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## Awaiting the King: Reforming Public Theology (Book Review)

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“resurrection is a fiction and a distraction to anyone who refuses to face the reality of death” (66). At the time of the Mary Oliver story, her partner had already begun to suffer the illness that would eventually claim her life. A story about the poet Denise Levertov coincides with her diagnosis with lymphoma, which would eventually cause her death. The book ends with a story of a visit to the home of Donald Hall, who had lost his wife, poet Jane Kenyon, only recently to leukemia. Earlier in the book, Hall serves as the voice of reality in the face of Wiman’s desire to write “a poem that would live forever,”:

When...my friend and then poet laureate Donald Hall turned his Camel-blasted eighty-year-old Yeti decrepitude to me and said as casually as he bit into his burger, “I was thirty-eight when I realized not a word I wrote was going to last,” I felt a galactic chill, as if my soul had chewed tinfoil. I was thirty-eight. It was the very inverse of a calling, an ex post facto feeling of innocence, death’s echo. (6-7)

*He Held Radical Light* is a masterclass in poetry appreciation woven into a memoir. Not only does it give the reader insight as to how a poet reads poetry, it also offers a glimpse into the everyday lives of several poets, acquaintances and close friends of the author and their respective struggles with issues of faith and art, life and death. Poets (and artists, writers, and other people with a creative calling) are driven by “moments of soul,” Wiman points out, an idea which

repeats through the book, the idea that in the process of creating a poem or other work of art, the artist seeks out the places where eternity meets time. The Celtic religion had a similar idea of this in the idea of “thin places,” moments of time where the distance between heaven and earth become shorter, and the space between the eternal and the temporal nearly connect.

Wiman gives us a picture of one of these “moments of soul” in his retelling of how his poem “My Stop is Grand” came to be written, fueled by an night of physical suffering coupled with a disagreement with another poet friend over whether art could be a “personally redemptive activity.” Having finished the poem in the predawn hours following a sleepless night, Wiman asks himself of the poem, “Will it last forever? Certainly not, but forever—for that one night, for this one writer—was in it” (70). And perhaps, until the new heaven and the new earth arrive, death is vanquished, and all things are put into order, that is enough.

What is it we want when we can’t stop wanting? Is it art? Is it faith? Is it both, together? Is it to create a piece that will last eternally, or at least generations beyond our death? Is art enough to elude our own mortality? Or is it better, instead, to be acquainted with our own mortality, our own failures, the constant unquenchable desire that serves, in its best sense, as the engine within that drives us to God?

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*Awaiting the King: Reforming Public Theology*. Volume 3 of Cultural Liturgies. James K.A. Smith. Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2017. 233 pages. ISBN 978-0-8010-3579-1. Reviewed by Laurence C. Sibley, Jr., lecturer, leadership and pastoral care, Reformed Episcopal Seminary.

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While I was reading *Awaiting the King*, questions like “should I salute or take the knee?” were swirling in the headlines; questions of public justice, public morality, and, yes, public theology. The National Football League had decided that all players on the field must stand (or remain in the locker room) during the national anthem. And the President had added some tweets about the flag, democracy, and freedom. After reading *Awaiting the King*, I can imagine what Jamie Smith might say. It would go like this:

Democracy and freedom are not just good ideas for the “meantime” of our earthly sojourn; they are the ultimate goods for which we die (and kill). This is reinforced by the liturgies of the stadium and arena that stage spectacular displays of national mythology and military power akin to what Augustine described as the “fabulous” civil the-

ologies of the Roman Empire; those public rituals that constitute nothing less than public worship. (*Awaiting*, 23)

Smith went back and re-read Augustine’s *City of God* as he was working on *Awaiting*. In book 6.5, Augustine writes “that there are three kinds of theology, that is, of the account which is given of the gods; and of these, the one is called mythical, the other physical, and the third civil.” The mythical, obviously religious and perhaps hard to believe, are supposedly distinct from what Smith describes as “the respectable and necessary civil religion of the *polis*.” But, they “bleed into each other” (*Awaiting*, 28). And both shape the loves of people, their takes on the world, their visions of the good, and their ultimate ends/*teloi*. In a nutshell, when you salute the flag, you have

mythology and liturgy designed to form what you love. “[A]n institution that wants you to ‘pledge allegiance’ is not happy with anything less than your heart.” (14)

Buried in a footnote on page 27, Smith shows how the state/*polis* sometimes manipulates the ceremonies (read: liturgies) of the stadium to foster the worship of the state; “the stadium is enfolded into our *civil* theologies.” In 2015, Arizona Sens. Jeff Flake (R) and John McCain (R) revealed in a joint oversight report that nearly \$5.4 million in taxpayer dollars had been paid out to 14 NFL teams between 2011 and 2014 to honor service members and put on elaborate, “patriotic salutes” to the military.<sup>1</sup>

For Smith, “every political theory assumes an anthropology” (6). Are we thinking beings or worshiping beings? Learning from Augustine, he opts for worship, with thinking and acting flowing out of worship. *Awaiting the King: Reforming Public Theology* is the third and concluding volume in a ten-year project on cultural liturgies by Smith, preceded by *Desiring the Kingdom: Worship, Worldview, and Cultural Formation*, Volume 1 of Cultural Liturgies, and *Imagining the Kingdom: How Worship Works*, Volume 2 of Cultural Liturgies, both published by Baker Academic, in 2009 and 2013, respectively.

James K.A. Smith, professor of philosophy at Calvin College, where he holds the Gary & Henrietta Byker Chair in Applied Reformed Theology & Worldview, has provided us with an Augustinian take on the shaping of human desire and imagining in a postmodern age. A brief summary of *Desiring and Imagining* will help us see what he’s getting at in his claim that the flag is about worship and the shaping of the heart. See my reviews of these earlier volumes in *Pro Rege* 38.4 and 42.1 for a more complete exposition.

*Desiring the Kingdom* argues that it is the heart that leads because it is the heart that hungers for and loves the kingdom and imagines what that kingdom might be. 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” (*Desiring*, 35).

The human as *homo liturgicus* resurfaces in *Imagining the Kingdom* as Smith digs deeper into a theory of practice, drawing on the work of Maurice Merleau-Ponty (kinaesthetics: how the body knows/perceives) and Pierre Bourdieu (poetics: how the body hears stories) to build a theoretical toolbox for naming and articulating a Christian liturgical anthropology. Smith’s working axiom is “that a liturgical anthropology

is rooted in both a kinaesthetics and a poetics—an appreciation for the bodily basis of meaning (kinaesthetics) and a recognition that it is precisely this bodily comportment that primes us to be oriented by story, by the imagination (poetics). Ultimately, this axiom is rooted in a theological claim about the sorts of creatures we are: created in the image of God, and called to image the Son who is the image of the invisible God, we, too, are *incarnate* in a sense. We are sacramental animals” (*Imagining*, 101).

#### *As we wait for the King*

In *Awaiting*, Smith sets out to do two things: (1) “...work out the implications of a ‘liturgical’ theology of culture for how we imagine and envision political engagement”; (2) offer an alternative to the assumption that citizens are “rational actors [debating beliefs and deciding policies]” and, instead, seeing them as “a citizenry with habits and practices for living in common and toward a certain end, oriented toward a *telos*...[Political animals are *made* [formed], not born” (8-9). The book is a rich mixture of analysis and proposals for critical, Christian engagement in the many-layered public life of 21st-century Western culture—more than we can discuss in this review. So, I will focus on just a few of the particularly helpful aspects of his project: the state as religious and the church as political; cratered liberalism; pluralisms; and subsidiarity.

In the introduction, Smith sets up the rest of the book, offering his critique of politics as “spacialized” into church and state compartments and his view that politics is a formative and forming process, a way of life. He lays the base for using Augustine’s view that we are lovers before we are thinkers; that societies are known by what they love (*City of God*, 19.24): “[W]e are creatures of craving, defined by our desires, who make our way in the world governed by what we long for” (Smith 10). So, chapter 1 considers the “religious” state and chapter 2, the “political” church.

#### *The state as “religious”*

As we noted above, one can see the religious *telos* of the state—one of power and dominance—in the political rites at sporting events. Again, it’s Augustine that Smith looks to for a take-down of the stadium. In the *Confessions*, 6.8.13, Augustine tells of his friend Alypius’s attempt to be at but not in the frenzy of gladiatorial conflict. He shuts his eyes, but his ears betray him, and he’s soon part of the rabid crowd, and for the moment, “he imbibe[s] the madness.” This avenue through sports is one way that Smith spotlights

the temptations of the earthly city in our day.

In discussing Augustine's two cities, God's and the earthly one, Smith points out that for Augustine, the distinction is not between an ultimate/Divine city and a penultimate/earthly one. Both cities demand your heart—are ultimate. Ultimate and penultimate bleed into each other (the supposed penultimate—traffic laws, getting the trash picked up, or protecting us from cyberwarfare—becomes ultimate, wants your heart), and the cities are antithetical. The distinction is in this antithesis.

#### *The church as "political"*

Worship rites of the church lead to a vision/social imaginary for the flourishing of creation and culture; worship is about the public good. Smith writes that the "centered...disciplines of the heavenly *polis*" are formation for engagement in the earthly *polis*. Worship is itself a political intervention: "The doxological claim that 'Jesus is Lord!' (*Jesus kurios!*) is also a political act in its refusal to say 'Caesar is Lord!'" (58). This doxological claim is not for dominance, a new Christendom, but for service for the sake of the world.

#### *Cratered liberalism:*

Smith also suggests that liberalism is better than you think. Like the moon, it's cratered by the impact of the Christian social imaginary, the gospel. Citing Oliver O'Donovan, Smith points out that liberal society is characterized by liberty, mercy in judgement, natural rights (equality, affinity, and reciprocity), and openness to speech/freedom of speech (104-5). Neither demonizing the liberal order nor blank-check baptizing it, we are called to undertake an ad hoc analysis and critique of Western liberal democracy, to discern those aspects that can be affirmed (the "craters"), and resist those that are deformative and unjust.

#### *Pluralisms:*

Citing the work of Jonathan Chaplin, Smith notes three kinds of societal plurality: Structural: the associations, institutions, and communities found in modern society; Cultural: the diverse expressions of culture throughout history and around today's globe; and Directional: various religions, worldviews, spiritual orientations (135-6). (Another taxonomy—directional, associational, and contextual—is found on 31-34.) Structural and cultural pluralisms are to be celebrated as God's gifts, but directional provides the challenge of living in common since it means that

"we disagree about the shape of the good life. . . [and this disagreement] entails a constructive program for negotiation."

#### *Subsidiarity:*

Early in the book (11) he warns against the cult of the presidency (Ross Douthat's term) and the tendency to expect all from the federal government. Instead, he points to the many layers and expressions of "the political." He begins his discussion of subsidiarity (125-30) with the debate about the size of government and the "assumptions about who should make decisions that impinge on the common good and where we should expect to find the resources for the flourishing of all."<sup>2</sup> Smith offers the example of private/Christian schools as a resource providing formation for service in the complex public space. He also asks how the state functions where there are educational deserts or where parents can't provide a private school. Although the state may step in as an emergency aid with state or public schools, Smith holds that the state's normal role is to provide the setting or environment for various communities and agencies (businesses, schools, churches/faith groups, NGOs, arts communities, etc.) to flourish, nurturing them rather than replacing or invading these micro societies.

#### *Summing up the Cultural Liturgies project*

In these three books, Smith has given us several important insights and tools. First, he has focused on the kingdom instead of personal salvation, individualism, or placing the individual within the kingdom. The gospel is about God setting the world right again, as Tom Wright has said many times: the kingdom that leads to the new heavens and the new earth. In the meantime, there is the Augustinian tension between the cities, the kingdoms.

Second, he has defined the human person as *homo liturgicus*. This descriptor, first introduced in *Desiring* and emerging again in *Imagining* and *Awaiting*, has established the heart and what it loves as the prime location for commitment, "under the radar" of worldviews and how we think. We love before we think.

Third, he has shown how the process works through his interlocutors. Smith fleshes out his anthropology with the concept of social imaginaries, borrowed from Charles Taylor's *A Secular Age* (Belknap, 2007). 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'" (Smith, *Imagining*, 65).

And fourth, he has applied all this to the public arena and the interaction of the religious state and the political church at a time when this relationship is especially confused and conflicted.

The sections on pluralism and subsidiarity are particularly helpful in navigating the current political climate (both in the broad sense that Smith describes and in the more narrow sense of the rhetoric and practice of politicians). The various pluralisms—structural, cultural, and directional—clarify the fact that not all differences are necessarily problematic. Local non-profit institutions have different missions: Esperanza, a Philadelphia primary care clinic, deals with medical and public health issues of an underserved community while seeking to provide care for the whole person; and the churches in its watershed begin with the spiritual needs of folks and partner with the clinic. The clinic, having a multi-ethnic, multi-lingual staff, focuses on an ethnic minority population and its mission and is supported by a variety of churches—even beyond its part of the city—representing many cultural and economic sectors. This combined effort makes for a rich tossed salad reflecting the multifaceted glory of the kingdom now and to come.

Interestingly, in their 1977 essay, “To Empower People, The Role of Mediating Structures in Public Policy,” Peter Berger and Richard Neuhaus proposed the neighborhood, the family, the church, and the voluntary association as mediating structures between the individual and the large institutions of public life. They perceived an anti-government, anti-bigness mood even then, a precursor to the full-blown polarization of today’s politic. Their concept of mediating structures bears some similarity to Smith’s subsidiarity, derived both from his Kuyperian heritage of sphere sovereignty and the Roman Catholic tradition articulated by Popes Leo XIII’s and John Paul II’s encyclicals *Rerum Novarum* (1891) and *Centesimus Annus* (1991). Not all problems can or should be solved in/by Washington. The clinic mentioned above is such a subsidiary, providing care designed for a particular neighborhood and mediating between the families served and the larger medical institutions of the city, to which they provide referrals, and advocating for their clients in the more complex and sometimes bewildering setting of a major hospital.

#### *Some questions*

As I was working on this review, the public liturgies of Independence Day included parades, concerts—*A Capital Fourth!*—and, of course, fireworks, flags, and songs—all patriotic sentiments! With my head full of Smith’s comments, I wondered, “How are these

liturgies forming my loves? Are they formative at all? How does one enjoy, even celebrate, the Fourth and remain faithful to God’s kingdom? What is the right kind of pride and loyalty to one’s country? Is it mere preference for the USA and gladness that we live here and not in a similar western democracy? Am I worshipping a kingdom of this world? With a grandson, nieces, and nephews in the military, how do I appreciate their service to the country and the protection it affords my family and not worship the military-entertainment complex?

Smith provides a place for us to stand while sorting out the questions and issues of the day. He gives only a few detailed answers, but as I hear and read the news, I hear him in my ear: “See this is what I was writing about.”

#### **Endnotes**

1. Joint statement, with an attached, detailed report by Sens. Jeff Flake and John McCain: “these displays of paid patriotism are included within the \$6.8 million that the Department of Defense (DOD) has spent on sports marketing contracts since fiscal year 2012... . When our offices first discovered this practice, we sought to better understand it from DOD and introduced an amendment to the 2016 National Defense Authorization Act to end these taxpayerfunded salutes to the troops. The United States Senate’s oversight has worked. DOD has banned paid patriotism and the NFL has called on all clubs to stop accepting payment for patriotic salutes” ([https://www.mccain.senate.gov/public/\\_cache/files/12de6dcb-d8d8-4a58-8795-562297f948c1/tackling-paid-patriotism-oversight-report.pdf](https://www.mccain.senate.gov/public/_cache/files/12de6dcb-d8d8-4a58-8795-562297f948c1/tackling-paid-patriotism-oversight-report.pdf)).
2. See the recent *NewsHour* conversation between Sherrilyn Ifill and David Brooks about local and national resources for healing racism (<https://www.pbs.org/newshour/show/the-arguments-for-and-against-more-powerful-local-government>). This was a followup after his July 19, 2018 *NYTimes* column, “The Localist Revolution” (<https://www.nytimes.com/2018/07/19/opinion/national-politics-localism-populism.html>).