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

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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

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