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# James K. A. Smith, *Awaiting the King: Reforming Public Theology*. Baker Academic, 2017

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James K. A. Smith, *Awaiting the King: Reforming Public Theology*. Volume 3 of Cultural Liturgies; Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2017. 233 pages. \$29.95.

This book is the third in a three-volume series that deals with liturgy's role in forming the desires of Reformed evangelical communities of faith and practice in the context of contemporary secular culture. It differs from the first two books in that its desire to shape the church as a kind of *polis* is less counter-cultural than before. This is represented in part by the book's subtitle. Although Smith has always been concerned with the church's loves and desires being shaped by a secular and consumeristic culture, he does not wish to advocate for a church that functions like a gated community. His concern in the subtitle, "reforming public theology," is about defining the terms of engagement on the public square, but consistent with a Reformed, evangelical viewpoint steeped in contemporary philosophy, Kuyperian Reformed theology, and even a little Augustine for good measure.

Smith's argument begins by framing up the book as a whole. He wants to argue for a liturgical politics in relation to a reforming public theology. Chapter 1 then takes a step back to look at how the "rites" and what we worship in democracy already shape us. Here, Smith also draws from Augustine's notion of the two cities from the *City of God*. Liturgy is already shaping us culturally in both worldly and ecclesial contexts. In chapter 2 Smith considers the church as *polis*, though here the emphasis shifts just a bit from his earlier writing. Even as Smith remains in this volume centered on the liturgical formation of desire and its relationship to the Reign of God and Jesus as King, he wants to note that this "liturgical irruption" is both in and *for* the world. Chapter 3 looks back at how the church has already impacted the liberal culture we are in. Smith calls them "craters of the gospel," seeing the landscape as shaped in part by a Christian culture secularized beyond recognition in a late modern context. Liberal democracy, in other words, may well be secular, but it is, viewed historically, theologically inflected. Chapter 4 then becomes an opportunity for Smith to reflect on the unique set of opportunities and problems posed by pluralism in liberal democracy for developing a reforming public theology in an evangelical mode. Chapter 5 then turns to consider the limits of natural law thinking and a contrast of such notions with divine providence. A reforming public theology would, of course, need to reconsider the relationship of nature and grace generally. The final chapter, which represents Smith's most honest and powerful reflections, deals with the problem of how liturgically formed desires can nonetheless go awry. If liturgy does form a church as *polis* that is nonetheless in and for the world, there is not guarantee that liturgy succeeds in doing so. Somehow a reforming public theology committed to the formation of ecclesial desires and loves needs to account for the liturgy's *failure* to form in the empirical life of the church. Smith then calls the church to embrace even these contradictions and struggles as it looks for public rules for the road that maintain a kind of received identity even as it considers its life in the world as occasionally "quixotic."

One of the most engaging features of the book is the way Smith engages in a kind of cultural criticism throughout. The book is replete with literary and cinematic examples, stories, and images that capture both the competing ways desire is formed in the two cities as well as the paradoxical possibilities for collaboration and betrayal in a pluralistic context. For me as a homiletical theologian, it is especially interesting to read as Smith seeks to help his readers experience the vision he holds out "theo-poetically" in this volume. There are moments where

the cultural allusions tend to be a bit ham-fisted (e.g., his use of the movie “Hidden Figures”) but many of the illustrations are quite powerful—especially the reference to the liturgical deformation represented by the Godfather movie referenced in the final chapter. This engaging cultural criticism alone would be helpful for homiletics and preachers who wish to develop an imaginative vocabulary for thinking about life at the intersection of cultures and in the conflict of desires.

Those of us for whom secular culture is not necessarily a bogeyman will not find much comfort in Smith’s book. At the same time, a more tempered reading of Augustine’s two cities in this third volume opens up, ironically, the possibility of an intra-confessional dialogue around public theology for evangelicals, liberals, postliberals, and postcolonial theologians who struggle with many of the same issues: the relationship of gospel and culture, the role and shape of identity, and the asymmetrical realities of conversation and engagement in a post-secular context. I don’t agree with Smith’s book, but I recommend it highly.

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