

Book Review

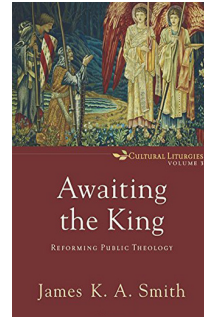
James K. A. Smith.

Awaiting the King: Reforming Public Theology
(*Cultural Liturgies Volume 3*).

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Awaiting the King is not the book that James K. A. Smith expected to write when he began his Cultural Liturgies trilogy. His *Desiring the Kingdom* (2009) and *Imagining the Kingdom* (2013) advanced a theological anthropology of *homo liturgicus* – humanity as imaginative, narrative, and liturgical animals, shaped by habits and practices in which visions of the good life are always already embedded. These volumes integrated multiple academic disciplines and cultural artifacts toward the development of a theology of desire and a phenomenology of imagination. For Volume 3, Smith initially envisioned “something like ‘Hauerwas for Kuyperians,’ a come-to-Yoder altar call for all those who were so enthusiastic about ‘transforming’ culture” (xi). Yet over a decade’s worth of research and writing, “the arc of my thinking has taken me from common grace to antithesis and back to an emphasis on our common life, but with ... a ‘second naïveté’” (xii). The result is a public/political theology infused with Augustine and dependent on Oliver O’Donovan, a proposal which is “neither a stance that is positive or sanguine vis-à-vis the earthly city nor a posture that is fundamentally dismissive with respect to political society” (xiv). Posture correction, rather than policy commendation, is Smith’s task.

Smith introduces his project with a crucial question: “In what ways – and to what extent – can the ‘peculiar people’ that is the church live *in common* with citizens of the earthly city?” (6). Given that “the political” constitutes “less a space and more a way of life ... less a realm and more of a *project*” (9), how are Christians called to seek solidarity with people who aim their lives toward vastly different *teloi* than the kingdom of heaven and its King? Much of the difficulty here, Smith explains in Chapter 1, lies in a pernicious lack of contentment on the part of politics to remain penultimate. Sorting through various pluralisms, Smith concludes, “It is the *telos* of a people’s love that defines a people ... It is in their different intentional objects that Augustine locates the *antithesis*” (51). Chapter 2 continues this analysis with an account of the formative nature of worship for helping “the church as *polis* in order to then discern what that means for Christian political engagement in the *saeculum*” (54). This includes making explicit what is implied in the liturgy, renewing Christians’ moral agency, and inhabiting the history of God’s actions in Israel and Jesus.

In Chapter 3, Smith addresses the complicated, often unacknowledged relationship between democratic politics and its ecclesial sources: “The branches of political liberalism are a long ways from their Christian and theological roots” (93). Nevertheless, substantial overlap remains; characteristics of liberal society that retain their Christian

pedigree include liberty, mercy in judgment, confidence in the security of the humane order, and openness to speech. Adequate Christian political discernment must thus include both “looking for signs of promise *and* forms of Antichrist” (112). In Chapter 4, Smith claims that “the challenge of pluralism is how to forge common life in the midst of ... ‘confessional’ diversity” (132), which requires the kind of virtue incubation in which Christian churches have long been proficient. Smith clarifies that he does not mean “to instrumentalize Christian formation ... but rather to recognize a kind of by-product that flows from the fact that the gospel is how we learn to be human and the church is where we learn what a *polis* should be like” (148). Chapter 5 continues by briefly discussing the missional implications of liturgical political theology, such that public witness about the gospel is itself a matter of the church seeking the common good.

Chapter 6 engages perhaps the most trenchant critique of Smith’s entire Cultural Liturgies project: “Liturgy is not a silver bullet that guarantees holiness; nor is there any guarantee that mere worship attendance is a sufficient condition to make the people of God a ‘contrast’ society. To say that there is would be to lapse into a kind of liturgical determinism that assumes a simplistic view of formation” (168). Smith explores case studies in liturgical inadequacy (Western churches’ inability to overcome racism, in conversation with Willie Jennings) and liturgical capture (Rwandan churches’ complicity in the genocide). Still, Smith doubles down on his argument: the “pastoral response to our assimilation needs to be as complex as its cause. We are liturgically deformed; and by the grace of the Spirit, we are liturgically reformed, albeit inadequately, in fits and starts, in need of the Spirit’s counter-

formation throughout our lives” (207). His conclusion offers four principles of calculated ambivalence in political collaboration: 1. Even disordered loves attest to creational desires. 2. Every critique is ad hoc; no (Christian) critique can be total or absolute. 3. Recognize penultimate convergence even where there is ultimate divergence. 4. Don’t lose your eschatology: cultivate a teleological sensibility (216-19).

Salutary features of *Awaiting the King* include: clear-eyed realism about many challenges facing Christian public witness, a call to nuanced creativity in discerning the possibilities and limits of interdependence between liturgy and solidarity, and a robustly theocentric vision (in contrast to the ecclesial overemphasis present in some other virtue accounts). Smith rightly warns against the danger of “eschatological forgetting” (82), since “it’s precisely when your ultimate conviction is that there is no eternal that you’re most prone to absolutize the temporal” (29). Rather, trust in God’s promised future grounds the church in its present endeavors in this world. The implications for pastoral vocations here are helpful and constructive. Finally, Smith’s pithy summations, already a prominent feature of his first two volumes, shine through in the third, such as: “The state isn’t just the guardian of rights; it is also a nexus of rites” (35); “We’re more Pelagian than we realize” (213); and, perhaps his finest, “How to remake the remade world? How to reconfigure the disfiguration of creation we have inherited? And how to be *faithful* to the word of a resurrected Jew in the midst of modernity’s markets? How to sing the Lord’s song in a strange land?” (179).

These salient strengths are partially overshadowed by several shortcomings. First, the book is marked by a pervasive

methodological haziness regarding Smith's working definitions of public and political theology. These disciplines are interrelated but not identical, and Smith's idiosyncratic handling of them, in lieu of acknowledging decades of discourse on both, comes across as rather facile. Other voices are also missing: Smith's extensive discussion of the pen/ultimate ignores Dietrich Bonhoeffer's iconic dialectical treatment of the matter, while his case study of Rwanda looks at the genocide exclusively through Western eyes (when Emmanuel Katongole's thorough, virtue-inflected account would have been preferable). By contrast, Smith's overreliance on Oliver O'Donovan is disconcerting – particularly given the glaring contemporary threats of ascendant *illiberalism* – and his major focus on the state tends to underestimate the coercive power of the market in communal deformation. Finally, his repeated attempts to retrieve and revive Christendom, coupled with sarcastic condescension toward critics of Constantinianism (i.e., that they are “lazy” and “bandy about” the terms), are historically dubious and come across as curiously out of sync with the needs of the current moment. *Awaiting the King* remains an important contribution to political (or public?) theology, but these vulnerabilities require counterbalance and correction.

