

Two New Books for the Preacher

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CULTURE WARS: THE STRUGGLE TO DEFINE AMERICA by James Davison Hunter. Basic Books, 1991. 416 pages. BEFORE THE SHOOTING BEGINS: SEARCHING FOR DEMOCRACY IN AMERICA'S CULTURE WAR by James Davison Hunter. The Free Press, 1994. 310 pages.

James Davison Hunter, a University of Virginia scholar, has written two books which together provide a rich mosaic of the contemporary American context in which Christian preaching takes place. In the earlier work, *Culture Wars*, Hunter analyzed very astutely the nature of the discourse which governs cultural warfare and explored in detail some of the fields of conflict, including the family, education, media and the arts, law, and electoral politics. His analysis of these battlefronts is informative for preaching, not least because it will warn against stereotypical characterizations of those points of view with which a preacher is most unfamiliar. For example, Hunter's description of both the conservative and progressivist approaches to the "schooling question" brings into focus the question of "who controls the institutional mechanisms of cultural reproduction" (p. 211). The awareness of such a fundamental concern at the heart of this battle helps us both understand and maintain an appropriate sympathy for all the disputants.

The biggest disappointment of *Culture Wars* is probably its all too brief treatment of the prospects of resolution. Happily, the more recent volume, *Before the Shooting Begins*, goes considerably further in this respect, but not before providing an even more sobering appeal and analysis. The appeal is to reckon candidly with the possibility that violent civil unrest like that which afflicts Yugoslavia, Ireland, and Lebanon could happen in America. He argues that it could happen unless we find a way to deal with nonnegotiable claims about the ordering of public life on a host of issues, including: abortion, racial conflict, gay and lesbian concerns, multiculturalism, textbook controversies, sexuality education, and many more.

Though we might prefer to believe that Hunter vastly overstates the problem, the summer of 1994 provided chilling evidence to the contrary. The killing of a doctor who performed abortions at a clinic in Pensacola, Florida, makes it less easy to dismiss Hunter's concern, especially when linked to the response of a death threat issued against priests in the state of Florida. The threat was to kill ten priests in retaliation for the death of each doctor. If we are lucky, this matter will go no further and the next time we encounter such things it will be in our fictional summer reading. But we would have to be blind not to see an incipient dynamic at work that has led other nations in our time into violent, prolonged, civil unrest—into civil war.

While Hunter's appeal is that we take all this seriously, his analysis is scarcely encouraging. Among other things, he argues that most Americans are woefully underinformed about many of the central issues of the culture war, that the mediating institutions (the press, public opinion, professional associations, and institutions of faith) fail to enrich the quality of reflection on the issues at stake, and that all parties move too quickly to political solutions—solutions which inevitably mean the asser-

tion of the power of one perspective over others. As this is done, there is simultaneously an abandonment of the quest for a moral vision that can provide a “new *unum*, capable of binding together a *pluribus* that seems ever more fragmented” (p.228).

One of the most disturbing (and for the preacher, challenging) pieces of evidence in Hunter’s research on how people respond to disputed issues in the culture war suggests that most have very little moral vocabulary and only tenuous ties to communities and traditions of moral reasoning. When pressed, for example, to explain why they advocate one point of view rather than another in the abortion controversy, they are quick to say that it’s just because of their experience in and feelings about the matter.

The obvious problem with trying to leave the matter there is that power politics becomes the only conceivable resolution. When we cannot talk about moral reasons for our opinion, since we are reduced to saying that it’s a matter of our feelings about a fetus’s right to life, or a matter of our experience concerning a woman’s right to reproductive freedom—our only recourse is to politics and efforts to enshrine our point of view in public policy, whether by legal statute or judicial interpretation.

The chief lesson for preaching (and teaching and Christian conversation in general) is to take some self-conscious responsibility for nurturing a community of moral discourse among the people of the church—one that can take more into account than only experience and feelings. Such preaching will reserve some time and space apart from the pursuit of political strategies. And in this free zone apart from the dynamics of political struggle, it will urge us to strive a bit more self-consciously toward a confrontation with some of our deepest differences—and to address a bit more intently the theological and moral visions that have animated Christian and other communities of faith. As we come into a living encounter both with our profound differences and with the substantive resources for talking and arguing about these differences, we may discover that God will share with citizens responsible for governance in a democratic society the gift which Solomon sought for his governance over Israel: wise and discerning hearts (See 1 Kings 3:1-15).

In doing so, preaching will contribute to the prospect of a substantive, public conversation, to the shaping of “some common metaphysical dream of the world” (p.228). In the matter of abortion and other disputed matters in the culture war, such preaching may lead us to discern how our opinions relate to the moral concerns at stake: of rights and also of obligations; of our assumptions about sexual relations and about gender privileges; of what makes and keeps life human (Paul Lehmann). Facing our deepest differences in this substantive and honest way is the only way open for forging new working agreements about how we might live together in our badly fragmented culture. Preaching that prepares people for participation in what Hunter calls “substantive democracy” can be a sign of hope not just for the congregations who hear such sermons, but for the wider society we inhabit.