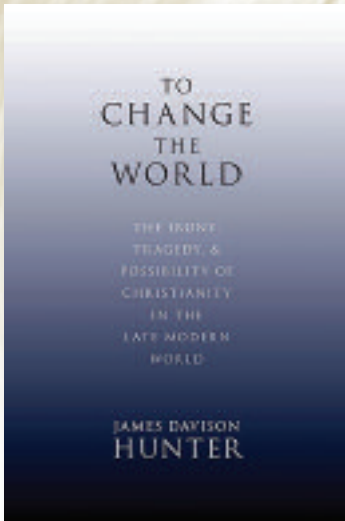




TO CHANGE THE WORLD

REVIEWED BY TREVOR CAIRNEY



To Change the World

James Davison Hunter, Oxford University Press, 2010, 368pp

James Davison Hunter's book *To Change the World: The Irony, Tragedy & Possibility of Christianity in the Late Modern World* has been hailed as one of the most significant Christian books for some time.¹ It has, perhaps, been a little over-hyped, but has certainly challenged my thinking about Christian engagement with the world, which is Hunter's aim:

I contend that the dominant ways of thinking about culture and cultural change are flawed, for they are based upon both specious social science and problematic theology. In brief, the model upon which various strategies are based not only does not work, but it cannot work. (p5)

Hunter begins by critiquing the assumptions that have driven Christian public engagement and action. The essence of culture, he argues, is not found simply in the 'hearts and minds of individuals', that is, in what are called 'values' (p6). This fails to take into account the factors that give cultures strength and resilience over time. Change does not occur through the

power of great ideas alone, but as these ideas meet elite networks and institutions, penetrate them and then spread their influence through new institutions and networks of influence. Wilberforce, Churchill, Martin Luther King, Mandela and others did not change the world by simply holding to the right values. At every point of significant cultural change there is 'rich patronage' that resources intellectuals and educators who within their networks '..imagine, theorize and propagate an alternative culture' (p5). Overlapping networks of leaders and resources come together and give a critical mass to the ideals, practices and goods of an alternative culture.

Hunter is at pains to stress that while evangelism and social reform are right priorities for the church, the working theory of culture on which they are based is flawed. Churches and individuals

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pursue right agendas to make Christ known in word and deed, but they often do this from a position of isolation on the periphery. His stress on networks, and in particular the penetration of elite networks, seems timely to me as I observe many Christians fleeing the professions, schools and universities to train for full-time ministry. Significant cultural change requires some Christians to be operating at the centre of elite networks not in enclaves. We are also reminded, helpfully, that at key moments in history new institutions are created that give form and expression to the emerging culture, such as those created during the conversion of Barbarian Europe, and later in the Reformation.

Hunter identifies three common 'paradigms of engagement' with culture and the world:

- a) **'Defensive Against'** – the major objective is the retention of Christian orthodoxies and conduct against the world, and the establishment of Christian institutions of all types to ward off the forces of pluralism, secularisation and change.
- b) **'Relevance To'** – prioritises being relevant and connected to the issues of the day; being in touch and meeting the 'felt-needs' of church attenders, especially non-believers.
- c) **'Purity From'** – motivated by a desire to uphold historical truths (like 'Defensive Against'), but goes further and concludes that there is little to be done for the world in its fallen state. The central task is to extricate itself from the forces of the world and enable authentic witness.

While acknowledging these major paradigms are not without biblical justification, Hunter argues that ultimately they fail to effect major cultural change and make a difference for the Kingdom of God.

Drawing on real-life examples, and careful historical and cultural analysis, he suggests an alternative way for Christians to spend their lives for God and engage with the world, which he calls 'faithful presence':

...where and to the extent that we are able, faithful presence commits us to do what we can to create conditions in the structures of social life we inhabit that are conducive to the flourishing of all. (p247)

CONTINUED ON PAGE 35.

inevitable future. On the other hand, where Marxism and politics generally have failed to fulfil their grand vision ‘the religious impulse flourishes, either in relation to national and territorial consciousness, of which Islamism and Hindu nationalism are the most obvious instances, or else through the transnational voluntary association, of which Pentecostalism is the most energetic contemporary expression’ (p83). And yet Martin does not think there is much in the ‘God is Back’ thesis, which holds that secularisation has gone into reverse, either. While the state of affairs in the special situation of the USA is fairly steady, in Latin America and Africa the situation is of ‘the persistence of largely inspirited universes for which secularisation and de-secularisation are alike largely irrelevant’ (p104). At one point however he does allow himself this one summary statement: ‘The future of Christianity depends not on what scientific advance may show, but on whether the Christian drama continues to make sense’ (p43).

The book is riddled with remarkable insights which are extremely helpful. For example, Martin understands that a religion has a ‘repertoire that extends over a distinctive spectrum, with some central tendencies and many marginal possibilities’ (p195) and that ‘the cultural realisation of those themes will vary enormously according to type of society, type of social context, and historical

situation’ (p167). This means that Christian faith is played out in different ways depending upon its social context in different historical moments: the Roman Empire, the Middle Ages, the Reformation; and in different places: eastern Europe, western Europe, South America. For example, he writes ‘There is no inherent connection between Christianity and democracy, but there are elements in its repertoire which can be given democratic inflection under particular and favourable circumstances’ (p18).

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I found Martin’s analysis of the social and political place of Christianity in Eastern Europe, as well as the remarkable phenomenon of world-wide Pentecostalism, a helpful antidote to my own narrow appreciation of the world wide faith. Of the latter he writes ‘Pentecostalism is a Christian movement fully comparable to Islamic revivalism, but entirely without a militant and violent wing’ (p40).

Martin is at his most witty when critiquing the over-confident Enlightenment and its master narrative which dominates the academy. ‘Intellectual history remains affected by a master narrative treating religion as

inchoate and backward superstition or as pathetic froth obscuring the surface of the real until blown away by revolution’ (p129). But such an approach ‘mandates a principled ignorance about our global reality. That is why it keeps surprising us. Waiting for the world to play catch-up with us is a mug’s game.’ (p120)

This book, though difficult at times, is a very important antidote to the shallow, simple or deterministic pictures that so often pass as commentary on the role and place of religion in the world today. It also helps Christians realise how

much they are shaped by their history and present social embeddedness, and that in another time or place much would have been different. There is a certain bracing refreshment gained through the perspectives that Martin gives.

The Future of Christianity is a book which will repay the effort of reading that it requires, and will leave the reader with a deep sense of the richness of religion in human experience—and a suspicion of any glib or simple explanation of what has been going on, or will happen next. To quote yet another memorable sentence of Martin’s, ‘History is too cunning for mortals easily to chart its course’ (p51). ©

CONTINUED FROM PAGE 33.

No book is perfect, and it is difficult to undertake the kind of analysis Hunter has attempted without oversimplifying the many complex and diverse expressions of Christian faith. It would also be easy to complain that the reader is offered little practical guidance on how to practice ‘faithful presence’. There is also a hidden danger in his approach: too many Christians in the past have pursued the path of elite networks for personal gain rather than the Kingdom of God. Despite this, I

think Hunter’s book should be a major corrective to how many of us think. The strengths of his work are the methodical discussion of culture and our capacity to influence it, the evidence presented in relation to the nature of cultural change and his critique of the way the Church deals with the challenges of pluralism and increasing secularisation.

The full benefit of Hunter’s work will only occur as people read it, discuss it with others and consider its implications for life. How does the way

we live in our various relational communities, and as we interact with key institutions, contribute to the flourishing of all? This is a book that deserves to be read by many and discussed at length.² ©

ENDNOTES

1 By Tim Keller, Charles Taylor, Nicholas Wolterstorff and Justin Taylor, to name a few.

2 A longer version of this review can be found on the CASE blog (<http://andjustincase.blogspot.com/2011/06/to-change-world-review.html>).