

Cite as follows: Connable, Sean (2017). *Winsome Persuasion: Christian Influence in a Post-Christian World*, by Tim Muehlhoff and Richard Langer (Downers Grove, IL: IVP Academic, 2017), xii + 190 pages, \$22.00 (paperback) [Book Review]. *Journal of Christian Teaching Practice* 3(2), <http://www.theccsn.com/networked-theology-negotiating-faith-in-digital-culture-review-by-annalee-ward/> [a publication of the Christianity and Communication Studies Network, www.theccsn.com, copyright 2017]



[Sean Connable](#), Ph.D., Christopher Newport University

In *Winsome Persuasion: Christian Influence in a Post-Christian World*, Tim Muehlhoff and Richard Langer provide an interesting and thoughtful perspective on the means by which Christians might engage with the broader culture, while providing some insight into the manner in which communication, as a discipline, can speak to some of the significant challenges that exist in a contentious communication context. The authors begin with the premise that civility, particularly within the American public square, seems to be something that exists in short supply. These tensions come into sharp relief when we consider the somewhat conflicting nature of the Christian’s existence within a secular world, to be “in the world, but not of it”—a concept expressed in biblical passages such as John 17:14-15 or Romans 12:2. In order to navigate these tensions, the authors suggest the notion of counterpublics as a means of shifting Christian (particularly evangelical) discourse from a pastoral or prophetic voice into one that functions more persuasively in the public sphere.

In Part I, the first four chapters of the book, Muehlhoff and Langer attempt to describe the counterpublic as a means of understanding how we might engage a secular/non-religious/post-religious public for the purposes of constructing more effective arguments. In chapter 1, the authors describe the counterpublic as it stands in opposition to the public within the context of the public square. They draw upon the work of Daniel Brouwer (2006) to define three key characteristics of all counterpublics as opposition, withdrawal, and engagement. For a counterpublic to exist it must be able to see itself as excluded or outside the discussions of the community public, must collectively retreat from the public in order to work through shared understandings of the world, and then must re-engage with the public for the purpose of challenging the status quo. To be effective in their engagement of the dominant worldview, the counterpublic must be able to speak persuasively in the language of the public.

Chapter 2 explores the necessary features of a Christian counterpublic through the application of Brouwer’s three characteristics. In terms of opposition, the authors point to the clear tensions between the secular and sacred worlds. In particular, they make note of the impact that hyperbolic culture war discourse has on the larger community. They argue that such rhetoric conditions believers to “interpret mere disagreement as personal attack” (33), all while creating the possibility for creating a self-fulfilling prophecy—that it exists, in part, because we look for it to exist. In order to effectively engage such a culture, the authors suggest that we withdraw in order to discuss and understand the agenda we wish to pursue, one grounded, they argue, in a “restoration of God’s shalom” (34). The challenge in pursuing a biblical agenda, however, stems in part from a variety of interpretations and understandings of the Christian agenda, as a public, in terms of biblically-grounded priorities. This assessment echoes the writings of authors such as

Christian Smith and others who critically engage many of the traditional narratives that tend to guide our decision-making and meaning-making as a public. In terms of engagement with the public sphere, the authors argue that we need to consider the scope and nature of the target audience, focusing on a perspective that is tolerant of differing opinions while engaging them locally. This echoes the criticism of some that the evangelical focus on the Great Commission (Matthew 28:16-20), at times, may fundamentally blind Christians to the call for the church to engage and act locally.

Chapter 3 shifts away from the Christian counterpublic and focuses instead on how this reorientation of perspective changes the way in which Christians interact with ideas within the public square. More specifically, the authors engage the notion of scripted argument and ways that an orientation grounded in counterpublicity can address complex issues such as the misconception that consideration equals acceptance; valuing the individual monologue over the dialogue; demonization; and disinhibition in online spaces. The authors make the argument that, “due to God’s compassionate relationship with us” (61), the primary response of the Christian counterpublic should likewise be grounded in compassion. The model of compassion they offer is grounded in principles of unconditional caring for others, sympathy and empathy, and confrontation of the uncompassionate. Chapter 4, in some ways, extends the conversation of interaction between the Christian counterpublic and the public square by exploring the manner in which Christians may function credibly as a counterpublic. Here, the authors revisit Aristotle’s notion of ethos and how Christian counterpublicity might demonstrate wisdom and virtue, as it engages, at times, a contentious public. The chapter concludes with the authors exploring the complexity of credibility as it relates to digital expressions of public life.

Part II of the book shifts from the counterpublic as a theoretical framework to the manner in which a Christian counterpublic can begin to operate out of a persuasive voice. The arguments of chapters 4 (in Part I) and 5 (in Part II) seem to be grounded, to some extent, in the work of Lloyd Bitzer (“The Rhetorical Situation,” *Philosophy and Rhetoric* 1, no. 1 [January 1968]) as it applies to the Augustinian notion that a “message [can] be deeply—and even mystically—transmitted through a creative presentation” (106). The content presented here lacks, in some ways, the novelty of some of the ideas presented in the first part of the book. What is offered, however, is a carefully considered discussion on the ways in which audience, commonplaces (called universal arguments by Muehlhoff and Langer), plausibility, timely and fitting responses, and knowledge of constraints intersect in the creation of compassionate arguments. One issue with this re-articulation of Bitzer’s rhetorical situation is that it does not explore the concept in its complexity (and so for a deeper dive interested readers should consider the Bitzer article mentioned above). This may be due, in part, to the constraints that stem from both publication venue as well as a somewhat (albeit intentional) narrow audience. As a result, less time is paid to their treatment of rhetorical situation and the possibility that Richard E. Vatz (“The Myth of the Rhetorical Situation,” 1973) and others have suggested that the situation we are addressing through discourse does not exist at all and is simply a product of our own creation. Chapter 7 concludes Part II by addressing the notion of *loose connections*, or “informal, temporary, and topic specific” (135) connections at a smaller, more communal level. Here the authors again return to the arguments they offered in the first part of the book, steering their readers toward the important notion of public discourse that is rooted in community.

Part III of the book offers each author's perspective on how the Christian community should respond to the Supreme Court of the United States' decision on same-sex marriage. Like the historical sketches periodically offered at the end of some of the book's chapters, these perspectives provide a practical grounding for the principles of civil counterpublicity. The nature of these chapters, however, might present challenges to several of the authors' key arguments in the book. For instance, the title of Part III is *Pressing Questions for Christian Counterpublics*, but what is offered are two perspectives on a single question, as though the main site or prime example of contentious discourse for the Christian counterpublic to address is that of same-sex marriage and the LGBT community. On one hand, this is certainly an important question that the evangelical community needs to address with careful and prayerful consideration, and one that few readers have seriously and intelligently reflected upon. As such, readers will benefit greatly from this discussion. On the other hand, there is a wide and diverse constellation of pressing questions that the authors could have chosen, including but not limited to the integration of politics and faith, abortion, immigration, as well as other sites of tension between the sacred and secular spheres. As such, their treatment of only one question may limit the audience's ability to understand fully the true and timely utility of their project.

This book begins with the assumption that Christians *are* the counterpublic, that they are the contested countercultural minority, and that the motivations that drive their decisions are not, in part, at the intersection of their identity within multiple publics. In some cases, the contentious situations the Christian is called to speak into are a product of Christian publics themselves. Not exploring Blitzer's rhetorical situation in greater depth as noted above may place some constraint on the measure of impact this book might have beyond the classroom.

As a classroom tool, this text serves as a solid introduction to a different kind of thinking—a means by which the evangelical voice might find traction within secular culture. It offers us interesting questions regarding the Christian public's right to speak. This book would likely not stand as the singular text in light of the aforementioned critiques; rather it should be presented alongside the works of both sacred and secular scholars to provide a full and theoretically rich treatment of the subject of counterpublicity and religious persuasion.

I applaud *Winsome Persuasion* and believe that the author's intended goal is notable and noteworthy. In the larger frame beyond its pages, it provides readers with important reminders and opportunities for additional conversations and explorations. For instance, evangelical identity is complex. At times, we are not the marginalized public but rather a dominant voice that has defined the status quo for good or for ill. We are wise, therefore, not to limit our discussion of important questions or hot button issues; if we do, we miss the opportunity to demonstrate how our perspective sheds lights on a number of subjects that make difficult the hard work of being "in the world, but not of it."

Winsome Persuasion is exquisitely timely, and it offers an important introduction into the conversation about how religious culture should engage in the public square. It offers Christian educators an opportunity to introduce students to the rich conversations about where theory and praxis connect to faith and allows educators to immerse students in a rich intellectual tradition beyond its pages to understand better how important the arguments it makes are. It proposes means by which the practice of faith in the public square might benefit from the musings of the

academic world. It offers practical examples that clearly demonstrate its principles and makes clear how counterpublicity, through compassion, might offer inroads to returning to a civil, informed conversation about difficult subjects.