
Pro Rege

Volume 39 | Number 3

Article 8

March 2011

To Change the World: The Irony, Tragedy, and Possibility of Christianity in the Late Modern World (Book Review)

Daniel Edward Young

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Recommended Citation

Young, Daniel Edward (2011) "To Change the World: The Irony, Tragedy, and Possibility of Christianity in the Late Modern World (Book Review)," *Pro Rege*: Vol. 39: No. 3, 34 - 36.

Available at: https://digitalcollections.dordt.edu/pro_rege/vol39/iss3/8

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and development specialists than to individual churches (although as the authors point out, some individual churches have ventured into these areas). Nevertheless, the strengths of this book greatly outstrip the minor areas

that could be improved. And the book is also timely, as weakened North American and global economies make it doubly important for individuals and organizations to be both wise and stewardly as they seek to alleviate poverty.

Hunter, James Davison. *To Change the World: The Irony, Tragedy, and Possibility of Christianity in the Late Modern World*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2010. 358 pages. ISBN: 978-0-19-973080-3.

Reviewed by Daniel Edward Young, Associate Professor of Political Science, Northwestern College (IA).

James Davison Hunter's *To Change the World* is a provocative book that everyone interested in the relationship of Christianity and culture should read. A University of Virginia sociologist of religion with a particular interest in the "culture wars," Hunter has an acute awareness of the decreased cultural power of Christianity; as a Christian, he seeks to rethink Christian cultural activity in a post-Christian culture. Rejecting the dominant Christian view on culture-changing, Hunter contends that "cultures are profoundly resistant to intentional change—period" (45).

The dominant Christian view of culture, Hunter contends, is that *culture* is that which is found in the hearts and minds of individuals—so-called "values": "By this view, a culture is made up of the accumulation of values held by the majority of people and the choices made on the basis of those values" (6). According to this view, changing culture requires changing hearts and minds, or the worldview that shapes those hearts and minds; the choices will then be different. He gives three subsequent beliefs of this view: "First, real change must proceed individually—one by one. ...Second, cultural change can be willed into being. ...Third, cultural change is democratic—it occurs from the bottom up" (16).

Hunter contends that this view of culture-changing relies on "specious social science and problematic theology" (5) and thus is "almost wholly mistaken" (17) and bound to be ineffective in changing culture (32). His contention is borne out by the fact that "in America today, 86-88 percent of the people adhere to some faith commitments. And yet our culture—business culture, law and government, the academic world, popular entertainment—is intensely materialistic and secular" (19). How can this be true if culture is simply the accumulation of values? In fact, culture often seems quite independent of majority opinion (22). Hunter repeatedly says he does not want to reject evangelism, political action, and social reform movements; these are indeed good things. But, he says that they do not change the culture (18).

Hunter contends that the dominant view goes awry in its assuming that ideas move history and that conflicts over culture are conflicts between worldviews (25). What the predominant view fails to take into account is the complexity of cultural production: culture is embedded in, and is a product of, language, history, and institutions. Culture exists where ideas, individuals, and institutions

interact (34-35); cultural change flows from elite institutions and impersonal forces such as the market, not grassroots political action or individual action, and takes place over a long period of time (42-43, 46). He explains that Christians are largely "absent from the arenas in which the greatest influence in the culture is exerted" (89): the elite universities, the leading publishers, the leading venues of the fine arts, and so forth. In fact, the church's absence from these areas is an indicator of the church's lack of health; it is not exercising itself in all areas of life (95). The dominant view also involves the questionable assumption that we can "know God's specific plans in human history and that one possesses the power to realize those plans in human affairs" (95).

Law and a common culture are sources of social solidarity, and, as Hunter notes, the one increases as the other decreases; the proliferation of legislation and litigation in recent decades is an indicator of the declining commonality of our culture. The state, as promulgator and adjudicator of law, is now seen as the locus of the public weal, its reach touching on every aspect of life. The *public* and the *political* are seen as coterminous (102-105). Hunter worries about the politicization of modern society; that is, all problems are seen as having a political solution, when in fact no such thing is true (171). Hence, Christian cultural engagement winds up being confined solely to political activism with the intent of controlling and deploying the coercive power of the state. Christian activism then becomes functionally Nietzschean: all about the will to power motivated by a *ressentiment* grounded in a perceived victimization (107). Hunter describes three main American Christian approaches to cultural engagement: the Christian Right, the Christian Left, and the neo-Anabaptists, each with their particular "myth and history" of contemporary America. The Right and the Left seek to acquire political power, while the neo-Anabaptists describe the church's witness, using the language of politics. In all three cases, they fall victim to understanding modern society in terms of politicization.

Given that we should reject the dominant and mistaken view of cultural change, how should Christians seek change in the late modern world of consumerism, democracy, and technology? Hunter points out two major challenges of the modern world: "difference" and "dissolution"; these are aspects of modernity that Christians have not

adequately understood (199-200). Regarding *difference*, past cultures lived in relative isolation, but today's globalized societies are constituted by cultural pluralism; in America today, there is no dominant culture, and it is highly unlikely there will be one. There is a fragmentation of worldviews as well as social structures supporting the worldviews. The other challenge, *dissolution*, relates to the deconstruction of the most basic assumptions about reality; there is no longer an assumption that words reliably refer to reality. For example, Hunter does not think of today's controversy over whether the law ought to recognize certain same-sex relationships as marriages. Essentially, the debate is over to what state of affairs the term *marriage* refers; a hundred years ago there would be no question of its referent. How does one adjudicate the meaning of the term *marriage* among multiple cultural discourses, each of which provides an alternative context for understanding its meaning?

What shall we do then? Hunter's central argument is this:

God, then, does not speak through empty abstractions or endless circumlocutions. Rather, in every instance, God's word was enacted and enacted in a particular place and time in history. In all, presence and place mattered decisively. Nowhere is this more evident than the incarnation.

Word and world, then, come together not so much because words describe the world accurately or because words correspond to reality. Rather, word and world come together through the word's enactments—both *the fact* that God's word is always enacted but also in *the way* his word is enacted.

This, in short, is the foundation of a theology of faithful presence. It can be summarized in two essential lessons for our time. The first is that *incarnation is the only adequate reply to the challenges of dissolution; the erosion of trust between word and world and the problems that attend it*. From this follows the second: *it is the way the Word became incarnate in Jesus Christ and the purposes to which the incarnation was directed that are the only adequate reply to the challenge of difference*. 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, is embodied in us, is enacted through us and in doing so, a trust is forged between the word spoken and the reality to which it speaks; to the words we speak and the realities to which we, the church, point. In all, presence and place matter decisively. (240-241; italics in original)

Hunter believes that American Christians today have much faith but have been formed by the larger post-Christian culture of modernity, which increasingly does not resemble the biblical vision of human flourishing: *shalom*. In response, the church, in both its local and universal manifestations, must embody this *shalom* (227).

Hunter suggests that Christians relate to the world through a twofold dialectic of "affirmation" and "antithesis"; the Christian affirms that which is good in the world, while refusing that which is not (231). "Faithful presence" is Hunter's term for the church's critical but constructive resistance to the institutions of late modernity:

In our present historical circumstances, this means that the church and its people must stand in a position of critical resistance to late modernity and its institutions and carriers; institutions like modern capitalism, liberalism, social theory, health care, urban planning, architecture, art, moral formation, family, and so on. But here again, let me emphasize that antithesis is not simply negational. Subversion is not nihilistic but creative and constructive. Thus the church—as a community, within individual vocations, and through both existing and alternative social institutions—stands antithetical to modernity and its dominant institutions in order to offer an alternative vision or direction for them. Antithesis, then, does not require a stance that is antimodern or premodern but rather a commitment to the modern world in that it envisions it differently. Such a task begins with a critical assessment of the metaphysical, epistemological, and anthropological assumptions that undergird modern institutions and ideologies. But the objective is to retrieve the good to which modern institutions and assumptions implicitly or explicitly aspire; to oppose those ideals and structures that undermine human flourishing, and to offer constructive alternatives for the realization of a better way. (235-6)

What does this look like concretely? Hunter gives examples such as the following (266-269):

- An automotive company that asked itself "what do we owe our customers and employees?" and as a result lowered prices at its inner city dealerships as well as creating a college tuition fund for children of all employees.
- A Washington, D.C., art gallery that believed that "people with the greatest need had the greatest need for beauty" and sponsored an art exhibit which featured DC artists' paintings and sculptures about an impoverished and crime-ridden section of the city.
- A music, film, and culture magazine that avoided the focus on "artistic and moral squalor" often featured in the popular culture press and "celebrated musical quality and promoted cultural products that ennobled the human spirit."

Hunter concludes by contending that the paradigm of *faithful presence* is the exiled Jews in Babylon, who are counseled to seek that city's peace (276ff).

Hunter's approach to Christian cultural engagement is broadly Reformed, using concepts such as the *cultural mandate*, *common grace (affirmation)/antithesis*, and a *creation-fall-redemption* motif. However, given his account of cultural

change, he is very skeptical of the language of “redeeming culture.” Essentially, Hunter promulgates what might be called “Niebuhrian neo-Calvinism.” While mentioned only in passing, the ghost of Reinhold Niebuhr (1892-1971) looms on these pages, intentionally or not. One reason for Niebuhr’s enduring appeal (President Obama cites him as a favorite) is his emphasis on the limitations of politics. For Niebuhr, politics can only be ameliorative, not redemptive. This idea had particular resonance in the mid-twentieth century as the Western democracies faced messianic ideologies such as communism that sought to wholly reshape societies and even human nature itself. While today we do not face totalitarian messianism, there is still the temptation to see politics as the solution to everything; it is this politicization of modern society that Hunter bemoans. Niebuhr also emphasized the inescapability of power in political and social life. Of course the words *irony* and *tragedy* found in the subtitle are very Niebuhrian. What is not particularly Niebuhrian is the note of critical resistance to the late modern world.

There is much to commend in this volume. The book is accessible to a non-specialist audience and would be excellent for college courses or church discussion groups. It is a very good orientation to the key approaches of Christian cultural engagement found in America today.

Nevertheless, I was left with some questions. Hunter defines *power* as “coercion or the threat thereof” (101), yet later in the book he refers to Jesus’ non-coercive power, which we are to imitate (191, 247). How these are to be reconciled is not made clear. Elsewhere, in passing, he seems to say that the concept of power is useless (256). However, Hunter contends that our imitation of Christ does not translate into pacifism. Power must be wielded.

Coercion is inevitable on some occasions as the lesser of two evils, but it cannot be considered as bringing about the kingdom of God (192-193). Hunter is wary about salvific or redemptive ideas of “building the kingdom of God” (233) since working within institutions to achieve a goal means the use of power, which is potentially corrupting. Yet his idea of faithful presence uses terms such as “foretaste” of the kingdom. Why is a foretaste, but not building, acceptable? Elsewhere, he says faithful presence is transformative of culture (253, 269). Hunter does not make clear how this notion of transformation fits with his earlier statement that “cultures are profoundly resistant to intentional change—period.”

Another difficulty is that Hunter seems to overestimate the amount of common ground that Christians have with non-Christians. For example, Hunter states that politics ought to be pursued in the light of the justice of God (253) and that we ought to try to create conditions in social structures that are conducive to the flourishing of all (247). Yet what the justice of God is and what human flourishing looks like are controversial, even among Christians, not to mention those who are not Christians or those who are atheists.

Overall, I am not clear on whether Hunter offers a genuinely alternative vision for Christian cultural engagement or simply a more modest one. My questions aside, Hunter’s book is an excellent entry into the “Christ and culture” genre. Hunter’s warning against simplistic conceptions of culture-changing is welcome and ought to prompt Christians to the careful study of power structures and cultural production. *To Change the World* is a book that all Christians ought to read.