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

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mathematics and its history, but his scholarly accounts in the various mathematical case studies are grounded in numerous good and reputable sources – his full bibliography of 440 items continues for 23 pages, almost a sixth as long as the 149 pages of larger font written text, and only a bit shy of the total number of footnotes he includes. Readers interested in historical or dogmatic theology will probably find his overall conclusions and some of his philosophical analyses interesting and provocative, though I suspect those portions related to mathematics may wash over them without much impact.

By Good and Necessary Consequence is an ambitious undertaking. Or perhaps I should say that it is a program for such an undertaking, for the book is too short to accomplish much more than to set out an agenda for and initiate research into its topic, to give *A Preliminary Genealogy of Biblicist Foundationalism*, as the book's subtitle acknowledges. I found its historical findings worth serious consideration, but I also thought some aspects could be developed further or tightened up.

In the first place, while I am convinced that the WCF exhibits signs of responding to seventeenth-century skepticism in ways that match what is being done by others, such as Descartes, the lines of historical influence and the relevant historical context need to be laid out more carefully. Juxtaposing and comparing the WCF quote I gave above with two sentences from Rule 3 in Descartes' *Rules for the Direction of the Mind*, Bovell suggests several times that Westminster divines shared Descartes' concerns and methodological approach. But since the WCF was published in 1646 and Descartes' essay remained unpublished until 1684, no *direct* influence can have occurred in precisely this way. Moreover, Descartes is best known in history of mathematics circles for founding analytic geometry, a field of mathematics that was *not* organized axiomatically but instead combined geometry with the non-deductive computational field of algebra. This trend ought to be considered further and factored in if the paradigm for the WCF's foundationalism is to be located in Descartes' assimilation of mathematical method into philosophy.

However, it is not clear to me why the source of

deductivist foundationalism can't be traced back to Aristotle and Euclid, as many have held. Bovell claims that the axiomatic method did not function in an epistemic manner in ancient Greece or later, but I find his arguments for this less than convincing. For Aristotle and others, grounding a demonstrative theory upon true first principles (known without proof) and developing it deductively from these truths with rigorous arguments are what make its results knowledge (science) instead of mere opinion. In other words, I believe the epistemic novelty that Bovell claims for Descartes and other seventeenth-century thinkers regarding deduction needs further substantiation or qualifying. At the very least, it would be good to flesh out in more detail how seventeenth-century thinkers appropriated the deductive legacy of Aristotle and Euclid, particularly in non-mathematical fields such as philosophy and theology.

Regardless of where the philosophical paradigm for biblicist foundationalism originates, pinpointing and characterizing the source for this theological trend should also be done more carefully. Several questions remain after finishing the book. Which Westminster divines were responsible for making Scripture the deductive basis for theology? What did this mean in practice for them? Did any of them or their followers ever attempt to develop an axiomatic theology? Or was their notion of the relation of Scripture to theology different from what is present in axiomatic mathematics? Also, the WCF notes that the illumination of the Holy Spirit is necessary for a saving understanding of Scripture and that there are ecclesial matters "which are to be ordered by the light of nature and Christian prudence." This doesn't seem like hard-core biblical foundationalism to me; others must therefore have developed biblicist foundationalism into a stricter viewpoint at a later date. Or perhaps the notion of deducing results by "good and necessary consequence" remains much looser in theology than it is in mathematics.

These questions and observations don't detract from the overall thesis and value of the book, but they highlight some points that would benefit from further reflection and refinement. Perhaps Bovell will take these matters up in a later publication, building on the solid beginning he has made here.

Smith, James K. A. *The Devil Reads Derrida (and Other Essays on the University, the Church, Politics, and the Arts)*. Grand Rapids, Michigan: Eerdmans, 2009. Reviewed by David Schelhaas, Emeritus Professor of English, Dordt College.

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 “pietist” 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.

Smith, James K. A., *Desiring the Kingdom: Worship, Worldview, and Cultural Formation*. Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2009. 240 pages. ISBN 978-0-8010-3577-7. Reviewed by Laurence C. Sibley, Jr., lecturer in practical theology at Westminster Theological Seminary.

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 hungers 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 headier 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 *antithesis* 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.”¹

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 rationale* 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,