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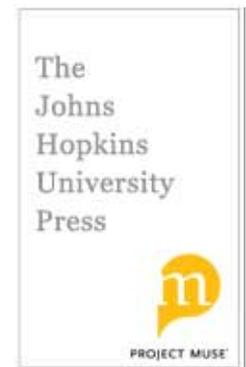
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*To Change the World: The Irony, Tragedy, & Possibility of  
Christianity in the Late Modern World* by James Davison  
Hunter (review)

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So, for example, in his reading of *Notes from Underground*, Girard highlights the Underground Man's mimetic rivalry with the officer who "unceremoniously" moves him aside as opposed to throwing the Underground Man through a window as he had fantasized (a desire discovered in the various romantic novels he reads). I agree that the officer acts now as a model and obstacle, yet one will miss crucial aspects of this underground tragedy if one moves too quickly away from the Underground Man's primary model—books. In other words, the Underground Man's initial attraction to the officer is already mediated, and books, these external models in Girardian parlance, stand as the foundation to understanding imitation in Part II of *Notes*—a fact about which the narrator takes pains to make us aware. I offer this instance not as a critique of Girard's particular reading here, but simply as an example of the strength of mimetic theory—that while it is admittedly reductionist, it also offers a plentitude of readings in its "system."

Robert Doran has done a great service to literary studies by giving us this collection of essays. For those familiar with Girard's work, the essays will provide a fascinating historical view of the trajectory of his thought. For those unfamiliar with Girard's work, I believe some essays in this collection could prove to be difficult; however, because of Doran's elegant introduction and because Girard deals with the same issues time and again in the various literary texts, I believe the patient reader will be offered a solid introduction to mimetic theory and literary study.

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***To Change the World: The Irony, Tragedy, & Possibility of Christianity in the Late Modern World.*** By James Davison Hunter. New York: Oxford University Press, 2010. ISBN 978-0199730803. Pp. 368. \$27.95.

The work of James Davison Hunter, as a sociologist of religion and culture, has not been made use of very often by literary scholars. His 1991 book *Culture Wars: The Struggle to Define America* played a large role in defining the terrain of American political analysis in terms of deep, morally-based partisan struggle, and the "culture war" metaphor has become ubiquitous in the two decades since. Still, there was little either in that book, or in his other studies of American evangelicalism and moral education, that was of immediate use to literary critics. That may begin to change, especially for scholars interested in Christianity and literature, with the publication of his latest book, *To Change the World*. In it, Hunter offers a sweeping, detailed analysis of the state of American Christianity and its relationship to power within the framework of a compelling sketch of social theory. And while he doesn't say much in the book about the literary field directly, his argument for altering

the way we think about late modern Christianity opens space to appreciate recent literary developments in a fresh light and suggests as well new directions for the intersection of Christianity and literature at this moment.

*To Change the World* is written, as the subtitle suggests, directly to Christian believers, but there is also much to be learned from the book about the relationship between religion and culture—as well as the vicissitudes of Christian identity in contemporary America—by those who do not identify as Christian. The main task Hunter undertakes in the book is to review and critique the modes of approach to “world-changing” in the major Christian traditions within the U.S., and he finds all of them—the Christian right, mainline Christianity, and the neo-Anabaptist tradition—significantly compromised in their approaches. According to Hunter, American Christians most often ignore institutional and structural realities of culture and pursue world-changing by seeking to influence the “hearts and minds” of individuals on the assumption that cultural change proceeds from the bottom up, as in the supposedly popular sources of the religious awakenings of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. When Christians do give attention to a collective level of cultural transformation, they have sought to impose their will on the culture at large by grasping for the political power necessary to legislate and adjudicate the values they hold dear. Hunter draws two important conclusions from this characterization of Christian attempts at world-changing—they are on one hand fairly naive in their belief in the ability of transformed individuals to alter culture, and they are on the other hand deeply implicated in the cynical power plays that define modern American political culture.

Hunter is at his best on this second point, carefully elaborating American Christianity’s often uncritical involvement with, and embracing of, the forms of power dominant in the modern state and modern politics. He writes: “The dominant public witness of the Christian churches in America since the early 1980s has been a political witness” (12); and again, “It is not an exaggeration to conclude that the public witness of the church today has become a political witness; the public identity of the church is its political identity” (169). Insofar as Christians have sought to influence the culture at large to reflect their values, they have most often resorted to political means to do so. As such, they have been full-on combatants in the culture wars over the moral direction of the American polity—demonizing those who disagree with them and seeking to use civic structures coercively to enact the godly society they envision.

As Hunter sees it, such a public witness greatly limits the power and complexity of Christian thought: “the consequence of the whole-hearted and uncritical embrace of politics by Christians has been, *in effect*, to reduce Christian faith to a political ideology and various Christian denominations and para-church organizations to special interest groups” (172). Hunter identifies the heart of the problem as the continuing failure of Christian theology to develop a set of adequate responses to the social and cultural realities of modernity. This very strong conclusion would

be more palatable if he engaged more directly with modern theology (Karl Barth immediately comes to mind) in the book, but the point seems to be well taken that at the level of practical theology, churches and public Christian figures have all too often been willing to abandon the strength of their theological tradition to gain advantage with a political party—or have too easily allowed their theology to be redefined narrowly in opposition to the perceived threats of modern thought. Paradoxically, then, in making political advancement the main—and often the only—form in which Christianity engages American culture in a public way, Christian theology has lost its potential to critique the dominant political order from a position prior to and outside of modern state power.

This seems to me the point of crucial importance in Hunter's book. He does not advocate an abandonment of Christian political involvement but a Christian renunciation of the politics of *ressentiment* as a way to regaining a healthful position of critical distance from the modern state and its power apparatus. In doing so, Christians do not pretend that they can escape from the operations of power, which Hunter rightly understands as inescapably affecting all human and cultural relations, but they work to reclaim a distinctive mode of power that cuts against the will to domination. This, for Hunter, is the kenotic power of Jesus defined through submission, rejection of status, compassion, non-coercion, and ultimately, the power to bless (188-193), and he encourages Christians to explore ways of enacting kenotic power publicly as an alternative to the politics of *ressentiment*.

*To Change the World* is a potentially significant book for literary studies because it suggests again that Christian theology holds the potential to offer a critical position with great power for cultural analysis and productivity. Hunter envisions a Christian presence in the late modern world characterized by "critical accommodation" and "humble resistance"—"a commitment to the modern world in that it envisions it differently" (284, 235). And he occasionally emphasizes the role of a public imagination and the work of the linguistic and literary fields in pursuing this task. This is a move in the right direction that could have received more attention in the book.

The novels of Marilynne Robinson are a particularly strong example of the literary possibilities for reimagining the relationship between Christianity and late modernity in a public space—a fictional world that bears significant interest both for those who identify as Christian and for those who do not. We need to understand more about the ways modern and contemporary theological novelists like Robinson draw upon multiple traditions and blend the secular and the religious in their work. It seems that literature could even be identified as a privileged site for this kind of dialogue, a place where the secular and the religious regularly meet and interact with one another, a public cultural space where the inextricable entanglement of the two becomes particularly clear and conversations between the two become particularly productive.

This is another way that Hunter's book opens possibilities that should be

attended to not only by Christian believers, because the critical position he suggests for theology is at many points not incompatible with aspects of the dominant theoretical approaches of the past fifty years. There seems to be much room for Marxist and psychoanalytic critics to find common ground with Christian theology, and theology can learn much about modern culture from these experienced modes of cultural critique. Of course critical thinkers like Slavoj Žižek and Giorgio Agamben and theologians like John Milbank and Graham Ward have been exploring just such connections in their work.

There remains, however, a fairly widespread level of discomfort on all sides about such dialogue—theologians who take this step are often criticized for having conceded too much to modern philosophy, and critics who engage theology are still few and their work remains relatively marginal. Theology has yet to recognize and admit the salutary influence secular literary forms can have on its modern formulations, and literary criticism has always been nervous about its obvious sources in practices like religious reading and hermeneutics. Hunter's book is a welcome intervention in the cultural discourse on Christianity because it opens space to talk more openly about the connections between, among many other things, Christianity and literature.

In Hunter's call for a reimagining of the Christian public presence, there lies an opportunity to recognize anew the way that literature provides a unique public imaginary space where agreements and disagreements, and even new and unexpected syntheses can be worked out, especially in terms of the relationship of religious modes of being to the larger culture. This is a space where secular writers can dabble in and explore the sense of transcendence that sometimes haunts their thinking—and it's a space as well of freedom for religious thinkers to explore the implications of their faith outside the rigorous confines of systematic thought. Particularly in its relation to religion, the ambiguity of literature enables it to create a public imaginary space where an unusual kind of dialogue can thrive—a dialogue that has potential, perhaps not to change the world, but to enable fresh forms of conversation, from opposed perspectives, on many of the things that are most important to us all.

*Note: The reviewer is a former fellow of Hunter's Institute for Advanced Studies in Culture at the University of Virginia.*

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***The Word in the English Classroom: Best Practices of Faith Integration.*** Edited by Jamie Dessart and Brad Gambill. Abilene, TX: Abilene Christian University Press, 2009. ISBN 978-0-89112-536-5. Pp. 256. \$24.99 (paper).