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3-16-2022

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# “Dancing in the Minefields”: A Review of *The Nicene Option*

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March 16, 2022

**Title:** *The Nicene Option: An Incarnational Phenomenology*

**Editors:** James K. A. Smith

**Publisher:** Baylor University Press

**Publishing Date:** August 15, 2021

**Pages:** 253 (Hardcover)

**ISBN:** 978-1481313728

Good fences make good neighbors.<sup>1</sup>

On the whole, this adage represents well an approximate thrust of modern philosophy. The freedom of the thinking thing that I am is best secured by mapping out the boundaries for the thinking thing that you are. If there was hope for common ground outside the fences, it was, of course, among the promising terrain of reason. It didn't take long, however, for the supposed neutral public square to be recognized for the fantastical landscape that positivism always was. Faith commitments shape the way we think. This philosophical turn has left common ground in short supply. In a rapidly polarizing age, difference and otherness are best viewed through the slatted enclaves of those who share your theoretical bedrock. It may be that we are all in favor of loving our neighbors, to misquote Ivan Karamazov, but it's the ones next door we cannot stand. Good fences make good neighbors.

As an assortment of previously published articles, *The Nicene Option* serves to “show the work” of James K.A. Smith's scholarship published for broader audiences. As such, the first half of the book, explores the implications of embodied liturgy—a subject Smith has devoted careful attention to in his *Cultural Liturgies*. While the reader will recognize the habits of Smith's thought, they do invite the reader into deeper contemplation. This exploration of embodied particularity and finitude provides a helpful foundation for the second half of the book, where Smith turns his attention to tearing down fences.

You might expect that if a philosopher is looking to tear down fences, they would turn to the French deconstructionist Jacques Derrida. However, the problem as Smith sees it is that Derrida did not actually succeed in tearing down the Kantian fences plaguing Western philosophy. The Kantian binaries were simply reconstructed by Derrida, albeit with different material. For example, Derrida's sincere belief that justice must remain indeterminate lest it turn violent robs

religion of any discrete content. Smith insists, as many intuitively feel, that there must be a way to allow our foundational beliefs to build signposts of the world to come, while not allowing these signposts to become violent, exclusionary “isms.”

But if alterity is not to be dealt with by a good run of fencing, what other resources exist to make sense of the “other?” Smith, for his part, turns to Chalcedon—the city where bishops convened in 451 to acknowledge Christ as two natures in one person and subsistence. Christian orthodoxy proves robust enough to offer the resources for which Christians can move out into a world where foundational beliefs are not shared. It is in Christ—fully human and fully God—where the dividing wall of hostility between universality and particularity is mysteriously broken down. In the Incarnation, “ontological abundance where something—Someone—is given without losing; something can both appear within immanence *and* remain transcendent: without confusion, without change, without division, without separation” (237). This immanence is precisely what allows for a radically transcendental critique of human institutions. As Christ inhabited sinful human flesh to redirect humanity toward its proper *telos*, we, too, are invited to deconstruct in order to reorder contingent institutions toward their proper *telos*. Having not been trained by angels, the church (and the kingdom it subsequently represents) is subject to “contingency, particularity, and finitude.” To live as a Christian is to go into all the nations making disciples all the while repenting for the “infected kingdoms”<sup>2</sup> we try to build. We both work *and* repent with hope.

Confessing that God became flesh does not only give us resources for human institutions, but also for other humans. By tearing down the fences, the “other” is not a simply the potential for violence, but rather an invitation to dance. Yes, as Derrida and Levinas observed, alterity can be a cause of many terrible evils, like genocide, war, and violence. If that were the only option, it makes sense why good fences make good neighbors. But alterity is also the source of (pro)creation, generativity, and hospitality. After all, to meet adage for adage: it takes two to tango. (Forgive me, I couldn’t resist.)

In short, *The Nicene Option* is not an invitation to retreat, but to participate without fear. The experiences and thoughts of others become gifts for us to “try on,” simultaneously enriching and expanding what can become a restrictive “worldview.” If this sounds hard (dancing has never come naturally to the circles of Dutch Reformed within which I frequent!), that is probably because it is. Just try to wrap your head around how Jesus can be fully human and fully God. But, as Christians who confess that God became man—that the transcendent could be given to the immanent without loss—Smith invites us to extend our arms out toward difference, not to push away, quash, or keep at an arm’s length, but—in imaging and testifying to that kingdom where difference is no longer “tinged with the risk of refusal or exclusion”—only the opportunity to dance<sup>3</sup> in what will one day be the world’s “redeemed wild spaces” (234).

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1. Robert Frost, "Mending Wall," <https://www.poetryfoundation.org/poems/44266/mending-wall>.
  2. I borrow this phrase from Padraig Daly's poem "God in Winter."
  3. I'd recommend listening to Andrew Peterson's song, "Dancing in the Mine Fields" on his album *Counting Stars* (2010) for another reference to this concept and thanks to him for the title of my essay.