). That is, the apparatus of government, by its nature, cannot provide solutions to problems of values in society. Further, he goes on to assert that “[f]or politics to be about more than power, it depends on a realm that is independent of the political spheres” (p. 172). There must be an autonomous moral realm, he argues, in order for moral terms to have any specified meaning outside the realms of politics and law.

What is the alternative to seeing politics as the primary witness of the church to the world, and practicing a pattern of engagement that stresses a will to power and ressentiment? It is ironic, according to Hunter, that embracing such perspectives actually contributes to the dissolution that these Christian subcultures claim to resist. In Chapter 7, Hunter begins to outline his alternative to current modes of cultural engagement, based on his understandings of the creation mandate and the biblical call to eschew corrupting power. In doing so, he outlines two main and immediate cultural tasks: first “to disentangle the life and identity of the church from the life and identity of American society” (p. 184); “the second task is for the church and for Christian believers to decouple the ‘public’ from the ‘political’” (p. 185).

Essay Three outlines his alternative, a theology of faithful presence. But this stance of faithful presence faces challenges from various areas: what he calls “the temper of our times” (p. 197), difference (p. 200), and dissolution (p. 205). The temper of our times is contradictory, according to Hunter, enamored of power, and to this point, not critiqued in a significant way by Christian theology. The challenge of difference relates to the privileging of diversity as a quasiethical principle, given the fact that “social systems seem to require some basic consensus to survive” (p. 201). The fragmentation, not only of worldviews, but of the social situations that support them, creates a dilemma for religious faith—in Hunter’s words, “God is simply less obvious than he once was, and for most no longer obvious at all …” (p. 203). The final challenge is that of dissolution, the “deconstruction of the most basic assumptions about reality” (p. 205). Besides the philosophical movements loosely called Postmodernism, Hunter also points out the rise of ubiquitous media and entertainment as engines of dissolution, especially in the way mediated interactions create “an illusion of intimacy” with celebrities and strangers, while impoverishing more immediate social connections.

Chapter 2 grapples with the cultural paradigms that often hinder fruitful engagement: the stances of “‘defensive against,’ ‘relevance to,’ and ‘purity from’” (p. 213). The “defensive against” paradigm attempts to create an alternative cultural space that is against the world. The “relevance to” paradigm makes being connected to the pressing issues of the day the highest priority, sometimes with the result that the mores and values of contemporary culture are used to critique the established church, rather than the values of the church critiquing contemporary culture. The “pure from” paradigm resembles the “defensive against” perspective in that it separates itself from culture, but unlike the defensive perspective, feels that there is very little that can be done for the world, because the world is irredeemable in its fallen state (p. 218). None of these perspectives, Hunter argues, can respond to the challenges of difference and dissolution in an effective way.

The final chapters of Essay Three present Hunter’s alternative, which can be quickly summarized: The church is ultimately bound by the “Great Commission” as its primary reason for existence; the church as a culture must enact a subculture of shalom (peace and goodness); the church will experience tensions with the “world,” which will include both affirming the good in contemporary culture and standing against the wrongs and mistakes of contemporary culture. How is this to be accomplished? For Hunter this involves returning to a sense of the importance of spiritual formation, and a practice of faithful presence within culture—holding to the “Great Commission” and working to bring in a culture of shalom, while realizing that final fulfillment of both of these elements is not completely possible in history. After outlining the theological underpinnings of this alternative, and making observations on leadership within this paradigm, Hunter integrates the major points made throughout the book for his final conclusions. He summarizes his central argument this way: “God, then, does not speak through empty abstractions …
Rather, in every instance, God’s word was enacted and enacted in a particular place and time in history. For the Christian, if there is a possibility for human flourishing in a world such as ours, it begins when God’s word of love becomes flesh in us … and in doing so, a trust is forged between the word spoken and the reality to which it speaks” (p. 240-241).