
REVIEWS

Winsome Persuasion: Christian Influence in a Post-Christian World by Tim Muehlhoff and Richard Langer. Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2017. 192 pp. \$22.00 Paperback.

Tim Muehlhoff and Richard Langer's *Winsome Persuasion: Christian Influence in a Post-Christian World* is a rhetorical handbook for Christian conservatives who want to engage with secular society. Casting their audience as a *counterpublic*, Muehlhoff and Langer draw on the classical art of persuasion to recommend speech strategies for the exigencies of the moment. An accessible blend of theory and practice, the work encourages readers to join the public conversation in ways that will be edifying both to their interlocutors and to God. If they take this counsel seriously, these readers may help to mollify the rhetorical violence of our obstinate cultural war. *Winsome Persuasion* is driven by admirable intentions, and there is much to commend the book in both form and content. Another review might easily devote three pages to enumerating and praising these qualities. Instead, this review will grapple with a pair of problems that arise in the Introduction and haunt the text throughout.

The first of these concerns the question of whether Christian conservatives qualify as a true counterpublic. Muehlhoff and Langer invoke Daniel Brouwer to define counterpublicity in reference to any minority group that employs a trio of strategies: *opposition*, *withdrawal*, and *engagement*. Though a counterpublic may be united by a shared perception of exclusion, its members must present evidence to legitimize their posture before the dominant public and to mobilize their concerted opposition against it. This process prompts an organized withdrawal from the public and opens channels for communication both within and beyond the resultant group. Messages directed from the counterpublic to the public constitute its plan of engagement, and must navigate a variety of discursive challenges. Do Christian conservatives fit this bill?

There is no doubt that *they want to*. Indeed, the Christian tradition has always drawn upon an oppositional ethos, invoked by turns from the Roman Coliseum to the Masterpiece Cakeshop. But as Muehlhoff and Langer concede, the breach separating their American constituency from the political mainstream is—both historically and at present—vanishingly thin (pg. 5). For one thing, Christian conservatives are an overwhelmingly white and self-consciously straight demographic, meaning that they have not faced the sort of marginalization and discrimination familiar to racial and sexual minorities. For another, they are a strongly middle-class assemblage, populating affluent megachurches and generally avoiding the obstacles that commonly confront poorer movements. Finally, for a third, they are closely aligned with the Republican Party, the political entity that currently controls the White House and both houses of Congress, as well as most state governorships and legislatures. Their most recognizable thought leaders have the ear of the President, and their legal watchdogs argue cases before the Supreme Court—a body with its own conservative advantage. Though they no longer represent the majority viewpoint where same-sex marriage is concerned, Christian

conservatives wield a degree of public influence that commands the envy of counterpublics nationwide. It may be argued persuasively that they hope to marshal the rhetorical force of a radical ethos without ever running the risks or carrying the material burdens of actual counterpublicity. Though Muehlhoff and Langer do grant this tension early in the text, they dispense with it a little too quickly.

The second problem is related to the first, and it concerns the question of whether Christian conservatives—understood as a counterpublic or not—carry the moral authority to wield “Christian influence” in the public at large. In their Introduction, Muehlhoff and Langer warn readers that their community suffers from a serious problem of ethos. They cite data from a 2007 Barna poll in which 87 percent of respondents viewed evangelicals as “judgmental” and 85 percent viewed them as “hypocritical,” making it unlikely that such a compromised Christian witness could convict the public conscience on matters of importance (pg. 4). And yet, despite the shocking severity of these figures, Muehlhoff and Langer acknowledge that many of their readers are not likely to be troubled by them. These include, first, those who claim Donald Trump’s victory as their own, and, second, those who just do not care what the public thinks, since “we know that the world will hate us even as they hated Jesus” (pp. 5-6). This, apparently, is the Christian conservatism most recognizable to the poll-responding public, pairing a profound self-consciousness with an equally profound obliviousness and so raising legitimate doubts about both the sincerity of their mission and the efficacy of any rhetorical handbook that finds its way into their inflexible hands. To their credit, Muehlhoff and Langer disavow this thinking. But the scolding is soft.

One logical consequence of their claimed counterpublicity is that Christian conservatives imagine themselves to be unfairly maligned by the dominant public. They commonly attribute this belief to the special nature of Christian redemption in a fallen world. If it were true that the secular public “hates” Christians because of their association with Jesus Christ, then perhaps an oppositional posture might be justified—as it clearly is in so many of these minds. But the reality is both very different and far less convenient. If anything, the figures reported in the Barna poll reflect a public that is familiar enough with Jesus Christ to recognize how poorly he is being represented in some quarters. The dominant public does not hate Jesus, and it does not hate Christian conservatives for believing in him. But neither does it suffer the posturing of hypocrites, and it does perceive Christian conservatives to be hypocritical. This was a major problem as of 2007, and there have been some notable developments in the years since. In November of 2016, for example, 81 percent of white evangelical Christian voters cast their ballots for Donald Trump, effectively wedding their public reputation to that of America’s most famously unrepentant, philandering, racist demagogue, doing so only three weeks after the release of audio in which he was heard to brag about his routine practice of sexual assault. Was that a hypocritical act? At this point, does it matter? Muehlhoff and Langer, to be clear, advocate a rhetorical posture much more civil and reasonable than that accompanying the Trump wave in American evangelicalism. And yet, conscious of its influence within their target readership, they miss an opportunity to confront that posture with the candor that it deserves.

Winsome Persuasion has nearly 200 pages, and the vast majority of them cover practical matters that are not addressed in this review. These include discussions about building credibility, crafting and delivering a message, and establishing loose connections with potential allies, among other relevant topics. But for readers who observe the

Christian conservative community from the outside or the margins, it will be difficult to consider Muehlhoff and Langer's commendable effort without drifting recurrently into thoughts of the Titanic's deck chairs. For all of its strengths, the book is too quick to accept an easy narrative of Christians-against-the-world, and far too sanguine on the prospects for Christian conservative engagement during and after Trump. Trust is a notoriously difficult bridge to build. For much of the American public—especially the young, the immigrants, and the citizens of color—this bridge, already broken, has been effectively burnt.

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