

RE-ENVISIONING CHRISTIANITY'S CULTURAL ENGAGEMENT STRATEGIES A PROPOSAL FOR A TOP-DOWN, BOTTOM-UP APPROACH TO CULTURE

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ABSTRACT

This study aims to critically evaluate James Hunter's key proposal for religio-cultural engagement in his book entitled, *To Change the World* (2010). Drawing on his expertise in sociology, Hunter argues for an exclusively top-down approach to cultural change. He asserts that the "work of world-making and world-changing are, by and large, the work of elite: gatekeepers who provide creative direction and management within spheres of social life" (Hunter 2010, 41). However, such an approach has the shortcoming of serving the needs of cultural elites and ignoring the needs and concerns of the people living at the grassroots level. By making use of the Asian cultural context—Minjung theology in Korea and the Chinese Pentecostal grassroots movement, this study pushes back against Hunter's key idea. It proposes that the best approach to Christian cultural change is through a top-down/bottom-up method that engages and contextualizes religion and culture in the public sphere.

Introduction

In his book, *To Change the World*, Hunter (2010, 6) displaces the implicit Christian understanding that "the essence of culture is found in the hearts and minds of individuals" and that cultural change happens as individual lives are transformed. He argues that this view is fundamentally wrong. Instead, he introduces four propositions for cultural change with the central assertion being that "cultures change from the top-down and rarely, if ever from the bottom-up." He continues by saying it is "by and large the work of elite gatekeepers that will provide creative direction and management within the spheres of social life" (Hunter 2010, 41). He notes that although the social movements and economic revolts that occur through the mobilization of the people (bottom-up) have tremendous influence *on their own terms*, this influence is often limited and short-lived.

For his part, Skocpol (1979, 287) asserts that successful political revolutions, such as in Russia, France, and China always "involve leadership from the ranks of marginal and disaffected elites who build new organizations that coalesce revolutionary changes around new state and national identity" (Hunter 2010, 41). Hunter thus advocates an exclusive top-down approach to enculturation, asserting that Christians need to revise their strategies for cultural engagement and focus on those cultural elites and institutions that hold the power to effect change. While Hunter's



view is seemingly accurate, it fails to consider multi-faceted aspects of the political environment and its associated workings—political positioning, marketing, and campaigning. Rather than effecting successful top-down enculturation, the original cause of a movement is often hijacked and converted into a top-down political narrative that masks or downplays the underlying social conditions, leading to dissatisfaction and social injustice in the form of reactionary subterfuge. Thus while there is some truth in Hunter’s proposition, an exclusively top-down approach to culture is set up for failure.

With the rise of contextual theologies in the latter part of the twentieth century, such as liberation theology, queer theology, feminist theology, and black theology, conceived as a means of bridging the gap between traditional modes of theological discourse and the immediate realities of individual persons as well as their collective experiences, “faith was no longer held captive by the educated and powerful elites; now laypeople were empowered to make their faith their very own bread and Word” (Smith 2018). As a pushback against Hunter’s proposal, this study makes use of the Asian cultural context to demonstrate that an exclusively top-down approach to culture is inherently flawed, and to show how bottom-up enculturation has been successful in influencing cultural change in the past. It then proposes a circular top-down, bottom-up approach to cultural engagement, concluding with a discussion of the missiological and ministerial implications of this proposal.

Top-down Approach – Minjung Theology

Asad (1993) points out that the distinction between a stand-alone religion and the non-religious/secular sphere is one not made anywhere outside the western world. For example, studies into the religion and culture of the Australian Aboriginals (Maddox 2000, 2) and Native Americans¹ (Woodley 2012, 71) reveal that any distinction between religion and culture would be problematic because such societies do not differentiate between religion, tradition, and other dimensions of existence. Instead, as Durkheim ([1912] 1965, 10) points out, religion is “something eminently social,” representing collective expressions of cohesion, social norms, control, and purpose for society at large. “Therefore, the relation between culture and religion is more circular than linear in nature, as one sphere informs and reciprocally feeds the other” (Abi-Hashem and Driscoll, 2013).

Using Cameron’s competing values framework and culture quadrant as an instrument, Rowley and Bae’s (2003, 195) research has found that the hierarchical culture quadrant has, on average, much higher value in Asian countries than in European and American counterparts. The underlying reason, not surprisingly, is that Asian culture has traditionally been shaped and influenced by Taoism and Confucianism, which stress hierarchy, social harmony, group orientation, and respect for others. As a consequence of this hierarchical culture, many Asian theologies are formulated and “seen through the lenses of elitist theologians who tend to impose their views on the grassroots and read their context selectively” (Bevans 2009, 78-95). The problem with this traditional, exclusively top-down approach is that it creates a religio-cultural quagmire and confines the theologies formulated in ivory towers “to a limited number of themes and theologians” (Chan 2014, 23). Additionally, such formulations are often oriented towards the goals of the elite (whether consciously or sub-consciously), and hence are often irrelevant to the proletariat. As a result, the people for whom these theologies were written become disinterested and subsequently disengaged from the dialogue, rendering the attempt at contextualization a failure as it misses its goal of engaging with culture.

One such example is Minjung theology, which emerged in the 1970s as a contextual Christian response to the suffering of the proletariat under Park Chung Hee’s regime. As a form of liberation

¹ Similar to the Jewish concept of *shalom*, the concept of *Eloheh* in the Cherokee religion is often used to refer to a broad interrelated and interconnected concept that includes land, history, law and culture.

theology, Minjung theology, devised within the walls of Hanshin University by a pair of cultural elites, Ahn Byung-Mu and Suh Nam-dong, sought to relieve deplorable economic and cultural conditions through people's involvement in political and civic affairs. Like other liberation theologies, it used the Bible to seek and follow Christ through the struggles for freedom and justice.

From Minjung theology's emergence in the 1970s until its decline in the 1980s, theologians reflected on their concern for suffering and their desire for social justice from their ivory towers. While the movement was immediately significant in awakening the Korean people's consciousness to their unjust lived context, the theologians' suggestion of a revolt proved less persuasive theologically and less applicable practically, resulting in dwindling support for the movement. By the 1980s, support for the Minjung theologians rapidly declined because they failed to represent the cultural and intellectual traditions and religious ethos of the Korean people (Koh 1993, 39) and started to toe a socialist-communist line by incorporating Marxist-Leninist ideology into their theologizing and approach to solving the minjung's oppression. This created a large divide between the proletariat and the elite theologians who, taking an arrogant and dogmatic approach, attempted to change the cultural values from the top down.²

Critics of Minjung theology have pointed out that it "is not so much a theology of the *minjung* as it is a non-*minjung* elite's theology for the *minjung*" (Kim 1987, 262). As Chan (2014, 19-22) points out, although the elitist contextualization by Minjung theologians brought a comprehensive vision of reality to the minjung, it failed to recognize the fallenness of humanity, and rather than challenge the status quo, it reinforced what was culturally acceptable to the minjung. Secondly, privileging one aspect of the culture by favoring a Marxist approach to social conditions leads to cultural bondage and "culminates in an uncritical stand towards local cultures" (Sadje 2018, 8). In this example, by telling the church what was right for them while failing to "listen carefully to what the Spirit of truth who indwells in the church is saying through the people of God" (Chan 2014, 30), Minjung theologians failed in their primary task.

In connection with an exclusively top-down approach to contextualization and enculturation, Chan comments, "the failure of such theologies is well summed up by one Latin American theologian who noted, 'Liberation theology opted for the poor and the poor opted for Pentecostalism'" (Chan 2014, 27). While one needs to recognize the validity of Hunter's claim for the institutional nature of culture and the way culture is embedded in the structures of power, the failure of Minjung theologians to culturally engage with the proletariat is an excellent example of why over-emphasis on a top-down approach to cultural engagement is inherently flawed.

On the other hand, the Chinese Grassroots Pentecostal movement, characterized by its grassroots, bottom-up ecclesiology, is one of the most successful contextualizations of the gospel to date (Clifton 2012).

Bottom-up Approach – Pentecostal-style Grassroots Chinese Christianity

Regarding the need to develop ecumenism at a grassroots level, the World Council of Churches noted that "the ecumenical movement is not rooted in the life of people and if it is not looked at from a perspective of people its authenticity and credibility will be considerably undermined" (Rivera-Pagán 2007). Therefore, ecumenism should not be based on what elite theologians have to say about the grassroots. By contrast, it should begin with and continue to seek

² Minjung theology gradually declined in the 1990s due to various socio-political, economic, and environmental factors (Cobb 2010, ix). Lee (2012, 285-86) points out that one of the main driving forces which propelled its decline was society's failure to cope with a "modernist understanding of culture" defined by the existence of one culture within one context. The collision of traditionalism and postmodernism in the 1990s created a division between Koreans of the ruling-class, who embraced a westernized Christian culture, and the traditional oppressed culture of the *minjung*. As such, the *minjung* theologians (who mainly belonged to the ruling class) failed to appropriately engage the *minjung* people and failed to develop a proper contextualized understanding of the church.

validation at the grassroots level. For Chinese “Grassroots Pentecostals,”³ it is the spirit that draws people to God and one another. There is unity in plurality and an outpouring of the same spirit on people of every language and nation. Thus, mission-focused Pentecostal ecumenism is a bottom-up grassroots reality that draws people forward (Lord 2015, 10). Pentecostalism has been, and remains, a powerhouse for mission by propelling Christianity as a lived reality among the proletariat by preserving the traditions and adapting to new challenges. It does this by using biblical hermeneutics to adapt and enculturate the gospel of Jesus into various cultures.

One such example is the *Songs of Canaan*, composed by Lu Xiaomin,⁴ a Christian peasant woman with no formal musical education from a local Pentecostal underground church. As a product of enculturation, Lu’s hymns resemble Chinese folk songs, emphasizing the communal aspects of the Christian community (Sun 2007). In addition to the Chinese cultural elements, Lu’s hymnody also contains Confucian and Taoist undertones (two primal religions inseparable from the Chinese cultural identity), making them acceptable to Chinese worshippers.

Music is often said to be one of the best media through which to understand cultural heritage because of its quintessential role as a human-specific communication system. Originally created for spiritual ceremonies and rituals, Chinese music was conceived from a Taoist cosmological manifestation of nature’s sounds and integrated into the universal binary order of *yin* and *yang*. In Taoism, the concept of *yin* and *yang* represents the philosophy of balance, two opposites coexisting in harmony and transmuting into each other. Thus, for the Chinese, musical composition seeks a harmonious balance between the masculine *yang* and feminine *yin* tones (Nakaseko 1957). While largely based on a Taoist cosmology, traditional Chinese folk music is also greatly influenced by the teachings of Confucius, for whom “personal cultivation begins with poetry, is made from by the rules of ceremonies, and perfected by music” (Chen 2015, 136-38). Like their Taoist counterparts, Confucianists also believe music promotes wholeness by spontaneously creating harmony amongst families, society, and the universe. As a product of both Chinese and Pentecostal culture, Lu’s hymnal is one of the most successful and well-received Chinese Christian publications to date, widely used in both local and overseas Chinese church communities.

Because enculturation projects such as the *Songs of Canaan* overturn the commonly held belief that primitive religions and Christianity are at opposing ends of the spectrum, many theologians prematurely judge such projects as syncretistic and superstitious. While it might initially seem that way, (1977) in a pioneer study of the world’s primal religions, Harold Turner finds a deep affinity between those who hold a biblical worldview and those of primal religions.

Regarding Chinese hymnody, president and founder of the Christian Apologetics and Research Ministry, Matt Slick, notes that the *yin* and *yang* from the Taoist religion is an example

³ Here, the term “grassroots Pentecostals” is used in a broad sense and refers to the Pentecostal-style Christian life practiced amongst Chinese Christians. Although the churches are not necessarily aligned with a particular Pentecostal denomination in terms of theology and church organization, a study undertaken by Liu (2014) on the practices of worship and spiritualism (healing, confession, born-again experience and role of spiritual songs) among Chinese Christians in Henan found the churches reflect Pentecostalism to a large extent. Of this grassroots Pentecostalism, Chan (2014, 201-2) points out that they are better equipped to address the concerns of non-baptized believers due to their emphasis on building vibrant, worshiping communities rather than focusing on dogmatic issues. This form of Christianity is better able to adapt to primal religious worldviews and religiosity without compromising the essential truths of the faith.

⁴ Lu Xiaomin is a prolific and well-known hymn writer within the Pentecostal and House Church Movement in China. She was born in rural China in 1970 to a peasant family belonging to the Hui ethnic minority. Living in a predominately Muslim community, she was unfamiliar with Christianity until her aunt introduced her to the faith. As a result of her ill health, she dropped out of school at the age of seventeen, joined a house church at the age of nineteen, and began writing hymns (without any formal music education) a year later. As of July 2019, Lu had composed a repertoire of 1810 “inculturated hymns, with a folk lilt, Chinese harmonics, and an imagery that blends rural China with biblical themes” (Starr 2016, 265). In addition to the melodic composition, the widespread use of her hymns in the Home Church Movement (家庭教会) and the Three Self-Patriotic Movement (TSPM, 三自爱国运动) across China come from recognition by congregations of their ability to guide and inspire the church in times of difficulty, as well as from Chinese Christians’ identification with the message of “unassuming, humble dedication and a life of self-sacrifice and fervor for evangelism” (Starr 2016, 265).

of a dualistic tendency (Slick 2009). The problem with Slick's claim is that the concept of *yin* and *yang* has little to do with western dualism. It is only concerned with process and represents the ontological philosophy of balance where two forces can coexist in harmony and transmute into each other in their own time. Interestingly, this philosophy of balance also comes into play in the biblical poem about time (Eccles. 3:1-8). In her commentary on the passage, Brown notes that the use of a chiasmic structure in the poem shows that "each activity, both positive and negative, has its season, and the seasons themselves have their place in the rhythm of the ever-circling years" (Brown 2011, 41). According to Brown, these opposites should be seen as counterparts that are all part of the rhythm of life. Turner's study of primal religions "overturns the commonly held view found in the nineteenth-century that comparative religious studies in which 'primitive religions' (and cultures) and Christianity are located at opposite ends of the evolutionary scale" (Chan 2014, 31).

Opposing Hunter's claim, this paper has thus far shown that an exclusive top-down approach to cultural engagement often fails to gain traction, as it only serves the needs of cultural elites and fails to address the needs and concerns of those at the bottom. A bottom-up approach ensures the cultivation of a culture rooted in people's needs and perspectives, but fails to resonate with the elites because it threatens the power relationships in contemporary society.

Towards a Top-down Bottom-up Approach

As shown in the above case studies, both the top-down and bottom-up approaches have their advantages and disadvantages. The main advantage of the top-down method is that culture can be easily inculcated because it is embedded in the structures of power and held firmly in the hands of cultural elites and power institutions. The disadvantage is that Christian cultural engagement strategies are formulated for the proletariat rather than by them. As a result, there is a chance that the cultural change will only benefit the elite while remaining irrelevant to the proletariat, thus leaving them disinterested and disengaged. The advantage of the bottom-up method of Christian cultural engagement is that it keeps the proletariat engaged and involved with the cultural implementation, ensuring that their cultural needs and concerns are met. The disadvantage is that bottom-up cultural change often encounters resistance and barriers from the cultural gatekeepers.

With these pros and cons in mind, this study proposes that the best way to go about implementing cultural change would be through a circular top-down, bottom-up approach. In such an approach, cultural elites heed the proletariat's influence, and after hermeneutical discernment, implement cultural change from the top-down. They then listen to the people's feedback, needs, and concerns in a never-ending cycle of cultural engagement. The difficulty with this system is that cultural elites in positions of power need to have the will and desire to listen to the proletariat. They should not turn on the proletariat to fulfill their own agendas and must continue to listen to and engage with the people even when cultural conflicts occur.

Hunter provides a blueprint for implementing such a system by increasing cultural influence and engaging elites in the cultural centers. Interestingly, he does not recommend that Christians follow his suggestions. Instead, he suggests that Christians remain content with being faithfully present in culture to emphasize the biblical concept of *shalom*. The problem with this is that it represents a pacifist stance in the cultural battleground, which cannot solve cultural issues and tends to make things worse. In another camp, Rod Dreher (2017) advocates what he calls "the Benedict option," which calls on Christians to shift their focus onto orthodoxy and orthopraxy as a community. In so doing, Christians may be able to engage with culture in more meaningful ways and improve the authenticity of their witness.

Although this study disagrees with Hunter's pacifist approach and his claim that cultural change is almost exclusively top-down, he is correct in saying that Christians should be thinking about increasing their influence in elite cultural circles. The best approach to Christian cultural engagement would be to follow Hunter's blueprint for increasing our influence and engaging with

the elites in the cultural centers, thus ensuring a Christian presence to help facilitate the implementation of top-down cultural change. At the same time, we should continue to follow Princeton philosopher Robert George's calls for a bottom-up approach, by continuing to engage with and contextualize culture in the public sphere. When applied together, both these approaches can effectively form the proposed top-down, bottom-up method of cultural engagement.

Concluding Thoughts

As Hunter points out, the church has been inadequate in its methods to engage with our existing culture, which is why the Christian mission for cultural change has had so little impact on society. Despite this, Vanhoozer explains that it is essential to read and write about culture, because it is an inescapable dimension of existence that penetrates every aspect of daily life whether we like it or not (Vanhoozer 2007, 24). As such, if we are to follow God's command to love our neighbors, it is of paramount importance that we make a continuous effort to engage in culture. American culture was once aligned with Christian values and beliefs, but the Enlightenment and the Second Awakening initiated a philosophical shift away from God towards reason, and Christianity steadily lost its cultural influence. While Christianity no longer dominates culture and reason as it once did, Christians need to make systemic changes to rectify the failed mission of cultural engagement so as to have a voice in influencing and directing culture, thereby fulfilling the great commission to "make disciples of all nations...teaching them to obey everything I have commanded" (Matt. 28:18-20).

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