James Davison Hunter's "To Change the World." An Intro to the Digest.

Introduction:

In August or September 2012, as I was working on the sequel to *Popologetics* (working title for 2d book: *The Care and Feeding of the Christian Imagination: Creating Authentic Christian Popular Culture),* I realized that I really needed to interact with James Davison Hunter's 2010 release, *To Change the World: The Irony, Tragedy, and Possibility of Christianity in the Late Modern World.* I'd been told that it was a must-read by a respected friend (I mean you, Wade), and it turns out, my friend was absolutely right. The book has broadly to do with these questions: "What is the responsibilty of Christians toward their surrounding culture, and under what conditions can they actually have a positive influence on culture?"

As I began reading it, I was impressed by the arguments, the amount of information he marshalled for his arguments, and the whole flow of the book. And the more I read, the more I realized that I needed to take notes. I also realized that there were a great many Christians who would be interested in what Hunter said. So I tried (and am trying) an experiment: I began tweeting a digest to see if others would find the information helpful. Turns out they did. In fact, a couple asked me to post it on my website rather than let it melt away in the info-streams of the Twitterverse. So here it is.

Please be aware that this is almost wholly a digest of Hunter's work. There will be some direct quotes, but no copyright infringement is intended. And I will certainly take it down if I get some legal notice saying that this infringes on Hunter's or the publisher's rights. Further, since this is a digest, it isn't meant to stand alone. If you don't have this book and you're interested in the issues raised by the book, for heaven's sake, *go out and buy it.* This digest is meant to whet your appetite for what can only be fully expressed there.

The first two chapters I did not tweet, but I did do a short digest of them, so that the whole book could be presented as a whole. I'll add to it until its done. Without further ado... James Davison Hunter's ***To Change the World: The Irony, Tragedy and Possibility of Christianity in the Late Modern World.***

Essay 1, Chapter 1: "Christian Faith and the Task of World-Changing"

ESSAY ONE: CHRISTIANITY AND WORLD-CHANGING

Chapter 1: "Christian Faith and the Task of World-Changing"

In the Christian view, humans are created as "world-makers." They are obligated to engage and change their world, "pursuing God's restorative purposes over all of life, individual and corporate, public and private." (4) Not that Christians have a stellar record in pursuing this "creation mandate." The record is ambivalent, with much to inspire, and much to repent of. Nevertheless, Christian denominations and para-church organizations today are eager to engage and better their world. But are good intentions and enthusiasm enough?

"I contend that the dominant ways of thinking about culture and cultural change are flawed, for they are based on both specious social science and problematic theology. In brief, the model on which

various strategies are based not only does not work, but it cannot work." (5)

Essay 1, Chapter 2: "Culture: The Common View"

Chapter 2: "Culture: The Common View"

The common view summarized "The essence of culture is found in the hearts and minds of individuals – in what are typically called 'values.'" (6) Culture is a reflection of values and life-choices.

More sophisticated version: worldviews, the lens through which we see reality and that directs our beliefs and actions. In this view, culture is shaped by ideas, ideas shaped by worldview. These shape our choices, which in turn shape the culture. Good worldviews in individuals leads to good life choices, and therefore good culture. Bad worldviews in the same way lead to bad (unhealthy, declining) culture.

So Chuck Colson lays out a 4 step plan. Christians must: 1. be good citizens, 2. carry out their civic duty in every walk of life, 3. engage directly in politics, and 4. act as the conscience of society and restrain the misuse of governing authority. Cultural change will be bottom up, grassroots, from evangelism and apologetics with ordinary people. This will transform worldviews, and thus transform habits and values, and thus transform culture.
This idea has a long American pedigree, stretching back to Jefferson. Sum: "Change the values of the common person for the better and a good society will follow in turn." (9)
In this context, Evangelicals have focused on evangelism not just to save souls, but to change individuals' values, and hence change culture. Pray and work for spiritual renewal, and surely cultural renewal will come.

As important a tactic for cultural change is politics. Bad laws come from bad choices made by individuals in authority. Therefore, we need to work to vote in the right people, make sure the right judges are appointed, etc. "[T]he reality is that politics is the tactic of choice form many Christians as they think about changing the world. This has been most conspicuously true for Evangelicals, though it has also been true for Christians in the Mainline Protestant traditions. It is not an exaggeration to say that the dominant public witness of the Christian churches in America since the early 1980s has been a political witness." (12) For the Christian Right, secular humanism in the judiciary and legislature has forced education to become secular, emptying the schools of religiously-based values, as well as liberalized abortion and other sexual-oriented laws. By mobilizing popular indignation to these moves, the Christian right believes it can swing the pendulum back in favor of Christian values, even as quickly as in one generation. Intensified prayer plus increased voter participation can turn things around. And this type of thinking is common also on the Christian left as well – we need a political vision with spiritual values, acc. to Wallis.

In addition to spiritual renewal and politics, a third tactic is social reform movements (pro-fatherhood or marriage movements, teen abstinence, etc.). The idea is to strengthen families, raising healthy drug-free children, preventing out-of-wedlock births, abortions, etc.
None is exclusive, and all share common approach: that real change in culture starts with the hearts and minds of grassroots individuals. This assumes: 1. "that real change must proceed individually," 2. "cultural change can be willed into being," and 3. "change is deocratic – it occurs from the bottom up among ordinary citizens, ordinary people." (all from 16). So Christians look to a Wilberforce, Martin Luther King, Jr., or Mother Theresa to show what one ordinary person can do.

"If you have the courage to hold to the right values and if you think Christianly with an adequate Christian worldview, you too can change the world.... This account is almost wholly mistaken." (17)

Essay 1, Chapter 3: "The Failure of the Common View"

Chapter 3: "The Failure of the Common View"

Notes on chapter 3 of #Hunter 's book, To Change the World. Standard Evang. model of cultural change doomed bc its rooted in idealism.

[Note (not in orig. tweets): The standard evangelical model = if we change people's thinking, change their worldview, then society will change from the grassroots up. We will change society by changing minds.]

Grassroots individuals who believe the right worldview don't change culture. Such "idealism" ignores that culture is not just ideas.

It misses the material and institutional dimensions of cultural change. Power lies in institutions and mat'l arrangements.

#Hunter quote: "In sum, idealism leads to a naivete about the nature of culture and its dynamics that is, in the end, fatal." (27)

"Every strategy and tactic for changing the world that is based on this working theory of culture and cultural change will fail."

#AndyCrouch doesn't fare much better. Crouch's model in "Making Culture": Xns will change culture by making things and floating it on the market. #Hunter responds that this still contains a democratic and individualistic bias. Not all cultural goods are created equal.

[Note: That is to say, some cultural goods exist at the centers of cultural influence, and some are quite marginal. Evangelicals, as we will see, tend to be experts in the latter.]

The cultural market is not free. It is governed by institutional and ethical norms that operate autonomously, but thru the market.

Therefore, Christians wanting cultural change must look to institutions (like the church) for change.

Essay 1, Chapter 4: "An Alternative View in 11 Propositions"

Chapter 4: "An Alternative View of Culture and Cultural Change in Eleven Propositions"

#Hunter ch. 4: An Alternative View of Culture and Cultural Change in Eleven Propositions.

Since this is #Hunter 's positive statement of his model, I'll sometimes put in my own reflections. **Prop. 1:** "Culture is a System of Truth Claims and Moral Obligations." Culture is *like* worldview, but it runs much deeper.

What this means is that culture shapes our undstg of the world and self and moral norms per-cognitively. V. much like #JamieSmith's understanding of the "social imaginary" in "Desiring the Kingdom."

Language specially important, since lang. "provides the primary medium thru which people apprehend their conscious exp of the wld."

That last quote from p. 33.

Prop. 2: "Culture is a Product of History." In other words, culture don't change fast, kids.
: Money quote: "Culture takes form as the slow accretions of meaning in society over long periods of time." (33)

Here, he makes use of French soc. theorist Pierre Bourdieu's concept of "habitus"-dispositions shared in a community. Or better... "'history turned into nature,'" *second* nature, if you will." (34) That makes cultures resistant to change, or at least consc. chg.

"The inertia built into cultr by virtue of its relatshp to its long hist tends to make it lumbering and erratic at the same time." Also from p. 34.

Prop. 3: "Culture is Intrinsically Dialectical." I.e. culture is the meeting place *between* ideas and institutions.

Ideas don't shape culture alone, but only as they are in conversation and shaped by institutions. And institutions (e.g. educational) carry these ideas according to their own logic and rules. So not all ideas are created equal.

And obviously, indv.s and institutions are in dialogue too. But the center of gravity lies with the institutions.

Prop. 4: "Culture is a Resource and, as such, a Form of Power." Here he draws on Bourdieu's concept of "symbolic capital."

Forms of knwl (e.g. credentials) act like money (capital), and it is unequally distributed within a culture. Ph.D.s have more, etc.

Or elite universities have more than community colleges, certain publishers have more. It's about cache, prestige w/in a culture.

Prop. 5: "Cultural Production and Symbolic Capital are Stratified in a Fairly Rigid Structure of 'Center' and 'Periphery'"

This is an elaboration of prop. 4 using the visual model of spheres of power. Some groups have a status of being central to power, others, not. So far, his case sounds commonsensical to me. But it has disturbing implications for "grassroots cultural change."

Prop. 6: "Culture is Generated within Networks." Here, he takes down the "Great Men" view of history.

History doesn't change because of great indvs (Einstein, Luther, etc.), but bc of the netwks w/in which these indvs were embedded.

Prop. 7: "Culture is Neither Autonomous nor Fully Coherent." Maybe the hardest to swallow for those who blv in a democracy of cultr.

Culture spreads and changes only in tandem with the market and the state (e.g. through a state monopoly on pub. education).

Culture also made up of "fields" (Bourdieu again): publ., religion, ent., edu., etc. They overlap, but have diff. agendas.

Add to this differences of ethnicity and geography within a society, and you've got one messy mixture. Can't predict how it changes.

#Hunter's first 7 props had to do with the definition of culture. His last 4 have to do with how culture changes.

Main theme for this section: "Ideas Sometimes Have Consequences." To riff on Orwell, some ideas are created more equal than others.

Prop. 8: "Cultures Change from the Top Down, Rarely If Ever from the Bottom Up." He doesn't deny that popular mvts exist, but they aren't the ones that produce lasting cultural change. Those who do that are those at the center who re-shape cultural concepts.

And those concepts are translated into concrete forms as research programs, passed on by educators, then popularizers who apply them

Money quote (at least for me): "Cultural change is most enduring when it penetrates the struc. of our imagination, frameworks of knowledge and discussion, the perception of everyday reality." (42) For someone into pop culture, this resonates more than he knows.

Because popular culture traffics in the realm of the imagination. I think entertainment has a bigger role to play than he thinks.

Prop. 9: "Change is Typically Initiated by Elites Who Are Outside of the Centermost Positions of Prestige."

Here, he employs Ital. soc. theorist Vilfredo Pareto's metaphor of the "lions" and "foxes." Lions are at the ctr. of power and crave social stability. Foxes seek to subvert and introduce new ideas. Cultural change happens in that tension btw lions and foxes.

Or even as the foxes *become* the lions. Note however that foxes lurk in elite institutions, just not the tip-top elite institutions

Prop. 10: "World-Changing is Most Concentrated When the Networks of Elites and the Institutions They Lead Overlap."

Not much explanation needed here: when elite networks from diff. fields come together in common cause, change results. But not fast.

Prop. 11: "Cultures Change, but Rarely If Ever Without a Fight." Every cultural change is a struggle for cultural power. Cf.Foucault

The struggle is never a fair fight, but it is a fight. "Conflict is one of the permanent fixtures of cultural change. It is typically through different manifestations of conflict and contest that change in culture is forged." (44)

The challenges to status quo must be able to "articulate" changes w/the existing social setting. Plausibility is key here.

This section made me ponder: "What are Christians truly called to with respect to culture?" Are we called to continuing culture war?

I don't think so. While we want to see cultures change, I don't know how much we want to be in a stance of "permanent conflict" with others in our societies. Seems to cut against the obligation to love and serve those we differ with. I also don't like #JamieSmith's suggestion that we simply abandon the culture (lest it taint our social imaginations) and burrow ourselves in church-led monasteries.

That seems like abandoning those who need us most. Is there some way of serving and loving from a position of cultural weakness that looks for cultural change without the acrimony? I liked #AndyCrouch's cultural servant model. I'll have to wait and see what I think of #Hunter's "faithful witness" posture. I can understand Xns who are frustrated w/their culture (like Chuck Crismier), but the culture-war model seems so counter-productive (church's image is one of grumpy, censorious, judgmental types), and so counter-gospel as well.

The role of subversive servants, working from the peripheries (and sometimes the centers) of cultural power to overturn structures of unbelief and injustice - that seems a better model to me. And I think an authentic and incisive Christian popular culture has an important role to play, as "oases for the imagination" of both the Christian and the non-Christian. Anyway, that's what my 2d book is about (d.v.).

Back to #Hunter: He summarizes his diff. model of cultural change vs. idealism (it's not about true or good ideas, but about the ways ideas are embedded in powerful institutions and networks; not just ideas, but soc. conditions and circumstances.

Against individualism, not the aut. and rational individual, but "networks and the new institutions that they create."

Contra pietism (cultural change will come w/indv. spiritual renewal): "It is not so much individual hearts and minds that move cultures but cultures that ultimately shape the hearts and minds and, thus, direct the lives of individuals." (45).

That last quote will be hard for Evangelicals to hear.

Ch. 4 ends w/some lessons. Lesson 1: culture cannot change "in a generation" (pace Dobson). Cultural change happens slow and subterranean. "The most profound changes in culture can be seen first as they penetrate into the linguistic and mythic fabric of a social order." (45) The quote goes on about how it changes the "rewards and punishments that organize soc. life" and structures of consciousness and character." It's great stuff. Just read all of p. 45.

If his characterization is correct, Evangelicalism's got a rude awakening.

#Hunter gives a thought experiment about a "3rd Great Awakening." Lots of hearts changed, lots of good people voted into office, lots of Christian judges and good rulings, but nothing of lasting cultural change if the elite institutions remain untouched.

That's why prohibition didn't stick, nor the changes in Am. after the 1980s vis-a-vis pornography, abortion, homosexuality, etc.

"Invitations by Christian leaders to fast and pray are most worthy, but their main effect will be to renew the church rather than keep American from 'losing its soul." So evangelism, pol. change, social reform, won't do what Evangelicals think it will.

Last note: cultural change never goes in the way you expect it. There is (as Crouch stated) always unintended consequences.

Essay 1, Chapter 5: "Evidence in History"

Chapter Five: "Evidence in History"

#Hunter's gist for ch. 5 is: In the spread of Christianity from marginal sect to dominating world religion, the change had more to do with structural changes and networked elites than with a simple grassroots change of belief. Cultural change happens top down.
The same applies to the conversion of European pagans. The Irish missionaries went after leading families, chiefs, kings, who later funded the ongoing cultural and religious activities of the monasteries.

#Hunter pays special attention to the Carolingian Renaissance in learning and arts, an elite movement that trickled down to the masses.
Even the Reformation was due more to elite networking and structural changes (nationalism, emerging mercantile class).

The same can be said for later renewal and reform movements. Edwards, Wesley, Wilberforce, all elites who ran in privileged circles.
Likewise post-Christian movements like the Enlightenment: elites cashing in on changing patterns of patronage (not ch, but state).

Socialism too. Marx, Engels, Lenin, all from upper bourgeois families, very educated, using networks to spawn elite movements.

#Hunter quote: "The irony here of course is that Marxism views history as inevitably unfolding toward socialism but its ushering in was done from the top, by powerful cultural intellectuals whose theory was both highly abstract and difficult to read by any but the most intellectually trained thinkers." (76) Marxism wasn't a popular movement. It was a movement of disaffected intellectuals.

On the bottom of p. 76, he has a bunch of footnotes tying the triumph of Darwin, Nietzsche, modern art, etc. to netwks and patrons.

In sum, "Change in a culture or civ. simply does not occur when there is a change in the beliefs and values in the hearts and minds of ordinary people or in the creation of mere artifacts." What does matter is resourcing and networking among elites.

So #Hunter says, essentially, "Kiss your idealistic dreams of democratic cultural change goodbye. It don't work like that." Sad but true?

Essay 1, Chapter 6: "The Cultural Economy of American Christianity"

Chapter 6: "The Cultural Economy of American Christianity"

The gist of ch. 6 is that while Christians have a presence of sorts in Am. culture, it's not where it matters most.

A look at funds that resource cultural production among Christians is, compared to the secular realm, pretty small potatoes.

Most Christian giving in Am. is individuals, not well-funded endowments.
And more importantly, NO Christian foundations give specifically to develop leaders in fields of cultural production.

Furthermore, in the wake of WWII and the fading of the "WASP hegemony," Chr. cultural production/institutions has likewise waned.
Catholics have fared much better than Evangelicals, launching important writers (O'Connor, Percy) and journals (First Things, etc.).

As well as a number of Catholic intellectuals and acad. institutions who have had the ear of the centers of cultural power.

By contrast, Evangelical intellectuals and institutions are often sidelined in American cultural life bc Ev. intellectuals bc Am. academy doesn't like Chr. distinctives, AND because Evangelicals tend towards anti-intellectualism. They don't support their intellectuals well. Where Evangelicals do succeed is in popular cultural production: movies, mags, music, and more recently, film.

But these works are mostly insular, for other Evangelicals, and alien to those outside the Ev. subculture.

#Hunter: "This insularity is quite striking. The Ev. world is not only difficult for outsiders to

understand (consider the caricatures that abound) but also nearly impossible for them to penetrate. Evangelicals, in other words, offer little by way of a common vocabulary shared life informed by faith but not exclusive to it." (87) This is a key insight and one I cannot stress enough.
In making cultural works, esp. works of the imagination, Christians must strive to construct imaginative worlds that invite in, believer and unbeliever alike.

Back to #Hunter on Ev. cultural marginality: Evangelicals produce tons of books, but how many are reviewed by NYTimes Review of Books?

Further, in the arts and television, Evangelicals located here and there, in the backwaters not in the mainstream (NY, LA).

And there are Christian arts organizations, but mostly you find indv Christians scattered here and there, as if by accident.

#Hunter: "The main reason why Chr. blvrs today...have not had the influence in the culture to which they inspire is not that they don't believe enough, or have the right worldview, but rather *because they have been absent from the arenas in which the greatest influence in the culture is exerted.* The culture-producing institutions of hist. Christianity are largely marginalized in the economy of the culture formation in N. America. Its cultural capital is greatest where leverage in the larger culture is weakest." (89)

One of the things I skipped was #Hunter's awesome chart called "The Cultural Matrix," cultural production organized by Aristotle's categories, "The Good, the True and the Beautiful." Good = knowledge production, True = morality/values, Beautiful = Aesthetics.

#Hunter divides each category up into elite, middle and popular levels of influence. So knowledge prodn is about academic think tanks and research universities at the high end, and mass-market book and magazine publishing at the bottom end.

#Hunter says that Ev. Christians are plentiful at the bottom rungs of cultural influence (non-elite), and largely absent from upper realms.

One place I'd challeng #Hunter's arrangement is in "aesthetics." Elite cultural capital is found in high brow art, while popular culture is largely bereft of cultural influence (acc. to #Hunter's schema). As I've argued in #Popologetics, the high/low culture distinction is problematic at best. But also he fails to grapple with how incredibly pop-culturally saturated our culture is. There is such a thing as popular culture that wields immense influence. I do think that it would be good for Christians to think through what kinds of popular culture is most influential. And here I give a nod to @zugzwanged for his distinction between popularity and influence.

The point is that high culture nowadays has nowhere the cultural impact it once had. Now it has become marginalized. So #Hunter's "Aesthetic" category needs revision in terms of who wields cultural influence. Popular culture changes landscapes. And if you doubt it, think about the gay marriage debate before and after "Brokeback Mountain."

So #Hunter argues that Christianity is a "weak culture." Indv.s of influence are largely disconnected from supporting networks and institutions (like the church), and most of the social and economic capital of Christianity is spent in places of least cultural influence.

#Hunter argues that Christianity is doing much good, but it's overall cultural impact is "negligible." Impact comes when diff. elite networks overlap and come together for a common cause. This isn't happening in Chr. circles. Too much division btw. denominations and groups, and within groups among those who disagree about politics, etc. Evangelical leadership is a collection of personalities without common purpose or vision. Evidence: look how so much Am. Christianity has been co-opted by the mainstream culture, such as consumerism, individualism, managerial and therapeutic models that actually undermine Christian doctrine. Acc. to sociologist #ChristianSmith, most young Christians don't follow historic Christianity, but a "moralistic, therapeutic deism."

#Hunter: Christians haven't been an influence in culture as much as they have been influenced *by* culture.

"One can debate the degree to which fragmentation and acculturation have come to characterize Am. Christianity but even the most optimistic assessment would lead one to conclude that Christianity in Am. is not only marginalized as a culture but is also a very weak culture." (92) So there it is: the bad news. But news that should surprise no one who's thought about Chr. and culture.

#Hunter finishes his first essay, "Christianity and World Changing," with a small chapter of doctrinal reflections called

Essay 1, Chapter 7: "For and Against the Mandate of Creation"

Chapter 7: "For and Against the Mandate of Creation"

What makes this ch. so interesting is that Hunter starts wrestling w/the implications of his own theory.

You'd think that he'd be all for elitism, but he recognizes that Christianity by its very teachings is radically anti-elitist.

"The sign. of ev. person before God irrespective of worldly stature or accomplishment and the care for the least are the ethical hallmarks of Christianity, for they mark every human being and every human life in the most practial ways with God's image and therefore as worthy of respect and love. W/o these, Christianity is a brutalizing ideology. This is why elitism - a disposition and relationality of superiority, condescension, and entitlement by social elites - is so abhorrent for the Christian. Its foundation is exclusion on the implicity (and sometimes the explicit) view that people are *not* equal in love and dignity bef. God. Thus, by its very nature, elitism is exploitative. So far as I can tell, elitism for believers is dispicable and utterly anathema to the gospel they cherish." (94) Sorry for the long quote, but it needed to be said: Hunter's not a cheerleader for elitism.

On the other hand, elitism often leads to "an oppressive egalitarianism that will suffer no distinctions btw higher and lower," better and worse," and leads to a "tyranny of the majority" and a commitment to cultural mediocrity rather than excellence. (94)

So #Hunter sees tension btw Am Christianity's "populism" and "what we know about the most historically significant dynamics of wld-changing."

The central question is, then, how can we have an elite-type influence and resist the elitism that comes with it? Or in his words.. "Is it possible to pursue excellence and, under God's sovereignty, be in a position of influence and privilege and *not*be ensnared by the trappings of elitism?" (94) Another thorny problem is that of power. Our creational call leads us to engage culture, but

"Whether we like it or not, merely engaging the culture implies the issue and exercise of power. The matter of power is unavoidable." (94)

This might lead us to think that we must try to gain power through politics. Not so, says Hunter. "Speaking as a Christian myself, contemporary christian understandings of power and politics are a very large part of what has made contemporary Christianity in Am. appalling, irrelevant, and ineffective - part and parcel of the worst elements of our late-modern culture today, rather than a healthy alternative to it." (94-95)

So Christians shouldn't be oriented toward winning the "culture war" (much to the relief of @chrisoldfield, I'd imagine).

Why not? "The reason is that so much of the discussion surrounding this kind of world-changing is oriented toward the idea of controlling history." (95). And that is an idol, a usurping of God's role, presumption.

And such presumption can have unforeseen and tragic consequences. Rather, he advocates a theology of "faithful presence." That means the Church should call its people into every sphere of society, even if we don't see immediate influence.

One interesting insight he gives is that "theology moves in the opposite direction of social theory." (95) That is to say, soc. theory would lead naturally to elitism, but theology can't. But neither can theology ignore soc. theory.

So what he proposes is, in line w/the "new creation," is "an alternative culture that is, nevertheless, integrated w/in the present the present culture. Whatever its larger influence in the world may be, a culture that is genuinely alternative cannot emerge w/o faithful presence in all areas of life." (96) So we need to build networks and institutions to support "counter-leaders operating within the upper echelons of cultural production and social life generally." (96) Elite, but still important for the "renewal of the church and its engagement in culture."(96)One wonders whether Hunter might be writing himself into the script here.

But I think the point is still valid. That's the end of essay one. Essay two is "Rethinking Power," and it will have to wait.

Essay 2, Chapter 1: "The Problem of Power"

ESSAY 2: RETHINKING POWER

Chapter 1: "The Problem of Power"

Ch. 1 of Essay 2, "The Problem of Power," is really short, but frames the issue: Given the Christians want to engage culture, and given that sometimes Christianity has been a good influence, and sometimes a horrific one, what's the difference? Answer: power.

#Hunter: "When faith and its cultures flourish, they do so, in part, bc it operates with an implicit view of power in its proper place. When faith and its cultures deteriorate, they do so, in part, bc it operates with a view of power that is corrupt. The end can only be corrupting." (99) So if we're going to engage culture rightly, we've got to do so with a right undstg of power.

Essay 2, Chapter 2: "Power and Politics in American Culture"

Chapter 2: "Power and Politics in American Culture"

Classical sociology believed that trad. societies held together because of common beliefs, while modern societies held together because of socio-economic interdependence. But more recent findings show that modern societies also need common beliefs and myths.

But what happens when the consensus disintegrates? When beliefs and myths are no longer common? What holds societies together then? In a phrase, political coercion. The state is looked to as an arbiter to enforce a particular party's vision of that society.

In other words, in societies that lack consensus, everything becomes political. This is proven "by the fact that the amount of law that exists in any society is always inversely related to the coherence and stability of its common culture: law increases as cultural consensus decreases." (102) It's not that many lawyers are bad for society, but a sign of its decay.

This means that everything in society is defined and legitimated vis-a-vis the state and the rights it grants to opposing groups. Even the market is regulated by the states. Everything filters thru the state, and that changes the public imagination.

#Hunter: "The language of politics (and political economy) comes to frame progressively more of our understanding of our common life, our public purposes, and ourselves individually and collectively." (103)

As cultural consensus thins, groups (left and right) turn to politics to enforce their vision of society. But because politicization per se gives so little content to that process, competing ideologies arise to try to give that content.

From another perspective, this means that the view of liberal democracy which claims neutrality for the state is wrong. #Hunter: "This is wrong mainly bc it is impossible. Law infers a moral judgment; policy implies a worldview. Indeed, in a society divided and often enough polarized on basic question, and where persuasion is ineffective at generating agreements, the state -- perhaps unwillingly so -- becomes a patron to ideology. Each and every faction in society seeks the patronage of state power as a means of imposing its particular understanding of the good on the whole of society." (103-104) I love how he writes.

So now more and more is being decided by ideologically-driven special interest groups try to influence the state. There are examples aplenty. Sexuality and family, education, science and technology, all have become battlegrounds for ideology. The same is true with the arts, and the media. Not just that Fox is conservative and CNN is liberal, but "Unless the topic is a human interest story buried at the end of the newscast or in the back pages of the newspaper or news magazine, news reporting on almost any issue is framed in terms of who is winning and who is losing the contest for political advantage." (104)

I would add (as he does not) that politicization often shape the narratives of popular culture as well.

In the past, political change happened through palace/elite revolutions. Now everyone is called to become "involved" in politics.

We label people we disagree with (feminist, liberal, fundamentalist) to discredit them. And other categories (sex, race, class, sexual orientation, "categories that are not in themselves political, become suffused with political meaning." (105)

Next to occupation, political affiliation contributes the most to a person's perceived identity, of one's worth even. At the extreme, "...partisan commitment becomes a measure of their moral significance; of whether a person is judged good or bad." (105) Incipt identity politics.

With the politicization of public life, everything comes to be seen in light of how it advances or undermines my group's influence.

There is no acceptable space for organizations or movements that are completely independent of the political realm. And in return, politics bears the burden of impossibly high expectations (cf. "Yes We Can"/Obama as Messiah circa 2008).

#Hunter: "We look to politics as the leading way to address our common problems and implicitly hope that politics will actually solve those problems." (106)

And such politicization leads to a Nietzschean struggle of ideologies for state control. "When one boils it all down, politicization means that the final arbiter within most of social life is the coercive

power of the state. When politicization is oriented toward the interests of the group w/o an appeal to the common weal, when its means of mobilizing the uncommitted is thru fear, and when the pursuit of agendas depends more on the vilification of opponents than on the affirmation of higher ideals, power is stripped to its most elemental forms." (106) Democracy then becomes a veneer over the will to power - democratic means to dominate and rule the other.

#Hunter says that postmodernists conclude too quickly that this is all politics is anyway. They paint "power" with too broad a brush, and ignore the "layers of meaning that human beings impute to their own lives." (107) (Bonus points for a great use of "impute"). But given the blindness of postmodern theorists, the fact is, with the loss of common culture, politics be gettin' ugly Nietzschean.

Which brings us to Nietzsche's idea of resentiment: "a combination of anger, envy, hate, rage, and revenge as the motive of political action." (107) Fun! Resentiment is grounded in a "narrative of injury, or at least, of perceived injury." That is, each group tries to fashion a history of being unjustly treated to gain leverage in the current political debates.

That injustice becomes central to a person's identity. Cultivating a fear of future injury becomes a way of generating solidarity. The injuries might be exaggerated (or not), but they serve to vilify one's ideological opponent, to justify revenge.

#Hunter: "Ressentiment, then, is expressed as a discourse of negation; the condemnation and denigration of enemies in the effort to subjugate and dominate those who are culpable." (108) These facts (politicization, ressentiment) have come to shape what Hunter calls "political culture." Especially in post-Depression era New Deal America (and beyond).

#Hunter: "It is my contention that Nietzsche was mostly right; that while the will to power has always been present, American democracy increasingly operates w/in a political culture - that is, a framework of meaning - that sanctions a will to domination. This, in turn, is fueled by a political psychology of fear, anger, negation, and revenge over perceived wrongs." (108-109). Rings true during a campaign year, doesn't it?

So the next question, then, is: How do Christians relate to this political culture? That's going to be the next few chapters.

Essay 2, Chapter 3: "The Christian Right"

Chapter 3: The Christian Right

#Hunter: "Christians who are politically conservative want what all people want: namely, to have the world in which they live reflect their own likeness." (111)

That is, the Christian right wants American to reflect their highest ideals, esp. concerning sexual and family relationships. And it is a response to the intellectual and cultural challenges to the faith and the moral authority of the Christian church.

There was a time when the Chr. church held a central moral authority in America and Europe. It does not anymore. That decline of authority allows the Chr. right to position themselves as victims in the cultural war.

Just to be clear, for Hunter, Chr. Right = Evangelicals, Fundamentalists, conservative Catholics and Charismatics. His def. is wide.

Central to the Chr. Right's understanding of power is its constitutive "myth" centered on the right ordering of society. Some see America's past as essentially Christians. Others see the past as a time when Christians had more input in publ. discourse.

This construction of the past provides a "deed of trust" and a "sense of ownership," i.e. "America belongs to the people of faith." (114) That is to say, the principles of God's righteousness provided America with the principles of "ordered freedom." (114) Liberty, order, hard work that leads to prosperity, all provide the moral and spiritual foundations for America's greatness.
But for the Chr. Right, that heritage is being threatened by secularization and hostility towards religion. The radical elements of society threaten to destroy America's soul. (That sounds extreme, but it reflects their rhetoric). Such radicalism can be found in the press, Hollywood, political action groups, education, but esp. in the courts.

This reading of history enables the Chr. Right to place themselves (and all good Americans) as victims of radicalism. The literature of the Chr. Right is full of stories of Christians persecuted in schools and universities, or by pol. action groups. The relentless nature of these perceived attacks (by lib. media, politics, educators, etc.) is used to mobilize Christians. Some Chr. Right leaders go so far as to declare that they are in Civil War. In that context, Christians are called to infl. culture.

The Chr. Right calls Christians to engage in 2 ways - prayer and political action (voting, giving to political groups, etc.). Presidential politics is seen as esp. important so that conservative judges can be appointed throughout the land (esp. Supreme Ct.).

That is to say, cultural influence is seen almost wholly in terms of political engagement. And it means support for Republicans. This is tricky, bc many of these groups dep. on *not* being political to maintain their non-profit status. It's a fine line. But it's obvious that they are not politically neutral. They seek influence for and in the Republican Party.

#Hunter remarks "The hope Christian conservatives place in politics is quite astonishing." (126) For the Chr. Right, politics is the chief means by which America can be "healed" and returned to its proper course.

They want to restore Am. to her Chr. roots, when Am. was truly great. That is, there is a "mythic connection between the Chr. faith and America" which motivates the Chr. Right. And it is interest of this agenda of restoring Am. that the Chr. Right has forged a strong alliance with a particular political party.

The Chr. Right peaked in 2004, and is now on the wane as many younger Evangelicals supported Obama in 2008. But they are far from dead, though its M.O. is changing. It is focused more on a "cultural engagement" wider than simply politics. Enter Christian worldview education, designed to combat the pernicious influence of "secular postmodernism."

At this point, #Hunter starts hitting a little close to home, since I'm a big advocate of both worldview and cultural engagement. But with this difference - the Chr. Right seeks a new Christendom, a culturally dominant position through their engagement. I prefer the language of witness and service. We, as Christians, are here to be a witness to the truth. We engage culture to provide oases in a spiritually dry, truth-starved land. *That's* what the Church should be about. Just to make it clear - I love the people of the Chr. Right as brothers and sisters in the Lord, but I don't consider myself one. I'm conservative on some things, not-so-conservative on others. For more on that, check out a recent blog post: [1]

Anyway, back to #Hunter: While the Chr. Right's intentions are good-hearted (to restore America), this cultural engagement strategy is almost identical to the political agenda in its language: "take back the culture," + a whole host of martial vocab. "Drive out," "eradicate the Other," "attack," enemy," etc. It's the same language and discourse of cultural domination. That is to say, though the tactics change, the motivating myth and outlook of victimization has not. They are the same.

Essay 2, Chapter 4: "The Christian Left"

Chapter 4: The Christian Left

We're still thinking through how American Christians understand power and cultural change. Coming up: ch. 4 - "The Christian Left." Because yesterday, I outlined #Hunter picking on the Christian Right. Now it's the left's turn (and then neo-Anabaptists).

Political progressives, like pol. conservatives, work out of a matrix of myth. In the left's case, it's the French Revolution's "Liberty, Equality, Fraternity," though lefties nowadays have less to say about "fraternity/community" (save socialism). Secular progressives define liberty in terms of rights, personal autonomy vis-a-vis sexual identity, relationships, entertainment. Rel. progressives tend to emphasize community more, esp. solidarity w/ the oppressed. Liberty means liberation from poverty, etc. As well as solidarity across social divides (ethnic, gender, sexual orientation, class).

Chr. progressives point to the biblical tradition in both OT and NT concerning the wealthy's abuse of the poor. Lots of refs on 133. Of course, the Chr. Left doesn't just look back to prophetic trad., but also forward to the eschaton they're working towards. #Hunter doesn't explicitly say, but he implies that the Chr. Left has a post-mil orientation: We will bring in the Kingdom of God... #Hunter calls this (selective) reading of history "myth," and it is used in a similar way to the Chr. Right's mythic stance. For Chr. Left, history's high points: Soc. Gosp. movement, women's suffrage, desegregation and Civil Rights movement, etc.

The Chr. Left peaked in the mid 20th c., along w/mainstream Prot. denominations. They were closely identified w/ leftist politics. Outside the U.S., Chr. Left's made itself felt in liberation theologies in the 3d world, esp. in Latin America. Such theologies share affinities w/the feminist and black theologies. Institutionally, since 1960s, it's been mainly Catholic. He's still talking about liberation theology, not the Chr. Left as a whole. Since the 1980s, it's been in decline because of conservative Catholic leadership who took a hard line against it. Not dead, but weaker for sure. In the U.S., Protestant progressive social activism declined w/the decline of mainline Protestantism. But their decline is also due to the fact that they achieved so many of their goals (civil rights, women's rights, anti-Vietnam). Since the 1980s, these leftist Chr. groups have been more and more irrelevant...until recently.

In the early years of 21st c., there's been a resurgence of the "spiritual left" (New Age, Buddhist, Unitarian, liberal Jews, etc.). But the Chr. Left keeps its spiritual distinctiveness. Among participants: Jim Wallis, Ron Sider, John Perkins, Brian McLaren, etc. As you can see, #Hunter defines the Chr. Left quite as broadly as he did the Chr. Right. It's also interesting to see McLaren in the lineup. H claims he's "post-lib/conservative." But fact is, he's thoroughly liberal.
It's also interesting to see McLaren in the lineup. H claims he's "post-lib/conservative." But fact is, he's thoroughly liberal. It's a pretty amazing interview. [1] ... After hearing Jim Wallis' position, Stewart quips: "Faith w/o works is dead, but works w/o faith is...still pretty good!" Zing!

OK, back to #Hunter: the key to the resurgence of the Chr. Left is evangelical progressives who played a big role in the last campaign. Thanks to them, the Democratic party has found religion and is speaking the language of faith.

Like the Chr. Right, the Chr. Left believes that harm is being done to Am. The diff. is what harm they focus on: the disadvantaged. "There is, in this renewal [of Chr. progressivism], no departure from the liberal and old-fashioned socialist tradition." (138) That's what you'd expect bc of their concern for equality (for women, gays, minorities, immigrants, and esp. the poor).
Acc. to leaders of the Chr. Left (Wallis, Campolo), God is angry w/America bc of its treatment of the poor. Acc. to Chr. Left, Am. cannot be great until there is social justice for all.

Though the Chr. Left is diverse, they find common ground in their hostility to the Chr. Right. The stronger the Chr. Right became, the more hate for them came from the Chr. Left. For them, Chr. Right has harmed the faith. They have "hijacked" the faith and promulgated a "false gospel" of neoconservative ideology. It's not just hurt the faith, but Am. Acc. to the Chr. Left, the language of the Chr. Right has polarized the nation and undermined democracy.

In this way, the Chr. Left also shares its litany of wounds suffered at the hands of the "enemy" (the Chr. Right). The sense of wounding in the Chr. Left in seeing the Chr. Right's "dangerous liaison of religion and political power" has a subtext. That subtext is: the waning of the Chr. Left's power w/the ascendancy of the Chr. Right. The Chr. Left believes it is better and smarter than the Chr. Right, yet lags in influence. What gives? The Chr. Left feels it must "take back the country" from the Chr. Right, and reclaim the lang. of Christianity from them.

Sound familiar? (If you were reading this feed yesterday, it should). This call to war is used to mobilize their membership to political action (again, faith placed in politics). "No one doubts the sincerity of their motives or the high-mindedness of the cause. There is also no doubt that the underlying call to 'take back' the faith and the nation is a basic will to power that is not unlike what one finds within the Christian Right." (144) You become like what you make your enemy. #Hunter quotes journalist Katha Pollitt: "In this sense, Wallis' evangelicalism is as much a power play as Pat Robertson's... By a remarkable act of providence, God's politics turn out to be curiously tailored to the current crisis of the Democratic Party." That quote is found on 144 of Hunter.

Though Wallis claims to be non-partisan, he is as much pro- Dem as Jim Dobson is pro-Rep. Same w/McLaren (as I mentioned). "With the possible exception of abortion, there is little in the actions and writings of the larger Chr. Left that would be objectionable to the progressive wing of the Democratic Party." (144).

Though they do rebuke the secular left for not taking religion (read: the Chr. Left) seriously. "Yet, in substance, the perspective they offer is not an alternative to the ideology of the secular left, but a faith-based extension of its discourse; the soc. movement they want to lead, its popular base." (145) Wallis is upfront about trying to gather momentum from a popular movement. He wants to create a new spec. interest group 4 the poor.

The Chr. Left accuses (rightly) the Chr. Right of promulgating a civil religion instead of biblical Christianity. Civ. rel.=a mixture btw religion and nation wherein the mission of the church and mission of the nation are conflated. So the Chr. Left berates the Chr. Right for using civil religion, conflating national and religious agendas. E.g. the Chr. Right's use of biblical texts to further their political ends, like defining marriage as heterosexual union. But #Hunter says the Chr. Left does the *exact* same thing in the use of the Bible to promote social justice issues. Wallis even at one point called a Bush administration federal budget that was being passed "unbiblical."

The problem w/citing the prophets re: soc. justice is that the biblical prophets were living in a theocracy, not a modn democracy. The Chr. Left does exactly the same thing as the Chr. Right, but can't see it. "Both Right and Left, then, aspire to a righteous empire. Thus, when [Wallis] accuses Falwell and Robertson of being 'theocrats who desire their religious agenda to be enforced through the power of the state,' he has established the critiera by which he and other politically progressive Christians are judged the same." (147)

Fact is, both are selective in their use of Scripture. And both are similar in their "framework, method, and style of engagement." And like the Chr. Right have become Republican tools, the Chr. left has become a tool of the Democrats (he uses "instrumentalized"). The Dems in the last election "got religion," but not as a foundation for a new political vision, but only as marketing rhetoric. "The political goals are different but the *realpolitik* is, in essence, identical to the long-standing instrumentalization of the Christian conservative constituency by the Republican Party--control over the power of the State." (149)

Essay 2, Chapter 5: "The Neo-Anabaptists"

Chapter 5: "The Neo-Anabaptists"

Essay 2, chapter 5: "The Neo-Anabaptists." Interesting ch. about a Chr. group that positions itself as an alternative to left/right. Though there are imp. similarities btw Neo-Anabaptists and Chr. Left: hostility twd the damage wrought by capitalism, they're better educated and ironic than Chr. Right, and they share the Left's contempt for Chr. Right.

But there are important diff. btw Neo-Anabapts and Chr. Left, tho it shows up more in theology than in institutional structures. Neo-Anabapts are the smallest of the Chr. groups Hunter looks at (Ekklesia Project and Potter St. Community in Philly are two e.g.). But it's popular with young, middle and upper class intellectuals who don't like Chr. Right and find Chr. Left unconvincing.

Major diff w/Left: Left blvs in a strong state, while Neo-Anabaptists keep their distance from state power. They do so out of principle, trying to copy the true NT and early Christian churches. Anabaptists want auth. Christian life. That means a commitment to simplicity, sharing goods, caring for the poor, and peace-making.

Neo-anabaptists aren't necc. from Anabaptist denominations, but they do draw inspiration from them. On p. 152, he lists some representatives. In particular, Yoder and Hauerwas are central.

The founding myth of Neo-Anabapts is the announcement of Jesus that he came to overturn the worldly powers. Ana-bapts engage the world in a way that they feel is radical, in line w/Jesus' proclamation.

The actual history of the Ch, however, is not radical, but a posture of embracing power and coercion ("Constantinianism"). The Ch. becomes the "divine legitimation" for the state. Early, ch. power used to persecute Donatists, and again in Reformation. Not Donatists that time, but Ana-baptists and 30 Years War.

For Anabapts, any time Christians seek to merge Ch. witness w/state power, the recapitulate that old error. Radical Orthodox theologians extend Constantianism to how Ch. forms alliances w/other institutions (global capitalism). Capitalism oppresses the poor and corrupts human desires, even when it is working well. We desire consumption more than God. Capitalism is coercive bc it has no common goal, just a "coincidence of indv. ends." (155). Manipulative power in pursuit of profit. For neo-Anabapts, prob. w/Am. church today is its dual loyalties to Christ and "political economy" (democracy and capitalism). For both Protestants and Catholics, it means a fatally compromised witness. God is judging the Am. Church now, they say.

There must be a complete divorce btw Church and the imperial status quo. The way back is to recognize Christ's Lordship as the very structuring principle of the cosmos, and to follow in his steps. That is - suffer as the innocent one (suffering servant, cross as mode of existence). That means rejecting all coercion and violence (pacifism), as Jesus did. He rejected Satan's offer of political power (kingdoms).

#Hunter talks a bit about the neo-Anabapt's concept of "principalities and powers," i.e. systemic patterns of "thought, behavior, and relationship that govern our lives and the spiritual realm that animates them." (157) Created good, they are now fallen. Meant for human flourishing, they now enslave us. In directing us, they lead away from God. Cf. 1 Cor. 2:6 "the rulers of this age." E.g. government. It is corrupted and corrupting, promulgating a false theology of redemption. But it also restrains human evil.

The principalities and powers cannot just be destroyed. Their sovereignty must be broken through the cross. That's what Christ did. The task of the Church is to proclaim this and live it out through an alternative community of self-sacrificial servants.

But for Jesus, the cross was a political punishment. The powers that be will see a nonconforming group as a political threat. Therefore, the community is called to suffer as Christ suffered, not by striking back. Non-violence is the prime mark of a disciple. And non-violence not just in war-time, but all the time. The problem is the self-legitimating violence of the state coercing people.

The true Church stands apart from that. For some neo-Anabapts, this means avoiding certain jobs

that entangle one w/the state. Or, for that matter, jobs that would entangle one w/capitalism (a for-profit company). Or any job that would wield authority over others. Christians must serve and suffer, but never rule. That is to say, for neo-Anabapts, there is no godly use of authority or power. Period. Because all such power entails coercion. I'm pretty sure teaching for a state school would be a no-no as well. Oh well...

(My opinion now)...The question is: Is there such a thing as divinely legitimated rule (as Ro. 14 implies)? Neo-Anabaptists would strongly deny that there is. All such orders are worldly powers, and have nothing to do with Christ.

All this is to say that there is a strong dualism between the Church and the world. Recent theological efforts have included a critique of secular cultural forms w/an aim at a post-secular self-understanding. This sharp dualism is understood eschatologically, i.e. btw this age (man-cntrd, sinful) vs age to come (ctrd on Christ's redmptn). The church is to be of the latter. Incidentally, this means a total rejection of common grace. There is nothing truly good in world.

In this sense, Christians are called to be an alt. community, obeying Christ's command to pick up our cross and follow. Further, it means that the Ch. is a competing polis, and our true loyalties lie there, not w/any earthly political organization. "[The church] creates an alternative space in the world and an alternative set of practices against which the world is judged and beckoned." (161). The church reveals an other citizenship, an other ethic, an other fundamental loyalty.

Along w/ this sharp dualism comes the fear of contamination by the world (worldliness). Neo-Anabapts are clearly separatist. There is a debate w/in neo-Anab circles about *how* separatists they should be, how sectarian.

Regardless, sectarianism doesn't mean isolationism. The ch. is to be an instrument of positive social change. But that effectiveness in society is a side-effect of the church being the church, being servants and carrying their crosses. That is to say, change in culture happens through the constitutive action and identity of this alternative community.

#Hunter offers a bit of critique at this point: the frame of reference for neo-Anabapts is the same as Chr. Right and Left: politics. The true perspective on Christ is as a politically subversive figure. True Christianity is a "politics of the cross," etc. Yoder goes so far as to say only suffering bc of political nonconformism really counts as Christian suffering, versus, say, raising a child w/disabilities, struggling through a hard marriage, etc. These somehow don't count. #Hunter quotes Yoder on p. 163 about this, if you want to look it up. This is a politicization that outstrips even the Christian Right and Left!

It is true that the neo-Anabapts redefine political in a wider sense (the very existence of nonconforming communities is political). Nevertheless, their language is not innocent.They use the lang of politics to frame the basic meaning of the witness of the church. That kind of talk is going to trail linguistic baggage that you cannot just wish away.

Further, politics sets the agenda for how the church is to witness. Trying to change structures of violence or coercion (pol. structures) still frames witness in terms of the politics of this world.

In fact, they ramp up the rhetoric in eschatological terms, literally demonizing the powers of State and market. Political struggle is a cosmic struggle w/demonic powers. In a yin-yang sort of way, they dep. on pol. powers for their identity. "Their identity *depends* on the State and other powers being corrupt and the more unambiguously corrupt they are, the clearer the identity and mission of the church. It is, as my colleague Charles Mathewes has put it, a passive-aggressive ecclesiology." (164) Zing!

That is why the neo-Anabapts are so "relentlessly negative" in their critiques. Here, he picks up on the "no common grace" thing. "...there is little good in the world that deserves praise and no beauty that generates wonder and appreciation." (164) In the theol. abstract, they say they admire creation, but in the details, only a few admirable Christian reformers (MLK, Mother Theresa, Oscar Romera, etc.) are worthy of praise.

There are two problems here, in my opinion: a deficient theology of creation, and sectarian hubris that is deaf to other Christians. E.g. Hauerwas chastises every Chr's theology that is less politically radical than his as "pale theism," "irrelevant," etc. Most Christians, it turns out, aren't as radical as they are. So they just aren't Christian enough. They don't measure up.

That is to say, their separatism entails a "discourse of negation" that ends up strengthening the politics of negation. #Hunter sees in neo-Anabaptist discourse a blend of Anabaptist and late modern themes. "the particular ways that neo-Anabaptists use the language of politics, their ideological affinities w/certain secular movements of late modernity, and their relentless hostility to all that is not God and his ideal church, distinguish neo-Anabaptism as something new; a political theology that reinforces rather than contradicts the discourse of negation so ubiquitous in our late modern political culture." (166)

As a personal note (tweet to Chris Oldfield), though I agree w/Hunter's criticism's of neo-Anabaptism, I'm no fan of Constantinianism either. There must be a diff way. Actually, that's why I'm interested in popular culture. How can Christians provide oases of spiritual refreshment and challenge prevailing spiritual currents without the threat of political coercion? Cultural witness must be involved.

Essay 2, Chapter 6: "Illusion, Irony, and Tragedy"

Chapter 6: "Illusion, Irony, and Tragedy"

So, #Hunter has just summarized the cultural engagement approaches of the Chr. Right, Chr. Left and the neo-Anabaptists. Essay 2, Chapter 6, "Illusion, Irony and Tragedy," begins #Hunter's critique of these three movements and their understanding of power.

First, the problems and injuries that these movements perceive are real. Secularism is alive and well in powerful institutions. And such attitudes do corrode traditional belief systems. BUT the Chr. Right has held disproportionate pol. power, and its concerns are narrow and don't represent all Christians. Their concerns have "eclipsed" the concerns of the Chr. Left. So the Chr. Left is right to be alarmed at the assimilation of Am. Christians to a consumerist culture. And the neo-Anabapts are right to be concerned about the Constantinian alliance btw Christians and the secular state and economy.

So all 3 have a point, and all 3 politicize their concerns. That's the leading strategy for engaging culture. Politics is the "social imaginary" (Chas. Taylor's concept) the frames the narrative of these 3 Christian groups. "Most people think that what matters is ideological direction of one's politics. Are you conservative? Are you liberal? These differences occupy most of our attention and argument. What is never challenged is the proclivity to think of the Christian faith and its engagement with the culture around it in political terms." (168) So for #Hunter, one of the main problems is this power and unquestioned "conflation of the public with the political."

The 2d problem grows from the 1st - all 3 Chr. movements' discourse is marked by ressentiment (narratives of injury, and a "discourse of negation" concerning opponents). By "negation" he means "nothing good comes from them - they are simply evil." This ressentiment marks all 3 as essentially Nietzschean - they are all 3 seeking domination in their own way (even neo-Anabapts).

Even though all 3 spend most time and energy in thgs *other* than politics, the belief is that the public ID of church=its politics. Chr. public affairs associations, political media coverage, voter drives, etc. have all risen in the past decades.

Why is this politicization a problem for Christian cultural engagement? Why is this politicization a problem for Christian cultural engagement? (I ought to say that here he's mainly critiquing the Chr. Right and Left, not the neo-Anabaptists).

Democracy has to do with the elected officials within the state, but the state is huge, man! Big ol' intractable bureaucracy. Decisions are not made in the state democratically, but by relatively autonomous bureaucratic specialists. You need such specialists even to get elected in a democracy! You need undemocratic elements to succeed in a democracy. This means that voters aren't in charge. The state kinda does what it wants, what it thinks is most efficient. "...political participation--both for politicians and citizens--is less about the expression of the sovereignty over the state than it is a surrender of their will to various political experts and technicians and the rules they have established." (170) So democracy =/= popular sovereignty. Rather, "democracy is led by the bureaucratic necessities of the state arguably more than it leads and directs the state." (170-71). I.e. voting in the right people accomplishes less than you think.

The 2d implication of the diff. btw. democracy and state is that politics is very limited. Good politics can change things (anti-discrimination legislation, for instance). But bad politics can truly mess things up. But for the most part, the state is a mass of compromises and and accommodation. "What the state cannot do is provide fully satisfying solutions to the problem of values in our society." (171) You cannot legislate against vulgarity, or for family values, etc. When the state does get involved, unintended consequences galore. That is to say, we expect too much of the state. It can't fix the stuff we want fixed. Laws "do reflect values. But laws cannot generate values, or instill values, or settle the conflict over values.

The belief that the state could help us care more for the poor and the elderly, slow the disintegration of traditional values, generate respect among different groups, or create civic pride, is mostly illusory." (171) (My opinion now) - It suggests that at the root of both Chr. Right and Left lies political idolatry. (Still my opinion). We Christians need to become more disillusioned with politics (true for Americans in general).

We cannot get values via politics, because it's just about power. For politics to be meaningful (about more than power)... it needs to depend upon something besides politics - an independent moral sphere (cue Glenn Tinder's "Can We Be Good w/o God"). Not that #Hunter mentioned him, but he should have. But politicization tends to politicize values, thus eroding it as an autonomous sphere supposed to *inform* politics. Sort of like a snake eating its own tale - it can't end well. That is to say, values become reduced to political slogans. (Justice, decency, fairness. liberty, morality, etc.).

"The irony, of course, is that no group in Am. society has done more to politicize values over the last half century, and therefore undermine their renewal, than Christians--both on the Right (since the 1980s) and on the Left (1960s and 1970s)." (172) The deeper irony--the Chr. faith, which could be a source of values independent of politics, has been reduced to a pol. ideology.
In fact, #Hunter sees in the Chr. uncritical embrace of politics an evasion. It's easier to vote in a guy who'll do what you want... than to actually do it yourself. It's easier to vote in your agenda than to be faithful to do the things WE are called to do. In other words, for Christians, politics is like having a butler. It's indulgent and just too convenient.

The tragedy of politicization is that it marks a decisive accommodation (syncretism?) to the spirit of the age. Politics as the dominant witness of the ch. to the world embraces "key characteristics of contemporary political culture, a culture that privileges injury and grievance, valorizes speech-acts of negation, and legitimates the will to power." (173)
And by choosing that sort of discourse, the Chr. Right has chosen a weak ID, bc it is established negatively and thru exclusion. That is, by "accentuating the boundaries between insiders and outsiders and the wrongs done by those outsiders." (173)

The Chr. Right didn't create this type of discourse, but they have been corrupted by it. They depend upon the culture war for their identity, and soon enough, they become as ugly as the monster they fight.

#Hunter quotes David Brooks about how, on both left and right, extreme partisans "tell themselves that their enemies are so vicious they have to be vicious too. They rationalize their behavior by insisting that circumstances have forced them to shelve their integrity for the good of the country...Hyper-partisans may have started with subtle beliefs, but their beliefs led them to partisanship and their partisanship led to malice and malice made them extremist, and pretty soon

they were no longer the same people." (Hunter quoting Brooks, p. 174). In other words, the worst corruption in Chr. Right activism isn't sexually falling for your secretary. It's politics as usual.

Further, the discourse of negation drowns out any "robust and constructive affirmations" that a vibrant culture depends upon. Vibrant Chr. culture needs leisure, phil. reflection, artistic creativity, scientific contributions, etc. But they all get eclipsed. Because they are not as well-funded nor as strident as the political discourse. Even worse, within the political discourse, these positive contributions aren't even mentioned. (Doesn't look good on newsletters).

"What this means is that rather than being defined by its cultural achievements, its intellectual and artistic vitality, its service to the needs of others, Christianity is defined to the outside world by its rhetoric of resentment and the ambitions of a will in opposition to others." Ouch.

And, he says, that goes for the Chr. Right, Left, and neo-Anabaptists. The neo-Anabapt. mvt is as negative as the others. Of the neo-Anabaptists he says, "*In effect,* theirs is a world-hating theology. It is not impossible but it is rare, all the same, to find among any of its most prominent theologians or its popularizers, any affirmation of good in the social world and any acknowledgment of beauty in creation or truth shared in common with those outside of the church." (174)

So Am. Christians of all stripes are into the negation game, left, right, and neo-Anabaptist. Granted that the Bible has a stream of prophetic denunciation w/in it. But is that what the Kingdom of God should be known by? The kind of political witness Am. Christians have indulged in betrays their highest calling. Indeed, it makes it difficult to even recognize others outside their own group as human beings.

Essay 2, Chapter 7: "Rethinking Power: Theological Reflections"

Chapter 7: "Rethinking Power: Theological Reflections"

#Hunter: Essay 2, chapter 7, "Rethinking Power: Theological Reflections" continues his critique of Am. Christian's understanding of power.

#Hunter starts by considering political myths, beliefs that energize political action. They can be constructive, or dangerously destructive. As myths, they are safe from refutation. But they are "combustible," that is, they can inflame passions that lead bad places. For the religious, pol. myths often invoke other-worldly justifications for this-worldly action.

We have an even more problematic situation when the social situation contains have *competing* myths. Each of the 3 pctvs we've been considering (Chr. Right, Left and neo-Anabaptists) can produce theol. justifications for their myths.

Which makes it imperative to question how much weight we put on politics and political myths. #Hunter says such emphasizing politics "gives expression to the nihilism of the dominant culture," i.e. they are Nietzschean grabs for power. So we need to stop and reflect on them.
#Hunter's first point is the disconnect between our undstg of God's power (transcendent, pure) and human power (brutal, pragmatic). And yet in history as Gd's people engage culture, "power is always an important subtext -- ever present, always essential." (177) How we engage is shaped by how we relate to power. Power is just a part of the equation.

Drawing from philosophical anthropology, he asserts that power comes from our indeterminate relationship w/the natural world. We have freedom from instinctual patterns other animals don't. That gives us leeway in negotiating the threats and poss. of nature.

And that goes not just for nature, but for our relationships with each other. We are inherently interdependent. But those relationships of interdependent are inherently "asymmetrical." Some will

always have more power to act than others.

Power saturates our social being. His definition of power: "Power, in short, is inherently relational, interactive, dynamically shared, and contentious, and it plays out at every level of society -- not just among individuals but among social groups, institutions, and local and national communities." (178)

Social power at its most effective is not overt and abusive. Power works best when it defines common sense reality, unnoticed by us. This is what political scientists call "soft power," power deployed symbolically and culturally. In this way, it guides human action and values.

But even here, it is asymmetrical; some have more of this kind of power. #Hunter terms this asymmetricality of power "symbolic violence" because it is a subtle form of coercion. It undermines resistance to power.

#Hunter terms this asymmetricality of power "symbolic violence" because it is a subtle form of coercion. It undermines resistance to power. It is not all there is to human life, but it's always there, in our myths, stories and assumptions that legitimate its use.

3 observations flow from this understanding of power:

1. Power tends to become an end in itself. Having power brings material advantages. Charitable organizations try to keep power, even when it hurts those it seeks to serve!

2. Because power is relational, it is always met by resistance. The power to defy or subvert power is inherent in the relationship.

3. Power, hard to reverse, always invokes the law of unintended consequences. It never acts quite the way we thought. E.g. technology, which gives mastery over nature/time/communication, etc. Every one of them develops by its own logic. The very things we thought would free us become our masters (cue Mickey Mouse as "Sorcerer's Apprentice).

#Hunter opened this chapter w/some reflection on "homo potens," man the maker/user of power. Such reflection is the necessary context for changing our thinking about how we use/abuse power. E.g. the 3 traits of power he mentioned earlier (its "inherent relationality, inherent asymmetry, + unintended consequences) highlight the problems with neo-Anabaptist's pacifism as eschewing power (and so relinquishing coercion).

But #Hunter points out the naivete of that stance. "Only by narrowing an understanding of power to political or economic power can one imagine giving up power and becoming 'powerless.'" (181) That is, no one gives up power w/o artificially narrowing the definition of power. If the church is in society, it is enmeshed in networks of power, despite its self-definition as the "community of the powerless." While the church is a community, it is also an institution, and thus imbued and enmeshed with power of various sorts. Even in subtle ways. It's not just irony that the guys who are writing theologies of powerlessness come from elite backgrounds.

The way #Hunter formulates it, every discourse, every action partakes of asymmetrical power flows. You can't get away from it, willy-nilly. "[E]very grammar and every narrative is an imposition; every source of inequality in power is a source of intimidation and force; even love itself has force -- for it draws and compels people in ways that they may not desire in themselves. Thus, as long as the church is constituted by human beings and is a human institution, it will participate in the structures of power at work in the world and will exercise a power that is spiritually and ethically ambiguous at best." (182) The neo-Anabaptist perfectionism is, to put it bluntly, screwed.
That is to say, you can't "draw a sharp line between the church and the world," because they both share similar power dynamics. Even for a self-styled "community of the powerless," powerlessness "can only be relative." (182)

To approach the same topic theologically is to realize that the cultural mandate is a mandate to use power in the world. After the Fall, using power with integrity has been thoroughly compromised. And redemption in Christ completely change that. "While Christ's life, death, and resurrection does

fundamentally alter the relationship of believers to the 'powers' and to power itself, in the time while believers wait for the *eschaton*, power is inherently tainted and its use inherently compromising of the standards to which Christ beckons." (183) In other words, our use of power is ineluctably tainted.

#Hunter goes on to say that Xns must exist in this eschatological tension between the divine/transcendent and the historical/compromised. So my question to #Hunter: It sounds as if Christians have no choice but to be stained, that there is no wholly innocent use of power. If that is the case (still me asking), then is this sin? Can it be called sin if innocence is no longer an option? Are we structurally predisposed to compromise, and nothing we can do can change that? Sounds kinda fatalistic to me.

OK, end of rant/questioning. He does have a good point when he says that Christian groups try to lessen this tension by Christianizing their ideals of the social order (whether that's liberal soc. justice, or conservative family values). And each of the 3 (Conservatives, Liberals and neo-Anabpts) measure faithfulness by adherence to their social vision. Which is why each eyes the other two suspiciously as not really being Christian. "Yet the call 'to be in the world but not of it' is a call to abide in the will and purposes of God in the present world disorder with integrity, and the only way to reach for that integrity is to recognize the tension and to reside within it knowing that failure is inevitable, forgiveness is ever available, and the work of the Holy Spirit to transform and sanctify our efforts is always inscrutably at work." (183-84)

So perhaps #Hunter isn't saying we necessarily sin by being involved in power. Rather, sin is using power w/o humility. That is, using it w/o understanding the compromise involved, by being overly sure of ourselves in this tricky, power-filled world. The Church is, as a worshiping community, distinct from the world, but not absolutely so, bc like the world, it possesses power. The real question, then, is not about choosing btw power and powerlessness, but rather: "how will the church and its people use the power they have?" (184)

However, just because we are always tangled in power as Christians does not entail fatalism or acceptance of the status quo. Rather, he urges that Am. Christians seek a better relationship with power (and "the powers"). It also means we need humility. "Christians must operate w/as much grace and forgiveness as possible because failure to use power rightly is, as I say, unavoidable." (184)

#Hunter singles out two essential tasks for the Am. Church. 1) Disentangle the life and ID of the Church from the life and ID of Am. society. That is, the neo-Anabaptists are right - the Am. church is far too Constantinian to be healthy. On both right and left, Xns are far too comfortable legitimating the dominant political ideologies. And they are far too comfortable w/the status quo economic structures.

In fact, the neo-Anabpts don't go far enough. We need to rethink every cultural assumption to see where we compromise w/the world. Things like courtship, marriage, entertainment, work, retirement...EVERYTHING needs a rethink. Of course, it's imposs. to disentangle the church from the culture or politics entirely. But that doesn't mean we shouldn't try.

So, task 1) = get critical distance from political, economical and cultural assumptions of the good ol' USA. Task 2): Decouple "public" from "political." Stop narrowing public life down to politics. It's a tragic oversimplification. We've narrowed our imaginations to politics. "Politics is just one way to engage the world and, arguably, not the highest, best, most effective, nor most humane way to do so." (185). #Hunter isn't saying don't be politically engaged. But he is saying we must "demythologize politics," and see it for what it really is. No more political messiahs, OK?

An overestimation of politics leads the church to a primarily political witness. And that's been a disaster. Because political witness of the church is often the "crudest, most manipulative, and arrogant" (186). So #Hunter suggests that we, as a Church, have a season of political silence. Shut up until we learn how to do it better. Or as #Hunter puts it: "it would be salutary for the church and its leadership to remain silent for a season until it learns how to engage politics and even talk politics in ways that are non-Nietzschean." (186)

That silence will open up a space for other types of engagement, w/o political static. To which I say, Amen. Of course, there are those who engage culture the way they engage politics: w/a view to domination. We need to find a diff. way. Some think we need to broaden the definition of politics. But the current definition will ultimately prevail. So, bad move.

Next, #Hunter turns to a meditation on Jesus vis-a-vis this "postpolitical understanding of power." (187) That is, given that power is about more than politics (relational, social power), how did Jesus use it, negotiate through it? How did Jesus deal with power and "the powers" (the institutions and power-brokers in the world)?

First, note that Satan offered Jesus the authority that was he had over the worldly powers (Mt. 4:8). Importantly, Jesus didn't dispute Satan's claim. This fits w/John's definition of "the world" as being under Satan's control. #Hunter interprets this as the default condition of power in a post-fall world is towards manipulation, abuse, self-aggrandizement. "The spirit that animates worldly power" is messed up, distorted and wielding a distorting influence over all it touches.

And it is precisely that spirit that Christ came to break (Col. 2:13-15) by laying their illusions bare. Worldly power produces the illusion of necessity, the way things *must* be. But this can be, must be, challenged. In his incarnation, and especially in his crucifixion, Christ exposed these powers for what they were, and thus disarmed them. And in his resurrection, he liberated his followers from them so they could participate in his kingdom.

Jesus did all this by "embodying and exercising a fundamentally different kind of social power." (188) How did he do that? Four ways. 1) Jesus' power was derived from intimacy and submission to the Father.

2) Christ's use of social power rejected the status and privilege that power normally gives (Php 2:6, servant-power). Christ's "kenosis" (self-emptying) was most intense at his death (dying as a criminal), but it was expressed day-to-day in his life. Christ rejected the symbolic capital that comes with social power. He washed his disciples' feet, for crying out loud! And not just his disciples. The man hung out w/the blind, lame, disreputable, poor, etc. Jesus is a publicist's nightmare.

Sorry, messed up. Rejection of symbolic capital was number 2. Number 3 was why he rejected it: compassion, serving others. 3) Jesus used power to serve others, to heal them, equip them to flower as human beings. That is the essence of J's compassion.

4) Christ used social power in ways that were non-coercive to those outside the community of faith. Jesus made himself a slave to all, Jew and Gentile alike. His dealings w/Samaritans is instructive here. Contact w/Samaritans was considered socially contaminating, yet Jesus healed them, talked w/them, used them as examples. See the parable of the Good Samaritan (Luke 10:30-37). He had the same attitude towards other non-Jews. Christians should share Christ's attitude towards outsiders, and eschew all forms of coercion. #Hunter concedes: "In the present world disorder, some types of coercion are probably inevitable" and necessary to defend the defenseless; a means to achieve a lesser of various evils. But even then it cannot be justified 'in the name of Jesus' or put forward as 'the Christian way' because force and coercion are not part of and cannot bring about the kingdom of God." (192-93)

In sum, Jesus brought a new way of using power, one that "operated in complete obedience to God the Father, it repudiated the symbolic trappings of elitism, it manifested compassion concretely out of calling and vocation, and it served the good of all and not just the good of the community of faith. In short, in contrast to the kingdoms of this world, his kingdom manifests the power to bless, unburden, serve, heal, mend, restore, and liberate." Clearly, if we are to follow Christ, we must follow his lead in how he used power (cf. Keller's "Upside-Down Kingdom").

What this looks like positively and practically is the subject of the third and final essay.

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