

RECONSIDERATIONS

EXPLORING A BIBLICAL UNDERSTANDING OF LIFE AND CULTURE

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MORAL DISCOURSE AND ITS IRONIES

James Davison Hunter

On January 27-28, the Christian Study Center sponsored two lectures by James Davison Hunter as part of its Culture Seminar initiative. Dr. Hunter is Kenan Professor of Sociology and Religion at the University of Virginia, where he is also director of the Institute for Advanced Studies in Culture and the Center on Religion and Democracy. His first lecture, held in the Keene Center at the University of Florida, addressed cultural problems that have arisen in the contemporary quest for inclusivity or neutral ground in moral education. This essay is an abridged version of Dr. Hunter's lecture.

Moral formation in a pluralistic society creates troubling questions. How does moral formation, especially the moral formation of the young, take place in a morally diverse society such as ours? Religious difference is one thing. In our society we learn to privatize our religious commitments and orientations, and religion is domesticated—it's made safe. Morality, however, is something very different—not that one can really disaggregate religion from morality at all times, but at least at the end of the 20th and the start of the 21st century, it seems to us that we can disaggregate the two. It is, however, very hard to privatize our moral commitments. The debates over abortion, funding for the arts, homosexuality, gender and family, etc. prove just how difficult it is to privatize these kinds of things. So moral difference remains a puzzle, particularly as it bears on the moral formation of the young. The issue of how moral pluralism is possible—and what its implications are—shapes

the larger set of intellectual puzzles that presently demand our attention.

With moral difference as a context, perhaps the enduring subtext in the evolution of moral education over the last two hundred and fifty years in America, and certainly its continuing story to the present, is the quest for inclusiveness. While the need to provide moral instruction to young people has never been questioned (and indeed, every generation has viewed their generation as the moment of crisis), neither has the impulse to accommodate the ever-widening diversity of moral cultures. Why the emphasis on inclusivity? A strategy of inclusion is a strategy for dealing with the problem of expanding pluralism. In the face of potentially contentious and disruptive differences, this strategy neutralizes the possibility of conflict, for in the most practical sense, inclusion means that no one's interests are neglected. No one is left out and therefore no one is slighted, snubbed, or offended. William Glasser, an educational reformer who was very popular in the 1960s and 1970s, captured the sum and substance of this quest for inclusiveness in our own day when he stated,

“Certain moral values can be taught in school if the teaching is restricted to principles about which there is essentially no disagreement in our society.” This provision has become the unspoken imperative of all moral education, not just in the psychological strategy, but also in the neo-classical and communitarian strategies as well.

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Among the psychologists who have dominated the field since mid-century, the framework for an inclusive moral education derives from their theories of moral agency. Simply put, if moral dispositions are to be found within all human beings, then the objective of moral pedagogy is simply to call out those dispositions into consciousness, particularly in the formative stages of childhood development. In this strategy, the differences one finds in the pedagogical approach depend upon whether one views these innate dispositions as essentially rational or emotional or genetic. Lawrence Kohlberg, for example, asserts that a moral principle is a mode of choosing which is universal—a rule of choosing which we want all people to adopt in all situations, particularly the principle of justice. The principle of justice always takes the same ideal form, regardless of climate and culture. Only by turning justice into an abstract universal ideal could Kohlberg insist that the teaching of it was “the only constitutionally legitimate form of moral education in the schools.”

The assumption here is that what is truly moral and truly just is not a matter of taste or of dogma, but rather an intrinsic feature of the human psyche. Social, cultural, racial, and institutional differences among people exist, but they’re largely irrelevant. What is relevant is that as moral agents, people possess innate dispositions, rooted in their psychological and emotional constitution, which make them morally equivalent in their potential for good or for ill. In light of this, the task of moral education is simply to call out these potentialities through pedagogic techniques that are equally general and encompassing.

The imperative for an inclusive morality into which all children will be socialized, is equally unquestioned among the neo-classical moral educators, except that they pursue inclusiveness not in psychology, but in anthropology. Thus, when these educators affirm what C. S. Lewis called the Tao, they affirm moral principles found across all traditional cultures—principles, again, about which there is no essential disagreement. Likewise when they speak of their commitment to the timeless values of the Judeo-Christian ethic, they speak of values that are enduring across time and therefore, values that transcend con-

tion. It’s because there are “certain fundamental traits of character, recognizable to most people,” writes Bill Bennett, that he can argue that his *Book of Virtues* is “for everybody, all children of all political and religious backgrounds.”

Among communitarians as well, inclusiveness is the aim. It is not sought in psychology or anthropology, however, but rather in sociology through a social consensus that is continually rediscovered or forged anew as a social contract among various and dissimilar individuals. Needless to say, consensus values are values that are explicitly shared and affirmed and, therefore, values that generate no friction.

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Underlying all of these efforts is the basic fear of violating historic traditions of secular education, or lapsing into dogmatic indoctrination. To recognize the differences among different moral communities and take them seriously in moral education is not to risk indoctrination necessarily, but it certainly risks entering a difficult pluralistic quagmire in which disagreements arise, fairness is challenged, and feelings are hurt. So, for the most part, the

moral education establishment retreats from this hard and dicey work, and settles on an inclusive morality. In other words, an inclusive morality is a safe morality. Whether it’s because it is rooted in the psychological predispositions of the human person, the anthropological constitution of all civilizations, or the social contract of a human community, to proclaim moral norms to be universal means that these norms will not be controversial, and they cannot be contested. And so the very volatile realm of life we call morality is contained, domesticated, made safe. So it is that inclusiveness is the sacred wood of all moral education.

Here we come to the ironic part of this, because while this imperative is beyond dispute, it is not without cost. The quest for inclusiveness in moral education can be pursued only by emptying lived morality of its particularity—those thick, normative meanings whose seriousness and authority are embedded within the social organization of distinct communities, distinct institutions, and the collective rituals and narratives that give them continuity over time.

The net effect of this denial of particularity is engagement in some extraordinary evasions.

To illustrate, consider, for example, the treatment of moral exemplars. Since we just celebrated Martin Luther King Day, let's consider him. Lawrence Kohlberg, in particular, absolutely adored Martin Luther King, and his treatment of King is illustrative of how all moral education deals with him. Martin Luther King is enshrined as the personification of a just human being. In Kohlberg's model, he exemplifies Stage 6 moral reasoning—autonomous, conscience-oriented morality, pointing toward universal principles of justice. And yet King's race, southern heritage, generational moment, community, faith and theological training—all of the inconvenient particularities that bore on his leadership in the civil rights movement—all of these are treated as incidental to his vision and his moral courage. They are simply disregarded. Though the circumstances and issues are different, it's certainly the same effort to evade the sticky problems of particularity that the psychological pedagogies avoid addressing—gender, sexuality, abortion, and so on. These moral matters simply cannot be addressed without getting into the particularities of moral commitment and the traditions and communities that ground those commitments. Knowledge of the cognitive and affective dimensions of moral agency just doesn't provide the resources to address these matters. And so for all practical purposes, these issues have been defined out of existence in the framework of moral education.

The problem isn't just with the psychological strategy. The neo-classical strategy denies particularity as well, but in its own way. In principle, you would think, the differences of philosophical and religious tradition would be of paramount importance in this strategy. But in practice, these differences are glossed over. Its advocates completely ignore the often-intense disagreements between Plato and Aristotle, Kant and Mill, Jefferson and Adams, Falwell and John Paul II, and the communities for whom these are merely representatives. And no effort is given to discern the ways to sort through these differences. Of course where these differences remain they often do so only as fragments of more full-bodied social and moral systems.

And so when its advocates champion the Tao, or the Judeo-Christian ethic, they champion an ethic that never existed in reality and now only exists as an ethical abstraction or as a political slogan.

Communitarians also diminish particularity with the same effect. In principle, of course, an appreciation of the concrete social and normative composition of communities would seem to be essential to any adequate theory of community. In practice, however, these constitutive elements tend to be downplayed in the liberal welfare state as the ideal of community. Here, after all, is a manifestation of political consensus that permits the feeling of rootedness and connectedness, but avoids most of the unpleasant realities that accompany their thick associations. So as a politicized understanding of community, particular communities—whether they are rooted in lifestyle or in religion—tend to be given short shrift. In their particularity, communities are often provincial and exclusive and messy and almost always constricting in some ways to individual freedom. The kinds of binding obligations typically rooted in the communal purposes of creedal communities, for example, make many Americans

and certainly most communitarians, nervous. And so they are written off as puritanical, authoritarian, and extreme.

The effort to affirm an inclusive morality, in other words, reduces morality to the thinnest of platitudes, severed from the social, historical and cultural encumbrances that make moral commitments concrete and ultimately compelling. Virtues are espoused as ungrounded generalities that can be found in various social organizations and cultural traditions, but are not essentially linked to them. And so, deprived of anchoring in any normative community, this morality, this thin morality retains little authority beyond its aesthetic appeal—generic values.

The problem is that there has never been such a thing as generic values—it never existed. And yet, this is what contemporary moral education ends up teaching children. How is this a problem? Why should anyone worry about the specifics—the particularities, especially since we're so likely to disagree on them—as long as we're united around

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NEWS FROM THE STUDY CENTER

RECENT HIGHLIGHTS

CULTURE SEMINAR: JAMES DAVISON HUNTER LECTURES

The Culture Seminar is a scholarly initiative of the Christian Study Center that works in cooperation with the university community in exploring the resources of the Christian tradition for understanding and responding to the challenges of contemporary cultural change. Specifically, the Culture Seminar seeks to provide a forum for scholarly inquiry that is informed and shaped by this tradition and which offers insight into our cultural situation. As mentioned on page one, on January 27 the Culture Seminar of the Center, along with The University of Florida Department of Sociology, sponsored a lecture by James Davison Hunter, Professor of Sociology and Religion at the University of Virginia. Dr. Hunter addressed a standing room only crowd in his lecture entitled "Moral Discourse and Its Ironies." The next morning, Dr. Hunter delivered a second lecture on "The Professor as Mentor" where he addressed the need for professors to help students think deeply about their lives in academia and beyond.

SECOND ANNUAL COLLOQUIUM ON FAITH AND SCHOLARSHIP

The Second Annual Colloquium on Faith and Scholarship, co-sponsored by Interservice Christian Fellowship's Graduate and Faculty Ministries and by the Study Center, took place at the Center on February 22. This day-long gathering of graduate students and faculty, gaining momentum from last year's inaugural colloquium, sought to probe the challenges and possibilities created by the connections between Christian faith and the academic disciplines. Plenary speakers were Dr. Charles Mackenzie and Dr. Samuel Hill. Mackenzie, formerly chair of philosophy at Stanford and past president of Grove City College (PA), addressed the need to engage in serious academic work with both humility and rigorous attention to the issues of the day. Hill, Professor Emeritus of Religion at the University of Florida, recounted his sojourn from seminary theological studies to secular university religious studies, offering a model for negotiating the academic life by way of "particularistic inclusivity." A spirited conversation was helped along by faculty and graduate student panel discussions.

"HOW TO WATCH A MOVIE: CHRISTIANS IN A CELLULOID CULTURE"

On March 3, James Walden and Steve Gregg concluded their five-week course on a Christian engagement with film. The class has established cinema as a place where the big questions of life are posed and as perhaps the most compelling art form of our day. The class began by considering film as art and by encouraging students to reflect seriously on this art form. It then moved into an analysis of film technique, and of the ways that films deal with significant philosophical questions.

NEWS FROM THE STUDY CENTER

THIS SPRING AT THE CENTER

READING GROUP—THE WORKS OF ANNIE DILLARD

Throughout the spring semester, we are looking into the works of Pulitzer-prize winning author Annie Dillard. Dillard has a keen and observant eye for recognizing both the beautiful and tragic in life. In February, we read and discussed *Pilgrim at Tinker Creek*. Other discussions are: March 20, *Teaching a Stone to Talk* (essays) and April 24, *The Living* (a novel). Discussions take place at noon in the Conference Room at the Study Center.

READING GROUP—CHRISTIANITY AND THE ARTS

Specifically for those working in and studying the arts, this group is currently reading *The Mind of the Maker* by Dorothy Sayers. The group will meet two times throughout the rest of the spring: 9:00 pm on March 3rd and April 7th in the Conference Room at the Study Center.

“THE CHURCH IN THE WORLD”

Based on the graduate course he is currently teaching at Reformed Theological Seminary, the Center's director Richard Horner will teach this class. Dr. Horner will address the question of how the church might best exist as congregated and dispersed in the world. The class will meet on Mondays beginning March 17th and going through April 21st at 7:30 p.m. at the Christian Study Center.

THE CULTURE SEMINAR PRESENTS J. KAMERON CARTER ON FREDERICK DOUGLASS

J. Kameron Carter is Assistant Professor of Theology and Black Church Studies at Duke Divinity School. He will be giving a lecture on Tuesday, March 25, 4:00 p.m., at the Keene Faculty Center (Dauer Hall) on the University of Florida campus. The lecture is titled “ ‘It was a Glorious Resurrection...’: On the Paschal Shape of Black Existence in Douglass' 1845 Narrative.” Dr. Carter was originally scheduled for the fall, but due to travel difficulties, he had to reschedule.

BUILDING FUND UPDATE

We are very happy and thankful to report that we have seen significant progress toward the fundraising goal for the classroom addition that will seat 75 people. Recent contributions specifically toward this fund have brought it up to over \$32,000, and we are preparing to start the project. However, we still need a substantial amount to reach our goal of \$50,000 to complete this and numerous other building projects that also need attention. Thanks to our faithful and generous contributors who are helping us move ahead. Contributions to help us reach our goal can be made through the form on the last page.

— BOOKS WORTH READING —
Patrick Kee

James Davison Hunter, *Culture Wars: The Struggle to Define America*, (Basic Books, 1991), and *The Death of Character: Moral Education in an Age Without Good or Evil*, (Basic Books, 2000).

In his recent lecture “Moral Discourse and Its Ironies,” James Davison Hunter confessed his interest in the work of understanding how moral pluralism is possible and in the implications of pluralism for society. These same questions drive his work in *Culture Wars* and *The Death of Character*. In *Culture Wars*, he sees sources of moral authority at the heart of competing cultural worldviews. These worldviews are driven by differences that he says, “go all the way down.” This is not mere shifting on a spectrum; this is the collision of cultural worlds. Much of *Culture Wars* addresses this point. Here Hunter carefully and systematically traces the historic development of the moral sources of authority in America. At stake, fundamentally, is the attempt to define major social institutions in America. This plays itself out in matters of the family, education, art, law and politics.

Hunter delineates two major sides in the debates, and he attempts to be the arbiter between these feuding factions. *Culture Wars* is not an apocalyptic treatment of American culture with the doom of democracy looming on the horizon; however, the polarization of the two cultural camps does represent a serious threat to American culture. *Culture Wars* calls for dialogue between “progressive” camps and “orthodox” camps in the cultural conflict. Hunter wants to keep both sides talking. The danger comes when each side thinks the other has nothing to offer. The loss of dialogue starts the struggle for absolute power—one side of the cultural conflict imposing itself on the other in an attempt at control. Hunter’s questions to each camp at the end of the book not only raise legitimate concerns, but also force each group to consider its position from the mindset of its cultural opposite. Hunter asks the progressive camp to consider whether moral pluralism should be allowed to grow unchecked. Aren’t there certain answers to moral questions that should be opposed? Hunter asks the orthodox camp if a nineteenth century moral ethos can be brought to bear using political means and a top-down approach? *Culture Wars*, while having a sense of warning about it, maintains optimism for the future of this conflict.

Almost a decade later, however, that optimism has waned as Hunter talks of character as a casualty of the culture war. In *The Death of Character*, Hunter writes, “Character is dead. Attempts to revive it will yield little. Its time has passed.” (xiii) Hunter’s eulogy of Character is short and to the point. He laments that the cultural and social conditions needed for the cultivation of character have been eroded. Indeed, “it is in the evacuation of depth, stability, and substance of culture where we witness the death of character.” (xiv) It would seem that Americans have recognized their problem; they just cannot fix it.

As in his lecture, Hunter discusses the ironies in the attempt to respond to pluralism with a strategy of inclusiveness. Talking about moral sources is an emotionally charged debate. One is tinkering with what Emile Durkheim called the “sacred,” that which orders one’s perception of the world. It is a messy business. People can and will get their feelings hurt. Inclusivity is the tonic applied to deal with the problem of expanding moral pluralism. Instead of holding to one’s moral sources, those sources are emptied of their particular meaning. They become abstractions to which any definition can be applied. The problem is the more viewpoints the system tries to embrace, the more abstract the concept of morality must become to accommodate them all. Morality becomes some “thin platitude” that cannot and will not hold. Hunter summarizes his point by stating, “when one couples a steady evacuation of a cultural habitus with the weakening of key socializing institutions, one has, in effect, undermined the social and cultural conditions necessary for the cultivation of good character.” (225)

The Death of Character ends with a far less favorable assessment of the culture of America. Here, Hunter calls for Khunian paradigmatic changes or revolutions to turn the tide of the evacuation of morality. Even with the more dire approach of *The Death of Character*, however, the idea of dialogue still holds some hope for Hunter. The possibility of dialogue should perhaps hold hope for us all, in whatever community we find ourselves. American society is one that is currently characterized by fear, but all the more reason to break through fear and talk about shared concerns and deep differences that unite and divide us all.

*Patrick Kee is a graduate student
 in theological studies at
 Reformed Theological Seminary
 in Orlando, Florida*

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the overall norms? This is the question that Charles Taylor poses in his book, *Sources of the Self*. Taylor suggests that it is the particularities that lead us to the sources of morality—the sources that sustain our commitment to goodness and fair play. The answers to moral questions speak of the higher purposes that take us beyond ourselves and that make morality compelling. It's one thing to affirm general standards of goodness, Taylor says, and quite another to be motivated to act according to them. The latter is rooted in a strong understanding that human beings are eminently worth helping or treating with justice, a sense of their dignity or value. High ethical standards, Taylor argues, require strong sources and without them there is little imperative and no direction for moral action.

To see moral education as presently practiced in this larger context brings a number of ironies into relief. I will mention just two in conclusion. The first irony is this: that the subjectivism and emotivism of the psychological strategy, that spills out into the other strategies as well, reflects a moral cosmology that is not so universal and not so objective after all. This is to say that the quest for inclusive morality has succeeded only in propagating a moral culture with its own distinctive set of prejudices and its own distinct method of indoctrination. In other words, it feels

inclusive only to those who share its assumptions and its moral horizons.

A second irony has to do with the role of moral education in the larger society. The purpose of moral education is to change people for the better and in so doing to improve the quality of life in society. That is, individually and collectively we are to become better people than we might otherwise become. The difficulty is that moral education, as it is presently configured and institutionalized, is utterly captive to the society in which it exists. It embodies very well the normative assumptions that have brought the social order to its present place and that continue to maintain it. It is, in so many respects, a reflection of the moral order it seeks to transcend and then transform. In this regard it is clear that moral education, even in its diversity and its oppositions, is more a story about the legitimization of American culture than it is about its transformation. In this we have a continuation of patterns well established in history. In every context, in every generation in America the evolving substance of moral education has reflected the central assumptions and ideals of the prevailing Zeitgeist. It's no different in our present moment.

James Davison Hunter is Kenan Professor of Sociology and Religion at the University of Virginia

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The Christian Study Center of Gainesville exists in order to encourage the university community in the exploration of a biblical understanding of life and culture.

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