

Cities of God

Christianity meets culture.

BY [Terry Eastland](#)

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To Change the World

*The Irony, Tragedy,
and Possibility of Christianity
in the Late Modern World*
by James Davison Hunter
Oxford, 368 pp., \$27.95

Natural Law and the Two Kingdoms

A Study in the Development of Reformed Social Thought
by David VanDrunen
Eerdmans, 512 pp., \$35

These two books concern the same general and difficult topic, one as old as the early church: the relationship of Christianity to culture. *To Change the World* takes up how Christian believers, their “citizenship in heaven” (as the Apostle Paul put it), should relate in this life to the world around them. James Davison Hunter, a University of Virginia sociologist who came to national attention almost two decades ago with *Culture Wars*, offers a paradigm for Christian engagement that he calls “faithful presence.” Accordingly, believers, sharing with nonbelievers a world that is more and more religiously pluralistic, are to seek “its overall flourishing.”

Hunter presents his theology of faithful presence having spent much of his book arguing against forms of engagement that seek to transform culture in Christian terms, a quest that often ends up in politics. Because Hunter makes America (actually the America of the past 60 years) the focus of his inquiry, he treats individuals and organizations that will be familiar to an American audience, bluntly telling them “to abandon altogether talk of ‘redeeming the culture,’ ‘advancing the kingdom,’ ‘building the kingdom,’ ‘transforming the world,’ ‘reclaiming the culture,’ ‘reforming the culture,’ and ‘changing the world’”—doubtless not an exhaustive list. Neither the Christian right nor the Christian left (Hunter’s terms) will be happy with his downbeat assessment of their prospects.

Hunter’s critique of what may be called transformationalism begins with a look at what its advocates in America have achieved. And he is not impressed. He finds their record “mixed,” and provides reason to think it might not improve. Culture changing, he writes, assumes that if you can change the hearts and minds of enough ordinary people, the culture itself will change. But this idea of cultural change is “almost wholly mistaken. . . . [C]ultural change at its most profound level occurs through dense networks of elites operating in common purpose within institutions at the high-prestige centers of cultural production.” But believers wanting to change the culture most often have been found working the “social periphery” and not the “cultural center” where those dense networks exist. Their influence has proved strongest where it counts least: “in tastes that run to the lower middle and middle brow rather than the high brow.”

Thus, writes Hunter, “for all the talk of world changing . . . the Christian community is not, on the whole, remotely close

to a position where it could actually change the world in any significant way.” And if it were close, “the results would likely be disastrous.” World changing entails the use of power, he says, and transformationalists, regardless of where they reside on our political spectrum, “cannot imagine power in any other way than toward what finally leads to political domination.” For them, changing the culture means electing a candidate, passing a law, and altering a policy. To be sure, this being a free country, they may pursue those activities; but too often their efforts seethe with “resentment, anger, and bitterness” for the wrongs they believe they have suffered. As a result, they “undermine the message of the very gospel they cherish and desire to advance.”

Natural Law and the Two Kingdoms is a careful explication of a theological tradition that is concerned with the same question *To Change the World* addresses: how believers should relate to this present world. David VanDrunen, a theologian at Westminster Seminary in California who is also a lawyer, reports among the answers to that question the one given by the remarkable Epistle to Diognetus, written in the late second century in the face of a culture hostile to Christianity. It did not presume that society should be Christian or even imagine that “as a goal to be achieved,” writes VanDrunen. Of course, that goal did become imaginable in the fourth century, thanks to the conversion of the Emperor Constantine and the empire’s embrace of his religion. As a result, when Augustine was writing his great work *The City of God*, he had before him the idea of a Christianized society as “a very real and plausible option.” And yet he rejected it. Augustine thus refused to commend to believers a conception of the Christian life that entailed pursuit of a theocratic state—or, in the modern vernacular, a culture transformed.

Regarding Augustine’s famous treatment of the City of Man and the City of God, VanDrunen says, “the two cities idea . . . became something of a standard for subsequent Christian reflection on the relation of Christianity to the broader world.” That later reflection, treated in detail here, led to the two kingdoms doctrine, the most articulate expression of which came during the Reformation. As VanDrunen describes it, God rules all human institutions and activities but he does so in two fundamentally different ways: God rules the spiritual kingdom expressed in the church “as redeemer in Jesus Christ,” and God rules the civil kingdom including the state and all other social institutions not as redeemer but “as creator and sustainer.”--

The two kingdoms, VanDrunen emphasizes, “exist for different purposes, have different functions, and operate according to different rules,” and Christian engagement with the civil kingdom (or culture or world) must take those differences into account. In particular, as citizens of the spiritual kingdom, believers submit to “the redemptive ethic of Scripture.” But as citizens of the civil kingdom they “can engage in genuine moral conversation with those of other faiths . . . without making adherence to Scripture a test for participating in cultural affairs.” Likewise, as citizens of the spiritual kingdom, they “can view the state and other institutions as temporal and destined to pass away.” Yet as citizens of the civil kingdom they “can have keen interest in promoting the welfare of human society here and now.”

The story VanDrunen tells continues from the Reformation to the present. He includes a fascinating chapter on the fate of the two kingdoms doctrine in the United States that begins in early 17th-century Massachusetts with the Puritan John Cotton (1584-1652). Cotton defended the institutional distinction between church and state, as well as their different functions; yet “these ideas”—central to two kingdoms doctrine—“tended to fade into the background in the face of [Cotton’s] zeal to defend civil religion.” VanDrunen also presents figures less well remembered than Cotton, among them the 19th-century Kentucky Presbyterian Stuart Robinson (1814-1881), an able defender of two kingdoms who, on theological grounds, not only questioned the authority of government to call upon churches to observe fast days but also opposed calls for a constitutional amendment that would acknowledge God as the source of all power and Jesus Christ as governor of the nations.

Robinson failed to persuade the transformationalists of his day, whose influence was rising. Indeed, as VanDrunen shows, in the late 19th and early 20th centuries, influential theologians in the Reformed tradition sought to provide “a redemptive and eschatological grounding to culture and Christians’ participation in it.” Inevitably, in the thinking of many of these theologians, the two kingdoms were collapsed into one: “This kingdom,” VanDrunen observes, “was originally created by God in perfect righteousness, . . . was corrupted through the fall into sin and is now being redeemed from corruption and advanced toward its eschatological goal” of the new heaven and the new earth. And so, with regard to how believers should engage the world, they “are not to dismiss any area of life as outside of God’s redemptive concern, and . . . are to seek to transform all activities and institutions in ways that reflect . . . [the kingdom’s] final destiny.”

Oddly, *To Change the World* has little to say about two kingdoms, notwithstanding its rooting in a millennium and a half of Christian reflection. And what the book does say is a caricature: According to Hunter, the doctrine leads its adherents “to increasingly withdraw into their own communities with less and less interest in any engagement with the larger world.” Hunter fails to consider such evidence as VanDrunen has weighed and which supports the proposition

that two-kingdoms doctrine encompasses the idea of promoting the welfare of society, or as Hunter himself might say, its “overall flourishing.”

That James Davison Hunter has no affinity for two kingdoms would seem surprising, since it is a doctrine that offers no support to the world changers he challenges at every turn. On the other hand, there is an ambiguity in *To Change the World* that makes one wonder whether Hunter’s dismissal of two kingdoms is a product of his sympathy for, yes, world changing. The ambiguity arises in his discussion of faithful presence, and it concerns the critical issue of redemption. For while Hunter emphasizes that “culture-making . . . is not, strictly speaking, redemptive or salvific in character,” and that “world building” is not to be confused with “building the Kingdom of God,” he also says that the church should “offer an alternative vision and direction” for prevailing cultural institutions and seek “to retrieve the good to which modern institutions and ideas implicitly or explicitly aspire.” Putting aside whether the church is even capable of offering such vision and direction, or of retrieving such goods, it would seem without authority to do so—unless it is now being charged with (to borrow a phrase) “redeeming the culture.”

Such is the allure of transformationalism that one of its most vigorous critics seems unable to abandon it. Even so, Hunter’s book is not without its redeeming features, notably a critique of the modern world that strikingly illumines the challenges that “difference” and “dissolution” pose for Christian engagement. Difference, meaning pluralism, “creates social conditions in which God is no longer an inevitability,” a development that renders “God-talk” with “little or no resonance” outside the church. Dissolution, meaning “the deconstruction of the most basic assumptions about reality,” makes it more difficult to “imagine that there is a spiritual reality more real than the material world we live in.”

Likewise, Hunter’s theology of faithful presence takes inspiration from the sensible teaching of that Epistle to Diognetus, and before that, from the wise counsel of Jeremiah. In his letter to the exiles living in the very different culture of Babylon—its king a pagan gentile—the prophet exhorted them to “seek [its] welfare” on the ground that “in its welfare you will find your welfare.”

David VanDrunen’s study is worth commending on account of the achievement it represents, for the two kingdoms doctrine, with its fascinating lineage, has not had the historian of theological acumen it deserved until now.

Taken together, *Natural Law and the Two Kingdoms* and *To Change the World* indicate where discussions of the perennial question of Christian involvement with the broader culture—a question with obvious implications for our politics—seem now to be heading.

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