**James Davison Hunter,** *To Change the World: The Irony, Tragedy, & Possibility of Christianity in the Late Modern World* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2010)

Ever found yourself saying to God, yourself or others, 'I want to make a difference'. It's a fairly standard Christian, and also, suspiciously, non-Christian line. It lines up with other common Christian statements like 'redeeming the culture', 'advancing the kingdom,' 'building the kingdom,' 'transforming the world'. All of them, according to James Davison Hunter, are wrong. Hunter is a sociologist based at the University of Virginia who has spent much of his academic career analysing Evangelicalism and the 'culture wars' to which it has been wed in the US. The preface reveals that he is influenced by people like the doyen of American sociologists, Peter Berger, and the doyen of American pastors, Tim Keller. It also reveals that the title is ironic. Hunter does not believe we can or should 'change the world', despite giving that impression for the first hundred or more pages.

In the first of the book's three essays, Hunter shows how we cannot change the world if we keep on doing what we're doing. The strategies adopted by so many Christians who want to make a difference make little difference where it really counts, in the key institutions of our culture. Hunter's focus is more on conservative Christians, given they are the bulk of Christians in the US, but he doesn't ignore mainline and progressive Christians. Fundamentalists focus more on personal and national revival, while the more theologically Reformed and intellectual groups seek to inculcate a "Christian worldview" in young people's minds through Christian education from pre-school to graduate school. The shared premise is that once the battle for ordinary people's hearts and minds is won, the culture will change. They are mistaken.

The common view is mistaken, as Andy Crouch summarises, 'because of its individualism: it ignores the central role of institutions in transmitting culture. It is mistaken because it is not just institutions that matter, but institutions at the cultural "center" rather than the "periphery"—so that an op-ed in the *New York Times* is of vastly greater importance than one in the *Sacramento Bee*. It is mistaken, perhaps most of all, in its egalitarian assumption that the hearts and minds of ordinary people matter—in fact, cultural change is almost always driven by change among a small élite who occupy powerful positions in those culturally central institutions'.

The failure of the common individualistic view, changing the culture one person at a time, is demonstrated massively disproportionate influence and visibility in public culture of miniscule minorities like Jews and gays (pp. 20-21). Despite the green longing with which Australian Christians may look at the gold of American Christian resources, Hunter shows through a vast variety of statistics of key granting bodies and institutional influence etc, that it is very marginal, not mainstream, despite its numbers. Christians run a parallel popular culture of schools, music, sport etc. But the parallels are in "lower and peripheral areas" of culture. In a wonderful 'culture matrix' diagram on p. 90, using Plato's classic typology of the True, the Good and the Beautiful, Hunter shows the largely low-brow nature of Christian influence. Our strengths are in primary and secondary schools instead of Ivy League (think the Big Eight in Australia) graduate research, pop culture not high culture, bandaid ministries rather than preventative policies.

At worst they produce Christian kitsch. As John U'Ren has said, "You used to get trinkets at the Catholic bookstalls and theology books at the Protestant ones; now it's reversed." (Further, in launching Acorn

Press's John W. Wilson Publication Fund, Tom Frame lamented the current parlous state of theological publishing in Australia and the inability of theological works to penetrate mainstream publishers and bookshops.)

In ch. 4 Hunter presents seven suggestive propositions on what culture is :

I. 'a system of truth claims and moral obligations'

II. 'a product of history'

III. 'intrinsically dialectical'

IV. 'a resource, and as such, a form of power'

V. 'cultural production and symbolic capital … stratified in a fairly rigid structure of "center" and "periphery"'

VI. 'generated within networks'

VII. 'neither autonomous nor fully coherent'.

Hunter is fortunately not an idealist and does not lapse into mere 'history of ideas'. Nor is he a Marxist materialist. His cautious maxim is that *under specific conditions and circumstances ideas can have consequences* not because of their inherent truth but 'because of the way they are embedded in very powerful institutions, networks, interests, and symbols' (p. 44). He provides four provisional observations of this:

I. 'Cultures change from the top down, rarely if ever from the bottom up'

II. 'Change is typically initiated by elites who are outside of the centermost positions of prestige'

III. . 'World-changing is most concentrated when the networks of elites and the[ir] institutions … overlap'

IV. 'Cultures change, but rarely if ever without a fight'

Hunter sums up ch. 4: 'evangelism, politics, social reform, and the creation of artifacts – if effective – all bring about good ends: changed hearts and minds, changed laws, changed social behaviors. But they don't directly influence the moral fabric that makes the changes sustainable over the long term, … implicit[ly] …. Form[ing] the presuppositional basis of social life. Only indirectly do evangelism, politics, and social reform effect language, symbol, narrative, myth, and the institutions of formation that change the DNA of a civilization' (p.45). Key examples of culture change on the Christian side include the Clapham Sect or elite network, not just Wilberforce as in the individualistic Evangelical great man view of history; and the Enlightenment on the non-Christian side, again, not just a case of pure ideas, but of networks and resources shifting remarkably over a century.

Hunter's second essay shifts from the irony of unintended consequences to the tragic hubris of adopting a primarily political model of change. He critically analyses three key Christian social movements of today, and uncovers a common obsession with politics, and a form of tunnel vision focused on narrowly political power.

The Christian Right is a too obvious though necessary illustration in its various rises and falls, the latest being the (Mad Hatter's) Tea Party which threatens to bring the US economy and much of the world's crashing down with its debt default brinkmanship. Its nostalgia for Christendom and a mythological

'Christian America' and distortion of the dominion mandate into one of theocratic domination shows the perils of 'Christian politics'.

Second is the Christian Left, exemplified by Jim Wallis and Sojourners. This is driven by an identification with the poor, longing for economic justice, and despair at the dominance of the Christian Right. For all Wallis' attempts at maintaining political neutrality, it is subject to co-opting into the Democratic Party at Prayer to break the Republic monopoly on the Evangelical vote.

Thirdly, though there is some overlap with the Left concerning pacifism, are the "neo-Anabaptists" , whose creative patriarch is John Howard Yoder, and *enfant terrible* is Stanley Hauerwas. However, they are less sanguine about liberalism and its institutions than the Left and abhor the coerciveness or 'democratic policing' (Hauerwas) of market and state structures. Hunter is much more nuanced in his treatment of the neo-Anabaptists than H. Richard Niebuhr who depicted Anabaptists as a 'Christ against Culture' model. He realises that they believe in indirect social change through the church's acting out an alternative politics. However, he astutely argues that the neo-Anabaptists end up collapsing the public into the political, defining themselves in political terms (hence Yoder's *The Politics of Jesus)* like the Right and Left they in many ways oppose. 'In a context in which traditional pragmatic definitions of politics prevail, it is a bit naive to imagine one can use the word so promiscuously and be free of those traditional and pragmatic meanings. The use of the language of politics is a bid to translate social marginality into social relevance. The problem is that this language comes with all sorts of baggage and cannot rid itself of this baggage' (p. 163). Hunter critiques its relentless negativity, a kind of 'passive-aggressive ecclesiology' (Charles Matthewes) (p.164).

The tragedy which all three perspectives are prey to is their over-politicised view of culture and its distinctive cultural power; their resentful negativity, where grievance dominates grace (whether the enemy is secular and theological liberals, fundamentalists, or the American empire); and their loss of vision of a genuine common good.

The third and most possibility laden of Hunter's essays calls for a positive Christian posture of 'faithful presence' — salting every social structure of culture having been shaped by their covenantal Christian community. This community would particularly display the virtues of justice and peace, for Jew and Gentile alike, even in exile, praying for and seeking 'the shalom of the city' (Jer 29:7).

These words are a mantra of the Christian community tradition but Hunter takes them beyond nostalgic, Christendom-based privileges and divisions of Left and Right. In our new situation where 'the ground has shifted in ways that most Christians have not recognized', Hunter uses Jeremiah 29:7 as the paradigm of 'a new city commons' where God's scattered, exiled people, in post-Constantinian modernity's neighbourhoods and workplaces, settle down for the long haul, seeking to share God's *shalom* (peaceable prosperity) with their neighbours and workmates through 'faithful presence', (pp. 175-6) so that the community they have in common, pluralistic and secular as it is, may not merely survive, but thrive.

Contrary to rumour, there are many examples of people providing a sense of 'faithful presence' in various places and positions of relative social and cultural power, in all spheres of society. For Hunter, '*Only by narrowing an understanding of power to political or economic power can one imagine giving up power and becoming "powerless"* as many admirable advocates of voluntary poverty do. When voluntary poverty is voluntary it is not powerless, nor is it really poverty. We all have various forms of softer or social, symbolic, culture forming power whether in workplaces, families or neighbourhoods as opposed to strong or coercive and violent power'. Further, Hunter again notes:

the very theologians and pastors who champion powerlessness have disproportionate life-chances (through salary, status, health care, and opportunities) and symbolic capital that provides them disproportionate material and discursive power. By virtue of their vocation and station, they themselves perpetuate asymmetries in power.

Much better to put our cards on the table and be honest about the relative power we have. This is where those who underplay the creation commission distort the balance of the Bible. As Hunter shows:

> To be made in the image of God and to be charged with the task of working in and cultivating, preserving, and protecting the creation, is to possess power. The creation mandate, then, is a mandate to use that power in the world in ways that reflect God's intentions… The question for the church, then, is not about choosing between power and powerlessness but rather, to the extent that it has space to do so, *how will the church and its people use the power that they have.* (p. 181-4).

Hunter reflects well 'the core teachings of Jesus as they bear on 'social power or 'relational power', the power one finds in ordinary life. It is exercised every day in primary social relationships, within the relationships of the family, neighbourhood, and work in all of the institutions that surround us in daily life and therefore it is far more common to people than political power [which] tends to be experienced as an abstraction (p. 187). Hunter has nailed the problem on the head: 'an abandonment of the call to faithful presence – *irrespective of influence.* … the cultural matrix is a visual demonstration of where the church is not healthy. A healthy body exercises itself in all realms of life, not just a few. The failure to encourage excellence in our time has fostered a culture of mediocrity in so many areas of vocation' (p.95). Hunter's humble image of 'faithful presence' provides us with a way forward beyond the hubris of messianic change and the totalism of H.R. Niebuhr's *Christ Transforming Culture*. We would all do well to listen. It might make us different.

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