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## The Irony, Tragedy, and Possibility of Christianity in the Late Modern World

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## **Hunter, J. D. (2010) *To change the world: The irony, tragedy, & possibility of Christianity in the late modern world.***

Oxford University Press, USA.

Reviewed by Mimi Barnard

James Davison Hunter's *To change the world: The irony, tragedy, & possibility of Christianity in the late modern world* has caused a great deal of consternation of late. As a Christian educator, I'm pleased by the cognitive dissonance I've found among colleagues and friends—one friend, someone I would consider a Christian elite, if there is such a thing, said he couldn't get past the "elite part." Others are concerned about the targeting of well-known Christian leaders, and some are happy to have someone finally articulate what they feel.

James Davison Hunter, the Labrosse-Levinson Distinguished Professor of Religion, Culture, and Social Theory at the University of Virginia and Executive Director of the Institute for Advanced Studies in Culture, organizes the book into three essays, "Christianity and World-Changing," "Rethinking Power," and "Toward a New City Commons: Reflections on a Theology of Faithful Presence." He asks the reader to reconsider the current, prevailing view of culture:

The essence of culture is found in the *hearts and minds of individuals*—in what are typically called "values." Values are, simply, moral preferences, inclinations toward or conscious attachment to what is good and right and true. Culture is manifested in the ways these values guide actual decisions we individuals make about how to live—that is, how we spend our time; how we work; how we play; whom we marry, and how and why; how we raise our children; whom or what we worship; and so on. 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. (p. 6)

He then critiques several popular Christian perspectives of culture. He begins with Chuck Colson's "bottom up" approach, "If our culture is to be transformed, it will happen from the bottom up—from ordinary believers practicing apologetics over the backyard fence or around the barbeque grill... *the real leverage for cultural change comes from transforming the habits and dispositions of ordinary people*" (p. 8). Continuing his critique of a bottom-up approach, he cites James Dobson's "The Truth Project," a Focus on the Family initiative that was created for "the possibility for exponential change within the body of Christ... as we expect thousands will be transformed by this curriculum" (p. 9).

After critiquing these leaders of the Christian Right, Hunter next addresses the social reform efforts of the Christian Left, namely Jim Wallis and Don Eberly. He cites Wallis, head of the Sojourners Community, as offering a "manifesto... to make it possible for other Christians to compete with the Religious Right: 'the issues of political morality we now confront are too important to be left to only one voice. We testify that there are other visions of faith and politics in the land. New voices are critically needed. We

especially appeal to the media to let new voices now be heard” (p. 14). The “eloquent advocate” Don Eberly supports a “broad-based voluntary reform movements led by citizens and community leaders. . . . these voluntary social movements include, among others, the fatherhood movement, the marriage movement, the character movement, and the teen-abstinence movement” (p. 15).

Hunter also critiques Andy Crouch’s “Culture Making” approach for really being “cultural materialism,” quoting Crouch’s perspective of culture, “We make sense of the world by making something of the world. The human quest for meaning is played out in human making: the finger-painting, omelet-stirring, chair-crafting, snow-swishing activities of culture.’ In short, ideas, symbols, ideals, worldviews, and the like are not free-floating and autonomous from lived reality. They are, rather, mediated through things” (p. 28). In addition to deconstructing the prevailing view of culture, Hunter avers, “Christians have failed to understand the nature of the world they want to change and failed even more to understand how it actually changes” (p. 99).

I read the book in preparation for a two-day seminar with the author and a group of about 20 Christian leaders. By page 5, as Hunter builds his case about Christian rhetoric, I was thinking (positive inflection), “Oh, he knows my school”:

there are colleges, such as Christendom College, Indiana Wesleyan University, Bethel University, and Abilene Christian University, that publicly declare their intention to train students who will “change the world,” or “reclaim our culture for Christ and His Church.”

By page 17, I was thinking (conflicted, contemplative, not-so-positive inflection), “Oh, he knows my school.” He knows, at least from the Internet, the institution where I spent 22 years of my life, where I finished my undergrad degree, met my husband of 28 years, raised my children, and served on the faculty and administration. Hunter was right—in West Texas, the impetus to “change the world” for the better is strong. As a young faculty member, I liked this rhetoric and thought it was the most obvious path for any Christian who desired to serve, to make a difference in the world.

For the past several years, moving into the 2008 elections and beyond, I’ve thought about what it means to be salt and light in the world. I’ve been unimpressed with some public Christians, especially politicians and preachers, the mighty who’ve fallen, leaving behind families, staff, followers, and congregations, and giving unbelievers justifiable reason for mockery and disdain. Would it be possible to have a more gracious, hospitable Christian witness in the cacophony of voices on the airwaves? I work in Washington, D.C., the marketplace of ideas and influence. There are times when I’m the only Christian attending a meeting or event, when I hear intelligent, influential people talk about my faith in ways that sadden me. How will we be salt and light if the “brand,” for lack of a better word, is sullied and confused?

This same conflicted feeling came upon me as I was reading *To change the world*. I was surprised by the way Hunter addressed the Christian Right, Christian Left, and Neo-Annabaptists. I don’t know Chuck Colson, James Dobson, Jim Wallace, or Shane Claiborne, but Andy Crouch is a friend. Some have been offended by the depth of criticism espoused in *To change the world*—it’s important to remember that Hunter is an academic, and that practicing critique is what academics do for fun. Academics enjoy

the process of critiquing and being critiqued, as it sharpens their own thinking; rarely does one academic actually persuade another who holds a differing opinion, as each perspective would have been thoroughly vetted over time. Most often, they agree to disagree—this is standard practice in the academy.

And I'm saddened by the lack of generosity of spirit toward Hunter, as I posit that he's done us a great favor, asking believers to consider our witness critically. I've wondered if some reviewers have actually read the entire book—Hunter and Andy Crouch are more congruent in their thinking than not. If Andy, who's challenged evangelicals to compete in the center of the marketplace, talks of homemade chili as a way of creating culture, I understand. And after reading the book, I understand even further why Hunter suggests that the prevailing view of culture is weak, that it is actually created by the elites.

It is Hunter's suggestion of "dense networks" instead of great men [or women], (i.e., Martin Luther, John Calvin, William Wilberforce, Dorothy Day, Martin Luther King), that actually cause cultural change: "...charisma and genius and their cultural consequences do not exist outside of networks of similarly oriented people and similarly aligned institutions" (p. 38). I'm most struck with Hunter's assertion that:

when networks of elites in overlapping fields of culture and overlapping spheres of social life come together with their varied resources and act in common purpose, cultures do change and change profoundly. Persistence over time is essential; little of significance happens in three to five years. But when cultural and symbolic capital overlap with social capital and economic capital and, in time, political capital, and these various resources are directed toward shared ends, the world, indeed, changes. (p. 43)

During the two-day seminar with Hunter, many at the table spoke longingly of earlier years, when Christianity was at its zenith in the United States—at times, the conversation was gloomy. I was one of four women at the table, and I challenged the gloomy spirit, as the practices of humankind, their ascendance and descent, do not impact the God of the Universe, who was, who is, and who is to come. I explained that, though many Christian colleges and universities have "change the world" rhetoric, they do this in hospitable ways, by having what Hunter calls a "faithful presence" (p. 244), connecting theory and practice in gracious, supportive ways, the sort of programming that establishes "dense networks," that is embedded throughout Christian colleges and universities.

I recommend Hunter's book because it is important to consider how to practice our faith in ways that invite non-believers to engage with believers, to build relationships, and to find commonality. The world faces big problems that need big answers. No matter the context, we can all practice a hospitable faith, participating in dense networks that support gracious leaders, being salt and light, having what Hunter calls a "faithful presence."

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