Devil Reads Derrida (and Other Essays on the University, the Church, Politics, and the Arts) (Book Review)

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Don’t let the title scare you off. You don’t have to understand Derrida to understand Smith—you don’t even have to know who Derrida is, though you might want to find out after you have read the clever little title essay. In it Smith quotes a speech by fashion-czar Miranda (Meryl Streep) from the movie The Devil Wears Prada in which Miranda chastises her assistant Andy for her scornful attitude toward fashion, showing how the lumpy cerulean sweater she’s wearing is the color it is because of what Oscar de la Renta and St Laurent did several years earlier. In other words, you are affected by the actions of the fashion world whether you know it or not. And in the same way that French fashion trickles down to the stuff you buy from the “Nearly New” store, French philosophy and Post-Modern thought from philosophers like Derrida, Smith suggests, can affect how you think and act.

And that, in a nutshell, is what the book seeks to reveal: Our cultural attitudes and experiences are formed and come out of a post-modern soup that has been significantly seasoned by the likes of Foucault and Derrida. Smith wants us to know these philosophers. But Smith, a philosophy professor at Calvin College, is not addressing philosophers in these essays, or even, primarily, academics. Noting that Christian academics and the laity of their denominations often seem to inhabit parallel worlds that rarely intersect, Smith suggests that this disconnect has happened because Christian professors wish (rightly) to speak to their colleagues in the larger academic world. Unfortunately, this desire to speak to fellow academicians is accompanied by a fear of engaging in popular or mainstream discourse. Smith, however, believes that writing for the “normal” reader is one of the important tasks of Christian scholars. Their failure in this area has resulted in James Dobson, an Arminian Nazarene, having more influence on the Reformed community than do our best intellectuals.

Most of the twenty-nine essays in this book are short (about five pages) and are written in a “popular” writing style. They are grouped in four broad categories: On Discipleship, On the University, On Politics and the Church, and Criticism. Many of the essays are responses—to a book, a movie, an article or an event—and this grounding of an idea in a particular situation gives them a strong sense of immediacy and relevance. I cannot, of course, tell you about each essay, but I will give you a thumbnail sketch of a few of them.

In “Are Men Really Wild at Heart” Smith takes a close look at John Eldridge’s immensely popular book and the phenomenon that it created, and then kindly—but firmly and methodically—he destroys Eldridge’s arguments by setting them against the truth of scripture. Having taught a capstone course at Dordt where the Wild at Heart phenomenon became an issue, I wanted to cheer when I finished reading Smith’s analysis.

Ordinary readers may find some of the essays in the Criticism section of the book hard-going, but “Passing on The Passion” offers trenchant criticism not only of Mel Gibson’s movie but also of the way it was misused by the church and Christian business organizations.

The occasion of President Bush’s speaking at the Calvin College commencement exercises causes Smith in “A Commencement, a Wedding and an Alternative Politics” to ask why Christian Reformed folk “so closely identify being faithful with being committed to a party that privileges the wealthy, is aggressively militaristic and caters to the nouveau riche of late capitalism?” But instead of joining with the professors who protest the speech, Smith suggests that the laity’s party affiliation represents a failure of Christian academicians (at Calvin and most Christian colleges) to do the “hard long work of discipleship and formation in the churches.”

“Are Students Consumers?” is a brilliant critique of the tendency of colleges and universities to treat education as a product, their particular college as a “brand,” and students as consumers. It ought to be required reading for all college employees.

In “Teaching a Calvinist to Dance,” Smith, formerly a Pentecostal, asks why Reformed worship ignores the body and treats worshippers as if they were “brains-on-a-stick.”

But another essay on worship suggests, far more radically, that our worship ought to be “public disturbance” in the way that the post-Pentecost preaching of the apostles was. This essay, “Christian Worship as Public Disturbance,” begins the section On Politics and the Church, and that is the right place for it. In it he argues that Christians must be committed to a government that seeks “justice and mercy, not power and the accumulation of goods.”

When it comes to politics and the church, clearly Smith does not put himself into the camp of either the religious right or the Christian left, claiming that both are guilty of Constantinian triumphalism and both are too willing to compromise with the State. Nor does he endorse the “piflist” dualism that entirely separates church and faith from political involvement.

What he does not make entirely clear, however, is how Christians should be involved in politics, though implicit in several of the other essays in the section Politics and the Church is the idea that Christians can most powerfully influence the political sphere by public worship and by quiet personal actions of justice and mercy in the world. This is how the apostles “turned the world upside down,” he says. In “How to Get Your Hands Dirty,” for example, Smith criticizes both Jim Wallis of Sojourners and Ted Haggard (former) president of the National Association of Evangelicals for “getting into bed with the state.” And he presents as a different and more effective model for getting one’s hands dirty in political action “pacifists who minister to the wounded” and “those who celebrate the Eucharist as politics.”

About fifty years ago Eerdmans published a highly influential book of essays by another Calvin professor, Henry Zylstra; Smith’s book is in a small way reminiscent of that book, A Testament of Vision. Both books are concerned with the relationship between Christians and culture, but while Zylstra writes primarily about literary culture, Smith cuts a broader swath—poetry, film, politics, worship, consumerism and more. Zylstra’s style leans toward the formal and away from the “popular,” and most of his essays are long when compared to Smith’s. But both are passionate about the need for Christians to engage culture and earnest about cultivating discernment within the Christian community. One Smith essay in particular, “Dumbing Down Discernment,” echoes Zylstra’s commitment to “high” culture and also his regret that classical allusions and wisdom are lost in our current age, subject as they are, according to Smith, to the “tyranny of the contemporary.”

In The Devil Reads Derrida, Smith successfully achieves what he has challenged other scholars to do: he writes
about significant issues of our time, grounding them in political or theological or philosophical schools of thought, yet making them accessible to the lay reader.

Read it with your spouse after breakfast or in the car on your vacation—as my wife and I read it. Read it one essay at a time as you grab a cup of coffee in the morning. Read it with a class of Freshman composition students—it is a model of clear, coherent prose. Read it with your book club or an adult church school class.

*The Devil Reads Derrida* is a fetching little book, well worth your time and money. You won’t always agree with Smith, but you will find him fair, and you will discover that he forces you to reevaluate the way you look at some of the important issues of your faith and life.


The maxim of a fifth-century lay monk, Prosper of Aquitaine, *ut legem credendi lex statuat supplicandi* (the law of praying establishes the law of believing) has long been the stock-in-trade of liturgical theologians. More popularly, it is cited as *lex orandi, lex credendi* or as Leonel Mitchell puts it, *Praying Shapes Believing* (Winston, 1985). What (and how) we worship shapes our hearts and characters, also our beliefs.

Prosper was a defender of Augustine during the Pelagian controversy (410–431). It was Augustine who wrote, “Our hearts are restless until they rest in you” and whose *Confessions* elaborate on his desire to know and love God. Book ten of the *Confessions* begins with “May I know you, who know me. May I know as I also am known” (*cognoscam sicut et cognitus sum*). This knowing is a loving, desiring knowledge, a heart rather than a head knowledge—he knew plenty about the latter, but for him the head followed the heart. So, later in book ten he wrote, “With your word you pierced my heart and I loved you.”

James K.A. Smith, associate professor of philosophy and adjunct professor of congregational and ministry studies at Calvin College and executive director of the Society of Christian Philosophers, has provided us with a Prosperian-Augustinian take on the shaping of human consciousness in a postmodern age. His *Desiring the Kingdom* argues that it is the heart that leads because it is the heart that hunger for and loves the kingdom; and he imagines what that kingdom might be.

It is refreshing to read a philosopher writing about liturgy and theology. Smith is at home in the header territory of continental philosophy of religion (recent articles in *The Christian Philosopher* and *Modern Theology*), engaged with postmodernism in the church (*Who’s Afraid of Postmodernism*: *Taking Derrida, Lyotard, and Foucault to Church*, Baker 2006), and with Radical Orthodoxy (*Radical Orthodoxy and the Reformed Tradition: Creation, Covenant, and Participation*, co-editor, with James Olthius, Baker, 2005). In *Desiring the Kingdom*, Smith interacts with sociologists and psychologists as he reads popular culture.

Briefly, the book proposes “a theology of culture that understands human beings as embodied actors rather than merely thinking things; prioritizes practices rather than ideas as the site of challenge and resistance; looks at cultural practices through the lens of worship or liturgy; retains a robust sense of anti-theism without being simply anti-cultural” (35). Smith uses the image of radar to describe his attention to identity-forming practices that function like liturgies rather than to ideas. Radar picks up the signals about what is out there, but it needs to be aimed at significant targets, not decoys. Smith claims that focusing on worldviews alone aims at a decoy.

This understanding of human creatures places worldviews downstream, as the outflow of loves and desires being shaped by the practices of the mall with its rituals and practices that grab the heart of a person and direct the heart to a certain vision of the good life, i.e., the kingdom as marketplace. Once directed to this vision, the human then thinks her way to a consumerist worldview or is faced with the conflict of loving one vision and thinking or believing a contrary vision. As Graham Hughes has observed about modern worshipers, they “are thereby committed to finding for themselves some order of accommodation or reconciliation between the divergent sources of meaning to which they subscribe; their religious convictions, on the one hand, and, on the other, the sets of meanings in the larger society of which they are part and of which they are indubitably the products.”

Smith proposes that an understanding of humans as thinking (ideas) or believing (doctrines) beings underlies typical worldview proposals. He suggests a different philosophical anthropology—that humans are loving, desiring, worshiping creatures who then think and believe. Humans “intend” the world through their loves and desires. This intention aims at a vision of the good life, a picture of the kingdom. This intention is shaped by “bodily practices, routines, or rituals” that capture our hearts and form an imaginary view of the world. The human person is *homo liturgicus*—not *homo ratione* as in Descartes and modernity—a return to Augustine and premodernity (40).

It is Smith’s contention that when we put ideas forward as the key element in either character formation or culture formation, we miss much of the impact of daily “thick” practices that shape us when we’re not looking, at least not looking in the right place. To focus his proposal he visits the mall, the entertainment arena, and the university, analyzing their thick practices that shape us as consumers; violent,