

---

# Pro Rege

---

Volume 42 | Number 4

Article 8

---

June 2014

## Discipleship in the Present Tense: Reflections on Faith and Culture (Book Review)

Neal DeRoo

*Dordt College*, [neal.deroo@dordt.edu](mailto:neal.deroo@dordt.edu)

Follow this and additional works at: [http://digitalcollections.dordt.edu/pro\\_rege](http://digitalcollections.dordt.edu/pro_rege)

---

### Recommended Citation

DeRoo, Neal (2014) "Discipleship in the Present Tense: Reflections on Faith and Culture (Book Review)," *Pro Rege*: Vol. 42: No. 4, 38 - 40.

Available at: [http://digitalcollections.dordt.edu/pro\\_rege/vol42/iss4/8](http://digitalcollections.dordt.edu/pro_rege/vol42/iss4/8)

This Book Review is brought to you for free and open access by the College Publications at Digital Collections @ Dordt. It has been accepted for inclusion in Pro Rege by an authorized administrator of Digital Collections @ Dordt. For more information, please contact [ingrid.mulder@dordt.edu](mailto:ingrid.mulder@dordt.edu).



A quarterly faculty publication of  
Dordt College, Sioux Center, Iowa

mentally different from a Ken Ham or David Barton is fooling himself/herself to some degree. Scholars and popular authorities may seem to come to different conclusions about the Christian approach to science and history, but Worthen posits that they are fundamentally the same in terms of their quest to use Enlightenment categories tamed with Christian worldview to understand the world. She may have a point that evangelicals of all stripes are struggling together with the tension between Enlightenment categories and faith, but so is everyone else. Throw in the fact that presuppositional thought possibly has more affinities with post-modernity than with modernity, and complications arise with Worthen's formulation. Evangelical historians have typically pointed to the influence of Scottish Common Sense philosophy as a major cause for adoption of an easy harmony between Baconian Scientific thought and Christian theology in early American culture. Both Mark Noll and George Marsden, along with many others, have expanded on these connections. Worthen notes this influence of Scottish Common Sense philosophy in passing, but focuses primarily on presuppositionalism as the root of the evangelical crisis of authority. Yet it would seem, more than anything else, that the quest of modern culture warriors is to recapture the easy affinity between Baconian induction and Christian theology that existed in nineteenth-century America.

One assumption Worthen seems to make is that everyone who uses worldview terminology in the twentieth century must have been influenced by the ideas of Kuyper and the Reformed tradition. This perspective does not take into account the diversity of the Reformed tradition or the actual content of Kuyper's world and life view, in contrast to the way it is portrayed by other advocates of a worldview approach to Christian thought. While evangelicals have incorporated Reformed ideas, they have not

subsumed these ideas holistically, instead using elements of them in an incomplete or distorted fashion. Worldview emphasis did not originate in the nineteenth century. Christians have been describing faith in terms of comprehensive worldviews since the days of Christ and the Apostles. While it is true that some Reformed thinkers developed a distinctive language and concepts for understanding Christian worldview in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, the evangelical embrace of worldview has often tweaked those ideas in ways that have sometimes subordinated the Reformed conception of worldview to aspects of their own tradition. For example, Mark Noll's *Scandal of the Evangelical Mind* contains an insightful investigation of the many ways that populist modes of thought and a variety of traditions shaped the evangelical mind, or what Worthen describes as the evangelical imagination.<sup>1</sup> Intellectual influence is notoriously difficult to trace. It is doubly so in the complex world of evangelical life and thought. The Reformed influence in both academia and popular evangelicalism would seem to be more complicated and more multi-directional than Worthen describes.

While there are many aspects of *Apostles of Reason* that are sure to provoke furious debate, the book is definitely a page-turner and conversation-starter. Worthen tells a good story and supports her thesis with many interesting details. *Apostles of Reason* is a provocative critique for Christians to consider as we strive together to hold together the pondering of the mind, the yearning of the spirit, and the devotion of the heart.

#### Endnote

1. Mark Noll, *The Scandal of the Evangelical Mind* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1995).

---

Smith, James K.A., *Discipleship in the Present Tense: Reflections on Faith and Culture*. Grand Rapids: Calvin College Press, 2013. ISBN 9781937555085. Reviewed by Neal DeRoo, Associate Professor of Philosophy, Dordt College and Fellow of the Andreas Center for Reformed Scholarship and Service.

---

John Wilson, editor of *Books and Culture*, has described James K.A. Smith as a “whirling dervish of public philosophy [who] generates enough intellectual energy to supply a middle-size city all by himself.”<sup>21</sup> While, as far as I know, he does not whirl any more than the average person, the rest certainly seems true—Smith is a great public philosopher whose output is simply staggering. By my count, *Discipleship in the Present Tense* is the 20<sup>th</sup> book that bears Smith's name as either author, editor, co-editor,

or translator, and the ninth since 2009. But it is not simply the quantity of Smith's publications that bears recognition. It is also the style and the quality of those publications. His *Cultural Liturgies* series (2009's *Desiring the Kingdom* and 2013's *Imagining the Kingdom*, with a third volume still to come) has shaped the conversation about Christian worship and Christian education, shifting the focus away from human thinking and believing and toward human action and loving. That his name is as likely to be

mentioned in a Provost's or principal's office as it is at a meeting of the American Academy of Religion shows the extent to which Smith's work has impacted the broader Christian world, not merely the narrower confines of academia.

*Discipleship in the Present Tense* is a reflection of the breadth of Smith's engagement as a public intellectual. Like 2009's *The Devil Reads Derrida*, *Discipleship in the Present Tense* is a collection of essays that (mostly) have been published in venues aimed at the general population: magazines like *The Banner*, *Comment* and *Perspectives*, as well as various online sites and blogs. As such, the pieces are relatively short (24 chapters, in a book that's barely 200 pages long), easy to read, and quite engaging on topics of interest to a wide variety of people (such as parenting, praise bands, posers, sports, and Thanksgiving).

The tie that binds the pieces together is laid out in an excellent introduction. There, Smith claims that the primary question of discipleship is the question "What do we do now?" (xv). Answering this question requires not only an understanding of what is to be done but also an understanding of what time it is, of the *now* in which we are called to act. Because of this emphasis, discipleship requires an intimate knowledge of both "the church" and "the world" (xvi). This double knowledge is required, not so that we can remain *relevant* in our present day and age (204) but so that we can remain faithful in it; if we do not understand the ways in which we are formed by the cultural environments in which we live, we will miss ways we have been formed that may run counter to Christian discipleship. Historically, this need to wrestle with the ways that *the church* has been formed by *the world* has been captured in the motto "the Reformed church is always reforming" (xix). It captures the dual necessity of being the enduring people of God while also unfolding new possibilities in creation.

For Smith, this dual necessity is best met by engaging the present via the depths and resources of our historical tradition, a theme that he has been discussing at least since his 2004 book *Introducing Radical Orthodoxy* (though it is present *in nuce* already in his first work, *The Fall of Interpretation* [2000]). In *Discipleship*, Smith proudly declares that his own tradition is "catholic Christian...with a distinct Reformed *accent*" (2), and he regularly draws on the resources of that tradition in speaking to contemporary issues. The issue of discipleship "in the present tense," then, is to determine how best to build on that (catholic, Reformed) tradition,

without changing the tradition to *fit better* in our contemporary day and age. "Faithfulness," he writes, "requires knowing the difference between authentic extensions [of the tradition] versus assimilative adaptations" (xix). Either way, we cannot remain content to live where we have lived, "simply parroting what we've said and done in the past" (xix). We must live in the now in a way that is faithful to the tradition from which we emerge and allows us to live in and out of that tradition today. This kind of living requires a deep understanding of the present, our tradition, and how they interact in our selves and our lives. *Discipleship in the Present Tense* offers insight into all of those things.

In the first part of the book, Smith outlines the Reformed tradition, telling anew (which is "not the same as merely repeating") some of its main elements, its best stories (1). These elements include the goodness of creation, the universal (but not universalist; see chapter 20) scope of redemption, the sanctification of all parts of human living, and the importance of Christian education. Much of this will be familiar to readers of *Pro Rege*, but Smith formulates these elements in ways that may help us see them in a different light, to see them anew.

The book's second and third parts examine this present age. Part two contains reviews of three different books (published between 2008 and 2011) as examples of one way of critically engaging our times. Especially of note in this section is his review of James Davison Hunter's 2010 book, *How to Change the World*, where Smith, following Hunter, argues that Christianity ought to be concerned with "faithful presence" in culture rather than with "transforming culture" (this theme comes up in several essays throughout the book but is concentrated most strongly here). For those of us working at CCCU schools where this rhetoric has become increasingly influential in recent years, the notion of "transforming culture" and its alleged ties to particular political programs must be meaningfully discussed, and Smith here shows us how Hunter can help begin that discussion on solid ground.

In part three of the book, Smith's analysis of the present age shifts to art, poetry, and literature. Smith is careful to show that the arts are not merely "instrumental ways to package religious claims, but [are] genuine expressions of what creational flourishing might look like," and so are essential to shaping the Christian imagination, thereby helping train Christian love and desire (97). However, it bears noting that the non-literary arts do not get much

attention; all the essays in this third part deal with the written word—including novels, poetry, and a book on “poetic theology.” There are no essays on theatrical productions, musical performances, or art shows (though Smith appreciatively mentions one in part four), to say nothing of movies, television series, or popular music. In fact, Smith seems to purposefully distance himself from the latter, claiming that “the church needs to move beyond its obsession with the *au courant* of pop culture and reinvest in those cultural forms that ask more of us: poetry, the novel, painting, and more” (97-98).

This claim about re-investing in certain cultural forms is underdeveloped, and it strikes me as somewhat puzzling, given much of Smith’s work elsewhere. If Smith’s *Cultural Liturgies* series has taught us nothing else, it strongly argues that spiritually deep and religiously meaningful formative practices occur in cultural things as *shallow* as Michael Bay films and iPhones. As such, it seems we should be encouraged to grapple deeply with all things and not merely be encouraged to grapple with *deep* things. Granted, we should not ignore the things traditionally described as “high” art—literature, poetry, the visual arts—and if that is all that Smith’s claim is asking for, then I have no problem with it. However, one wonders if Hunter’s claim that “world-making and world changing are, by and large, the work of elites” is not in the background here, perhaps implicitly influencing Smith’s call for Christianity to engage in what are traditionally more elitist cultural practices (67). Given his own penchant for “faithful presence” rather than for “changing the world,” Smith should work *against* this influence, not in support of it. As such, I would have liked to have seen more investigations into how *popular* artistic ventures shape the social imagination, investigations

that Smith has done so well in other venues; at least a more thorough explanation for the focus on “high” culture is warranted in *Discipleship*.

Finally, the fourth part of the book provides site-specific pieces, offering us visions of how to let the Reformed tradition speak to unique times and places, in response to unique issues in the present. These brief pieces probe issues that transcend the time for which they are written, and some of the most valuable chapters in the collection are in this section. In fact, the interview in chapter 23 is an immensely valuable introduction to Smith’s thought, and I strongly recommend it as a go-to piece if someone asks you who Smith is and what he’s all about. Still, for people not interested in the particular topic(s) under discussion—including the prosperity gospel, universalism, sports, and doubt—some of these chapters may be of little interest. Those who are interested in the topics, however, will get a glimpse of how short, popular pieces can be thoughtful, and move a conversation forward by raising a new set of questions. In this regard, these chapters are a reminder to academics that we need not confine ourselves to the monograph or the peer-edited journal in order to do something deep and meaningful; indeed, doing otherwise might help us find better ways of sharing our gifts with our brothers and sisters in Christ (204), and so help us produce “Christian scholarship *for the church*” (xxi; emphasis added).

#### Endnote

1. See his endorsement on the back cover of Smith’s 2009 collection of essays, entitled *The Devil Reads Derrida and Other Essays on the University, the Church, Politics and the Arts* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans).

---

Kaiser, Robert G. *Act of Congress: How America’s Essential Institution Works, and How It Doesn’t*. New York: Vintage Books, a division of Random House, 2013. 417 pp. ISBN 978-0-307-74451-7. Reviewed by Jack R. Van Der Slik, Professor Emeritus, Political Studies and Public Affairs, University of Illinois Springfield.

---

According to recent Gallup surveys, Americans who “approve of the way Congress is handling its job” constitute only a small minority of the people. In August 2013, just ten percent of survey respondents expressed approval. It is in the context of this discontent that Robert Kaiser’s study has appeared, a discerning study of a notably important act of Congress, properly referred to as the Dodd-Frank Wall Street Reform and Consumer Protection

Act of 2010.

Acts of Congress come in all sizes and degrees of complexity. This one, Dodd-Frank for short, grew increasingly complex as it passed through the basic legislative stages—initially House committees and House floor; Senate committee and Senate floor; then reconciliation of two different versions in a conference committee of both senators and representatives. This procedural outline is just as portrayed in elementary