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2012

## Book Review: To Change the World: The Irony, Tragedy & Possibility of Christianity in the Late Modern World

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### Recommended Citation

Belcher, E. (2012). Book Review: To Change the World: The Irony, Tragedy & Possibility of Christianity in the Late Modern World. *International Christian Community of Teacher Educators Journal*, 7(2).  
<https://doi.org/>-

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## Book Review: To Change the World: The Irony, Tragedy & Possibility of Christianity in the Late Modern World

### Abstract

In reflecting on James Davison Hunter's thesis *To Change the World: The Irony, Tragedy, & Possibility of Christianity in the Late Modern World*, I must admit experiencing rising tension as to whether this book is to be a harbinger of hope, or another postmodern harbinger of doubt regarding the possibility of Christianity in our current environment.

In unpacking such deliberations, I begin by outlining the form, content, and intent of Hunter as to his purpose, his theology for faithful presence and shalom, and my final musings. As with any review, the hope is to have the reader read the book him/herself. Instead of writing a review on this book from its obvious theological perspective, as an educator, I will comment on its equipping aspects of inspiring a faithful presence.

## **Book Review: To Change the World: The Irony, Tragedy & 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*. New York, NY: Oxford University Press. Hardcover, 358 pages, ISBN 978-0-19-973080-3.

### **Introduction**

In reflecting on James Davison Hunter's thesis *To Change the World: The Irony, Tragedy, & Possibility of Christianity in the Late Modern World*, I must admit experiencing rising tension as to whether this book is to be a harbinger of hope, or another postmodern harbinger of doubt regarding the possibility of Christianity in our current environment.

In unpacking such deliberations, I begin by outlining the form, content, and intent of Hunter as to his purpose, his theology for faithful presence and shalom, and my final musings. As with any review, the hope is to have the reader read the book him/herself. Instead of writing a review on this book from its obvious theological perspective, as an educator, I will comment on its equipping aspects of inspiring a faithful presence.

### **Hunter-ian Perspectives of the World**

Hunter's purpose is driven by the question, 'How do believers live out their faith under conditions of the late modern world' (Preface, p. ix)? He organized his work within the structure of three essays: Essay 1: Christianity and world-changing; Essay II: Rethinking power and toward a new city commons; and Essay III: Reflection on a theology of faithful presence. All of the key themes of these essays relate to his chart 'The Culture Matrix' (p. 90). His perspective flowing from this chart is that Christians are mostly in the Low Brow/Upper Middle Brow of society, and hence, will not in this contemporary age have any real influence in the world. Christians cannot affect or change the world because the world (culture) is embedded in structures of power. Any cultural influence will be held with those holding power – the Elite, or High Brow citizens of society.

In theoretically supporting his cultural matrix, Hunter refers to Pierre Bourdieu (1977a, 1977b, 1993, 1994) regarding his view of habitus (p. 34) and his idea of cultural and symbolic capital (p. 35). Bourdieu (a contemporary of Foucault and Althusser), poses some problems for me. Bourdieu, as I see it, posits a clinical view of society from the *outside* in, (anthropologically and socially) rather than a dialectic view of reality from the *inside* out (ethnographically and socially) as done by Dorothy Smith (2002, 2005), which would further support Hunter's view that culture is intrinsically dialectical.

Hunter makes many salient points in Essay I. He details a common view of Christianity and its effects on society in American culture which draws from history. He expresses concern with dualism, how it is understood, and how cultural goods mitigate one's understanding of culture and how to engage it. However, his emphasis is placed on where Christians have not met the mark in affecting or engaging society. Hunter suggests the need for an alternative, based on seven propositions on culture. These propositions see culture literally and metaphorically as being a system, a product, a resource, a form of power, a symbolic capital – all of which are dialectical and generated within networks. Hunter sees any change in culture as being from the top down, initiated by elites outside of the centermost positions of prestige through networks of engagement. Much of what he targets is helpful to provoke further discussion and make Christians define their views; even though his elite model is something with which I do not personally agree.

In Essay II, Hunter explores rethinking 'power' as it applies for the most part to politics, putting emphasis on his idea of *ressentiment*, which is

reflected in the spirit of a postmodern age. Ressentiment involves a narrative of injury, a victim mentality towards power and justice, fostering a discourse of negation. Hunter reflects back on modern Christian culture (in the Christian Right, Christian Left, and Anabaptist traditions) and its impact, saying ‘those times are long past.’ In examining what he terms as the seven mountains of culture – government, education, media, arts & entertainment, family, and business – he focuses on what is awry, noting the impermanence of politics and the fragmentation caused by modern technology and media. A postmodern stance seems to be evident in the tone of his reflection. I find such a stance is problematic.

In Essay III, Hunter’s rhetoric on the challenge of faithfulness engages the differences caused by a growing pluralism and dissolution (the deconstruction of the most basic assumptions about reality), saying that worldview never transcends the environment that surrounds it. He expands this view by unpacking a paradigm, similar to that of Niebuhr (2001) in *Christ and Culture*, involving stances towards culture for the Christian as being *defensive against*, *relative to*, and *purity from* as forms of cultural engagement. Hunter then suggests groundwork for an alternative way to engage culture, one of faithful presence and shalom. Unfortunately, his theory of faithful presence is somewhat underdeveloped.

### **Perceived Tensions in the Work of Hunter**

Why does Hunter, in Essay III, dismiss the current debates on the significance and importance of worldview when nothing in his bibliographic references relate to it? Why does he suggest on page 281 (the section dealing with moving towards a new city commons) that Christians should be silent for a season and learn how to listen in order to learn how to engage the world differently? This leaves me to question if he has much hope in the idea that Christians may have the wisdom to move forward. This postmodern approach also leads to other areas where I do not buy in to Hunter’s total picture.

Examples of vignettes of the power of the individual to affect society (p. 266) do not always fit with Hunter’s Culture Matrix. One problem I have with the model and process of Hunter’s work is that it is confusing and in some cases contradictory. I cannot see how any human ever fits precisely into the boxes of his categories. Surely a

Christian may experience the divine intervention of being able to find oneself within areas of influence not within his/her status. Even though Hunter states that the Holy Spirit is still active in culture, he seems to not create a space in which He could work. Focusing on his ‘reality’ of cultural engagement, Hunter limits Christian possibility in many ways to smaller dreams of ‘perhaps making the world a better place by being fully present in our daily lives’ in his final statements.

Perhaps Hunter is exhibiting resentment himself. In not engaging what he stated as being positive in Christian history in essays I and II, he removes the possibility that positive history has and could ‘repeat itself.’ In seeing the church through militaristic lenses and metaphors as a ‘community of resistance,’ with leadership being the ‘burden’ of Christians, and Christians as being less than elite, the book seems to keep readers in the mode of considering what they dislike more than in furthering what they love. His ‘theology for a faithful presence’ and shalom only consumes the last few chapters of his book.

Instead of being inspired to see God’s people as harbingers of hope from what Hunter perceives as a faithful presence of shalom, I see a very small view of the possibility of God working in our age and a very large view of Christian dismissal as a significant part of culture. I see Hunter as remaining postmodern and rather pessimistic in his approach to Christianity in ways that do not extend the basic Christian story of redemption and reconciliation, but rather serves a passive, pessimistic, and somewhat defeatist attitude regarding the possibility of the Holy Spirit moving in this age in significant ways. As a harbinger of doubt, Hunter does not promote the culture of hope that Christian educators seek to engage regarding redemption or restoration of culture. He does, however, make us think and defend our hope, and being able to discuss what we do not agree with is what education is all about.

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