Hipsters vs. Nerds

Submitted by admin on Fri, 01/31/2014 - 17:35

I was at the pub the other night, talking with a friend, and somehow we got onto the subject of hipsters, and what the Christian take on hipsterism is. I was totally shooting from the hip (not -ster), but the comparison that came to mind was hipsters versus nerds. They are so alike, but so different.

They are alike in that they occupy the same kind of cultural space. They gravitate towards eccentric cultural works that they dub "the awesome." You know, little-known bands or anime serials, things like that. But they are unlike in *how* they occupy that culturally marginal space.

The hipster is all about translating obscurity and eccentricity into subcultural capital (a la Bourdieu by way of Sarah Thornton's "Club Cultures"). "There's this great band, but you've never heard of it." It's all about hierarchy, about accruing status, of positioning the self as in-the-know, of making an exclusive clique, the more exclusive the better (optimally, a clique of one). Indeed, this attitude of cultural arrogance is why hipsters are almost universally detested, at least on the interwebs. It is also why so few hipsters actually claim the label (that, and it's too mainstream).

The nerd, on the other hand, is all about broadcasting the awesome thing he or she has found, sharing the joy as if it were the "pearl of great price." The nerd is not about status. Indeed, he or she has accepted the mantle of social awkwardness, of fitting into Nietzsche's category of the "botched and bungled" humanity (no grasping at Ubermench-ness here). Indeed, they know themselves to be more bungled than usual, and they are okay with that. They don't care how weird they come across. They just want to share the awesome.

My daughter, Ruth, is a good example of this. After Dragon*Con (see previous post), she decided that she needed to transport some iota of her wonderful experience into her school, which seemed sadly lacking in that sort of thing. She determined to start "The Awesome Club of Awesome," a place where her fellow students could watch and discuss the awesome (anime, samurai movies, superhero movies, the Whedonesque, monster movies, and so on).

It seems to me that it is the nerds rather than the hipsters who resonate in parallel with the Christian faith. Christianity has an inevitably outward, centrifugal momentum: it seeks to spread its joy and include others in the joy. That's essentially what evangelism is: spiraling out the good news to others.

The example that comes to mind (besides my daughter) is Andrew and Xander in "Buffy the Vampire Slayer," season 7, episode 10, "Bring on the Night." Andrew is being led, bound, through a system of caves. He remarks aloud (to no one in particular), "Man, this place gives me the creeps. It's like in Wonder Woman, issue 297–299." And Xander instantly replies, ""Catacombs". Yeah, with the skeletons." And they both say together, "That was cool," and smile. Then Xander remembers that he's supposed to be treating Andrew as a prisoner, and the moment is past. But for that moment, they connected, shared, and enjoyed a common humanity basking in the glow of the awesome. And

behold, it was cool.

Hipsterism, by contrast, has a centripetal movement. It seeks to shut others out, shut others down, to place the self and self-status clearly at the center. The Pharisees were kind of hipsters of the law: they were above the hoi-polloi, and they wanted the hoi-polloi to remember their place. The hipster hoards the awesome like Smaug, sitting on piles of it so that they'll be higher (and be seen as higher) than the rest.

Now obviously, I am dealing in ideal-types. The line between hipster and nerd is always dangerously thin. Everyone knows that nerds, even at conventions/love-ins like Dragon*Con, don't just join hands and sing Kumbaya. There are know-it-alls, social climbers, can you top this obscure reference, etc. Why? Because nerds, like the rest of humanity, fall prey to pride and self-exultation. There are nerds who really wish to be hipsters. And there are hipster-enthusiasts who sometimes slip into nerd-mode, sharing their cultural wealth recklessly. But as ideal-types, I'm throwing my lot in with the nerds.

Of course, the other problem is that the awesome that nerds want to share is not, well, Awesome. There is a One True and Eternal Awesome from which all derivative awesomes derive their awesomeness. Most nerds don't get that. Ruth does, and I'm proud of her for it. But for some reason, even Christian nerds (like me) find it much easier to get jazzed about the awesome than about the Awesome. I think that's part of our own sin-blinded lack of imagination and sanctification. God help us recognize the Awesome as AWESOME.

One last point: I think Christians would fare rather better in relationships with non-Christians if we treated evangelism less as a duty, and more like a fan trying to explain his or her passion. If we could share the gospel with the naturalness of the nerd (or rather, the natural awkwardness of the nerd), I think it would be more infectious, and less odious. That is, if we understand the gospel for the awesome thing it is: an open invitation to all the botched and bungled to bask in love of the Awesome. Hard to hate on that.

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