How to be Political: Smith's Primer for Pilgrim Citizens

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Abstract

This paper sets *Awaiting the King* against the background of the previous volumes in Smith's Cultural Liturgies trilogy, and outlines this book's argument for readers not familiar with it, bringing out the influence of St Augustine and Oliver O'Donovan. It draws attention to Smith's responses within the book to earlier critics and, in turn, points towards two lines of critique of it.

Keywords

James K.A. Smith, political formation, participation, citizenship

James K.A. Smith's latest book, *Awaiting the King*, completes his three-volume 'Cultural Liturgies' series.

In the previous volumes, *Desiring the Kingdom: Worship, Worldview, and Cultural Formation* and *Imagining the Kingdom: How Worship Works*, [1] Smith set out the goal of the series as the renewal of Christian practice *in the light of* what he calls a liturgical anthropology, *in which humans are identified* as fundamentally worshipping creatures.

Smith is particularly seeking to contest what he sees as the very cognitive 'worldview' approach of his own Reformed tradition, which, he argues, in emphasising knowledge and understanding as leading to wise living, tends to create the impression that humans are primarily thinking beings. Against this 'bobble head' anthropology,[2] Smith draws on Augustine to argue that we are actually creatures made for worship and constituted by what we desire, and that knowledge follows from desire, not vice versa. Acknowledging this pre-cognitive mode of being as foundational means recognising that what we love is formed not primarily through conscious decisions, but through bodily practices. Smith therefore argues that Christians must learn to attend better to and to exegete the 'liturgical' practices in which they participate daily, whose *teloi* are often at odds with those of the kingdom of God. To this end, Smith seeks to expose and diagnose the ways in which our cultural, economic, and political practices are not neutral activities that we undertake but are always doing something to us, shaping us towards one implicit vision of the good life or another (see, for instance, his descriptions of the formative power of shopping malls).

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[1] Respectively, Grand Rapids, IL: Baker, 2009, and 2013.
[2] *Desiring the Kingdom*, pp. 41-42.

Having set out in the first volume the argument that we should be more concerned with the 'formation of a peculiar people' than with the 'dissemination of Christian ideas',[3] Smith's concern in *Imagining the Kingdom* is to articulate how worship, the Christian liturgy, can shape our imaginations such that we are empowered to transform the world into the image of God's kingdom. To this end he draws on the conceptualisations of *habitus* and narrative in the work of Maurice Merleau-Ponty and Pierre Bourdieu, arguing that the way we perceive and inhabit the world is foundationally shaped by our imaginations. Understanding our nature as 'storied' creatures, Smith examines the question of how the liturgical practices of the Church can become the Christian's primary rather than secondary 'repertoire' – that is, how ecclesial practices can fundamentally capture and orient the imagination.[4]

If the first volume is about how we are formed by our culture, and the second is about how the Church's liturgies offer a rival and resistive formation, Smith turns in *Awaiting the King* to how formation as disciples both takes place through and equips Christians for participation in political life. If all human beings are creatures shaped by their desires, then Christians too cannot help but always be directing their allegiance and loyalty toward some desired thing or person. For Smith (following Augustine), this directing of allegiance (whether undertaken consciously or not) is a

[3] *Desiring the Kingdom*, p. 31
[4] *Imagining the Kingdom*, pp. 115-116

political act, and so, 'the question isn't *whether* to "be political"; the question is *how*' (p. 216).

In framing his answer to this, Smith rejects two common approaches: Christians are not to retreat into apolitical clubs or fortified bunkers, disengaged from the secular world, nor are they to pledge the Church to a wholesale political activism on the terms of surrounding culture. Smith sees the neo-Kuyperian tradition as having a particular tendency to fall into the activist mode of political engagement, in which Christians give over questions of ultimate good to the authorities of the *saeculum*. Thus, in participating in secular politics, Christians are unwittingly captured by cultural rituals which are rivals to the Gospel for our allegiance and love (p. 39). Against this activism, Smith sees the Church as already a political body. Continuing to follow Augustine, he argues that recognising that we are already and ultimately citizens of heaven should lead to a reorientation of our political desires. Yet he is clear that this citizenship is not fully expressed in any earthly institution – so the Church should not be understood as a counter-society.

Smith had originally envisaged this volume issuing a 'come-to-Yoder altar call' to Reformed churches (p. xi), finding in his own tradition a tendency to understand common grace as an affirmation of the political status quo. Against this, he saw a need to retrieve a more fully articulated ecclesiology – including an account of the Church as a community that already has its own (formative) polity – and a retrieval of the

'antithetical', prophetic Reformed voice, by which the 'deformative' practices of totalising rival political liturgies would be exposed (p. xi). However, this was not the book Smith ended up writing. Instead, he was drawn into engaging closely with Oliver O'Donovan's body of work, alongside Smith's own ongoing dialogue with Augustine. Through this new project of translating O'Donovan and Augustine for a non-specialist audience, Smith came to see his task in this book as equipping political practitioners with theological resources for their work in the world, and reshaping the thinking and practices of Christians currently working with quietist or hyper-activist political theologies (p. xii).

To this end, Smith fills out what he takes to be implicit in Hauerwas and proposes a posture of 'holy ambivalence' in Christian political engagement (p. 16). Building on his earlier critique of spatial understandings of Church and world, he uses O'Donovan to offer a temporal account of political life in the *saeculum*, arguing that 'we live in the seasons of contested rule where the principalities and powers continue to grasp after an authority that has been taken from them' (p. 160). The reality of the rule of Christ renders all earthly authority penultimate and the local church must shoulder its task of forming Christians oriented toward 'a good creaturely desire to build communities of cooperation beyond the comfort of kith and kin – to love our neighbours by building institutions for human flourishing', whilst also resisting 'the fallen penchant to absolutize the penultimate, to confuse the political with the eternal' (p. 18).

For Christians, Smith suggests, politics begins in the Church as the 'political center of gravity' (p. 160), explored through O'Donovan's account of the political patterning of the people of God developed in Scripture. It is from this centre that Christians learn to exercise 'careful discernment', so that they may 'cautiously affirm and selectively participate in some of [late modern liberalism's] institutions and rhythms' (p. 122), seeking the peace of the shared earthly city. Yet attainment of penultimate goods in common is not the only aim of participation: Christ's sovereignty over all means that participation in the politics of the *saeculum* is also done as public witness to the character of the politics of the people of God.

Whilst Smith's critique of dominant modes of Christian political engagement – quietism and unreflective activism – grows out of a diagnosis of North American Protestant churches, it carries a wider resonance. This is partly due to the breadth of voices corralled by Smith, spanning ecclesial traditions and academic disciplines. His clear and succinct summaries of important but often dense and difficult texts are also very valuable, as is the way he brings these to life through frequent use of illustrations drawn from film, literature, and music (like in previous volumes).

Smith's dual aim is particularly distinctive and to be welcomed: seeking to enable those in the Church to think anew theologically about the political (and to see their participation differently as a result), whilst also equipping those already working in

public roles and political institutions with theological tools to address and discern how their work can fit with their practices oriented towards citizenship of heaven.

More than in either previous volume, in *Awaiting the King* Smith acknowledges and responds to criticism levelled at his project – particularly with respect to the undeniable truth that many church-attending Christians live less than saintly lives: if worship practices are formative, why are there 'people who have spent lifetimes immersed in the rites of historic Christian worship who nonetheless emerge … unformed … [or] even malformed' (p. 167)? Smith calls this 'the Godfather problem', after Michael Corleone's skin-deep renunciation of evil during the baptismal service of his godson, whilst a series of brutal assassinations are carried out by his orders. Here Smith heeds his own earlier call to attend to the Church's historical relationship with secular politics and spends some time in close engagement with the work of Willie Jennings and Ephraim Radner in order to show how the Church has often been 'captured' by worldly liturgies, assimilating to the often prejudicial and oppressive practices of rival kingdoms (pp. 170-179; 181-186).

Yet it is not quite enough to highlight that the Church's liturgies are too weakly embodied. More could be done here to explore the complexity of the life of the Church – in particular, how power relations operate in the *ekklesia*. For it is not only the case that Church is responsible for oppression when it is co-opted by other rival liturgies;

Jennings's account of 'ecclesial failure',[5] with which Smith engages, also necessitates acknowledging the way the Church has not only replicated oppression, but also instigated it (and continues to do so). Jennings clearly sees the colonial logic of slavery as drawing its power from theology, rather than simply being a political agenda that was provided with a post hoc theological justification.[6] Whilst Smith notes the Church's complicity in 'enfolding' the injustices of slavery into its own liturgical narrative (p. 172), he does not fully carry through Jennings's insights in his argument.

A thicker account is needed, therefore, of malformation in the life of the Church if readers are truly to be equipped to discern the formative power of the practices in which they participate, and 'antithetically' to call out injustices encoded not only in the practices of the surrounding culture but also in the liturgies of the Church. This entails recognising the limitations of any single person's ability to discern injustices, particularly those which do not oppress the one doing the discerning. Thus, Smith's account of the role of the pastor theologian as unveiling rival liturgies (pp. 194-197) requires supplementing with an awareness that it is often the case that the pastor also needs to be brought to see the injustices enshrined in their own ecclesial practice by members of their congregation and wider community.

[5] Willie James Jennings, *The Christian Imagination*: *Theology and the Origins of Race* (Yale University Press, 2010) p. 247.
[6] Jennings, *The Christian Imagination*, p. 22.

This leads us to consider Smith's presentation of the relationship between Church and world as ultimately in competition with one another. There is certainly truth in this, but it is not the whole story. As Christian Scharen demonstrates in his ethnographic work on the relationship between community and congregational identity, we can be positively as well as negatively shaped by the Church's relationship with the world.[7] This includes the possibility that Christians might be positively formed *as Christians* through participating in the political practices of the world, not simply working out in those political practices a formation they have already received in the Church's worship. A more developed pneumatology, such as is offered in the first two volumes, might allow for a richer account of the Spirit at work outside of the Church in encounters that are gifts to the Christian.

In spite of these limitations, *Awaiting the King* offers a richly informative and generative account of how Christians are to act according to their nature as political animals. As such, it can equip them to take on their mantle as 'faithful citizens of the heavenly city' by learning how actively to wait, 'bearing witness to kingdom come' (p. 18).

[7] Christian Scharen, *Public Worship and Public Work: Character and Commitment in Local Congregational Life* (Liturgical Press, 2004).