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Desiring the Kingdom: Worship, Worldview, and Cultural Formation (Book Review)

Laurence C. Sibley

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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,

patriotic citizens; and successful producers (chapter 3).

For instance, Smith suggests that the mall is “actually a religious space suffused with practices that constitute a kind of worship [...] . . . rituals of ultimate concern that are formative of our identity” (93). The mall’s version of the kingdom is “I’m broken, therefore I shop” (sin and/or need); “I shop with others” (community); and “I shop, therefore I am” (identity and salvation). Christian worship’s antithesis to these liturgies includes, among other things, confession of sin, with the grace of forgiveness and pardon and hope of renewal, and baptism into a new community.

Smith fleshes out his anthropology with the concept of social imaginaries, borrowed from Taylor’s *A Secular Age*.² An imaginary is “the way ordinary people ‘imagine’ their social surroundings,” which is “not expressed in theoretical terms, but is carried in images, stories and legends” (65). Taylor’s take on modernity, the secular age, is that the shift from the medieval age occurred in the popular imagination. There was also a shift in theories, but these were held by a minority, the elites. Imaginaries and theories interact, of course, but the imaginaries are driven by common practices more than by ideas. And it is the practices of the mall, the arena, and the university that should occupy our attention, be the focus of our radar, according to Smith.

The route to our imaginations, our hearts, is through our bodies. We are embodied actors aimed at the kingdom or some version of the kingdom, true or idolatrous. The routines and practices of daily life automatize our bodies, leading to habits of the heart. Practices, the rituals and routines that train our bodies and our hearts, are thick or thin. A thin practice, like brushing one’s teeth twice a day, doesn’t touch our love, our fundamental desire. We don’t become fundamentally tooth-brushers. Riding public transit instead of commuting by oneself on the freeway can be formative, identity-significant—a thick practice. And, of course, Sunday worship and daily prayer are thick, formative practices. Thick practices are liturgies, rituals of ultimate concern that form identity and inculcate a vision of the good life, the kingdom. They are the thickest practices, not necessarily linked to institutional religion. One chart shows concentric circles with rituals at the periphery, practices (thin and thick) in the median, and liturgies at the center.

Worship is both expressive (what we do) and formative (what it does to us); Smith focuses on the latter. His exegesis of the Christian Sunday liturgy (chapter 5) begins with comments on the liturgical calendar, annually stretching from Advent (beginning just after Thanksgiving) through Lent to Easter and Pentecost and weekly focusing on Sunday as the day for rest and celebration: “The liturgical calendar already constitutes a formative matrix that functions as *counter-formation* to the incessant 24/7-ness of our frenetic commercial culture” (157). Advent counters the pre-Christmas mall season of accumulation, consumption, and self-indulgence with penitence and expectancy: a different orientation to time.

The elements of the worship service are taken up one by one and analyzed to show their formative character, for instance, the gathering for worship with what is an admittedly motley crew, chosen by God. Also, not everyone is coming (some are mowing their lawns), and we do not have the ability to answer the call to worship on our own: “our response in gathering is already a sign of God’s redemption and regeneration at work” (161). This is just the beginning for those who showed up in answer to the call to worship. Among the other parts, baptism changes us in Christ (Rom 6) and joins us to a new counter-social reality, the church as “first family”: “We are new creatures with new desires, a new passion for a very different kingdom” (189).

In a final chapter, Smith brings these insights into the faculty meeting and proposes that the Christian college or university rethink its pedagogy. Early in the book, he states, “Education is not something that traffics in abstract, disembodied ideas; rather education is a holistic endeavor that involves the whole person, including our bodies, in a process of formation that aims our desires, primes our imagination, and orients us to the world—all before we ever start *thinking* about it” (39–40). So, how should we then form students? “A Christian education should draw deeply from the well of Christian liturgy” (221). To do this, he suggests “a new monasticism” of worship, learning, and work (that fascinating area called “extra-curricular”) that would form the whole person through common practices, prayer, and study. Smith suggests three ways to enact this vision: Reconnect the church, chapel, and classroom. Reconnect the classroom, dorm room, and neighborhood. Reconnect body and mind. Reconnect.

Desiring the Kingdom is characterized by a rich interaction with other scholars from many disciplines and their writings. This interaction leads to fruitful footnotes. The conversation is going on at two levels, and the bottom of the page is as much fun as the top. However, because of the many valuable sources in the footnotes, it was disappointing to find no bibliography at the end of the book. Since this is the first in a series of three books—volume 2 on philosophical anthropology, with an expansion of chapters 1 and 2 of this first volume; and volume 3 on political theology debates, the Reformed tradition in a democratic state—bibliographies should be included in future volumes.

This is a substantial contribution to the intersection of liturgy, culture, and worldviews and is very readable. Smith has the ability to make clear some of the most complex and often abstract concepts of philosophy. His handling of liturgical theology is appropriate. The mixture and the proposals of this project are impressive. We’re holding our breath for the next two volumes. Hurry up, Jamie!

Endnotes

1. See Graham Hughes, *Worship as Meaning* (Cambridge U Press, 2003), 220.
2. See Charles Taylor’s *A Secular Age* (Belknap, 2007).