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Smith, James K. A. *Desiring the Kingdom: Worship, Worldview, and Cultural Formation*. 2009. Grand Rapids, Michigan: Baker Academic. 238 pp. ISBN 978-0801035777.

*Any Christian scholarship worth the name must emerge from the matrix of worship.*

This statement, from the concluding paragraph of James K. A. Smith’s remarkable work (230), suggests the overall trajectory of the entire book. He begins from the vantage point of Christian education, but in fact (as he recognizes in his opening Acknowledgements) the implications of this study extend much further: into the life of churches, their leaders, and their adherents.

### Forming our desires

Smith takes to task the notion that education is primarily about “ideas and information,” and that therefore Christian education is supposed to be about “Christian ideas,” about developing “a Christian *worldview*, which is taken to be a system of Christian beliefs, ideas, and doctrines” (17).

Rather, he suggests that Christian education is, or should be, more about *formation* than *information*: shaping our “hearts and desires,” our “hopes and passions” (18). He vouches for imagination over intellect, for “what we love” over “what we know.”

Foundational to this conclusion is Smith’s insistence throughout the book that we humans are creatures of desire, love, and affections before we are defined by intellect, beliefs, and doctrines. “This book argues that we human creatures are lovers before and above all else, and that the people of God is a community marked by a love and desire for the kingdom of God. . . . I think we are primarily desiring animals rather than merely thinking things” (15, 26). Therefore “what constitutes our ultimate identities—what makes us who we are, the kind of people we are—is what we love. More specifically, our identity is shaped by what we ultimately love, or what our love *as* ultimate—what, at the end of the day, gives us a sense of meaning, purpose, understanding and orientation” (26–27). “The core claim of this book is that liturgies [which is what he calls worship practices of all styles]—whether ‘sacred’ or ‘secular’—shape and constitute our identities by forming our most fundamental desires and our most basic attunement to the world. In short, liturgies make us certain kinds of people, and what defines us is what we *love*. . . . Our ultimate love is what we worship” (25, 51).



## Cultural liturgies

Smith describes what he and others have termed “cultural liturgies”: habitual practices and institutions in our society that have a powerful, though often invisible, formative influence on us “by being pictured in concrete, alluring ways that attract us at a non-cognitive level”—through media, for example (58). These “train the heart, as it were, to desire certain ends” (58). We are thus lured unconsciously into counter-Christian conceptions of what constitutes “the good life.” (The “Practices Audit” on page 84 is especially recommended for unearthing some of the formative influences going on in our individual lives.)

As an example of a “cultural liturgy” we are offered a fascinating view of a modern mall and its allurements, through the eyes of “Martian anthropologists” observing such a phenomenon for the first time. Smith interprets the mall as a “temple,” a place of worship for a particular brand of consumerist religion (19–23). He wants the reader to see how pervasively and persuasively the allurements and promises of the good life are accomplished through display, lighting and, finally, purchase. What Smith calls the “education of desire” is extraordinarily powerful in the mall.

He mentions stadiums and media (television and films) as other such sites where powerful cultural liturgies are enacted; and he points out that we are all being influenced and formed daily by the cultural liturgies surrounding us. That means that Christian education and discipleship are indeed “counter-formation” (33), combatting these contrary attractions that seek to divert our desires and love. In other words, Christian instruction never occurs on a blank slate; rather, in a fallen world, there is always a polemic and corrective aspect to it.

Smith’s focus is exclusively on North American culture and Christianity, and one might wish for a wider swath of application. However, his principles would certainly apply cross-culturally: every community is inculcated by a (probably unique) contextual set of cultural liturgies; and it is up to the Church in each culture to be conscious of these, acting as a true counterculture when these influences draw people away from biblical perspectives and priorities.

## The priority of worship

Smith maintains that this sort of needed “counter-formation” or “reprogramming” occurs most fundamentally and powerfully through the rituals and liturgies of Christian worship practices. It is there, he insists, that a person’s sensibilities are trained to recognize and discern “whatever is true, whatever is honorable, whatever is just, whatever is pure, whatever is lovely, whatever is commendable, if there is any excellence, if there is anything worthy of praise” (Philippians 4:8). “Being a disciple of Jesus is not primarily a matter of getting the right ideas and doctrines and beliefs into your head in order to guarantee proper behavior; rather, it’s a matter of being the kind of person who *loves* rightly—who loves God and neighbor and is oriented to the world by the primacy of that love. We are made to be such people by our immersion in the material practices of Christian worship—through affective impact, over time, of sights and smells in water and wine” (32–33).

Smith subordinates intellect, belief systems, doctrinal convictions, and worldview to the priority of worship. In that sense the volume may be seen as “a reassertion and gloss on the classical axiom *lex orandi, lex credenda*: what the church prays is what the church believes. . . . Not a top-down, ideas-first picture that prioritizes beliefs and doctrines (‘worldview’) but rather a bottom-up, practices-first model that prioritizes worship as a practice of desire” (34, 136). This is of course how Christian worship developed historically during its first pre-canonical, pre-creedal centuries, as Smith points out: “The people of God called out (*ek-klesia*) to be the church were worshipping long before they got all their doctrines in order or articulated the elements of a Christian worldview; and they were engaged in and developing worship practices long before what we now call our *Bible* emerged and was solidified” (135). Smith sees this historical observation as intersecting naturally with his anthropological view of desire over doctrine in human nature.

Smith asserts that “We become disciples by engaging in communal practices of communion, prayer, singing, and dancing” (64).

The liturgy is a “hearts and minds” strategy, a pedagogy that trains us as disciples precisely by putting our bodies through a regimen of repeated practices that get hold of our heart and “aim” our love toward the kingdom of God. Before we articulate a worldview, we worship. Before we put into words the lineaments of an ontology or an epistemology, we pray for God’s healing and illumination. Before we theorize the nature of God, we sing His praises. Before we express moral principles, we receive forgiveness. Before we codify the doctrine of Christ’s two natures, we receive the body of Christ in the Eucharist. Before we think, we pray. That’s the kind of animals we are, first and foremost: loving, desiring, affective, liturgical animals who, for the most part, don’t inhabit the world as thinkers or cognitive machines. (33–34)

Smith ends up endorsing the historical and traditional shape and activities of Christian worship as being the kind of nourishing of our hearts and desire that we need. In one of the final chapters, he allows his “Martian anthropologists” to observe in a Christian church “elements of Christian worship that, over time, have been judged as essential aspects of the gathered body of Christ in its praise and worship of the triune God” (152–53). This true *outsider’s* view is telling and instructive. He walks us through:

Liturgical Time: Rhythms and Cadences of Hope  
 Call to Worship: An Invitation to Be Human  
 God’s Greeting and Mutual Greetings: Hospitality, Community, and Graced Dependence  
 Song: Hymning the Language of the Kingdom  
 The Law: Order, Norms, and Freedom for the Good  
 Confession and Assurance of Pardon: Brokenness, Grace, Hope  
 Baptism: Initiation into a Royal Priesthood, Constitution of a New People  
 The Creed: Situating Belief  
 Prayer: Learning the Language of the Kingdom  
 Scripture and Sermon: Re-narrating the World  
 Eucharist: Supper with the King

Offering: Kingdom Economics of Gratitude

Sending as Witnesses: The Cultural Mandate Meets the Great Commission

Worship, Discipleship, and Discipline: Practices Beyond Sunday

(Chapter 5, 155–215, “Practicing (for) the Kingdom”)

### Helpful contributions of the book

1. Smith makes interesting and significant observations about *human nature and behavior*. He rightly points out that we are much, much more than just what we think; what we *love* says much about who we are, especially what we love most (that is, what we *worship*).
2. He gives important cautions about the formative nature of the “*cultural liturgies*” in which we find ourselves involved and immersed. He shows how our culture (and every culture) is infused with visions of a supposed “good life” that points us away from the “path of life” God offers us in Christ. “In Your presence there is fullness of joy; at Your right hand are pleasures forevermore” (Psalm 16:11).
3. He gives a vital emphasis to the *centrality of worship* in defining and shaping who we are as beings created in the image of God. We are led in “training in righteousness” (Timothy 3:17) by practicing and repeating and internalizing actions which direct our hearts toward God and His kingdom.
4. This book is about high and lofty things (and is obviously written by a scholar of great depth and erudition, who writes in his Introduction that he has purposed to tone his presentation down a bit to make the book more widely accessible). Yet the subjects he deals with are of the utmost practicality to our Christian living, our living in society, and our ministry of building up others in the faith. And, of course, pastors and worship leaders find much to consider and evaluate relative to their methods and aims for the corporate meeting of the church.

### Concerns about the book

1. Smith may go too far in his assessment that humans are more connected to love, desire, and the affections than to thought, rationality, and doctrines (which is ironic, since he is an intellectual himself!). To cast this in the “left-brain, right-brain” model: he could almost be seen as giving preference to right-brained people as somehow truer to their real nature! For left-brained people, the thought life of course is a crucial part of their identity, and profoundly formative for them as well. Obviously Smith is not totally discounting the life of the mind (just writing his book took some intense and focused thinking); but perhaps his dichotomy is just a little bit too strong.
2. The principle of *lex orandi, lex credenda* was clearly operational in the early pre-canonical, pre-creedal centuries of the Church; yet in the canonical, creedal centuries since, the Word of God and doctrines growing out of it necessarily play a central role in guiding, guarding, and reforming the worship life of the Church. The ultimate authority of Scripture with its “ideas-first picture that prioritizes beliefs and doctrines (‘worldview’)” (136) definitely has a “top-down” influence, instead of the “bottom-up, practices-first model that prioritizes worship as a practice of desire” that Smith insists on (136). “Faith

comes by hearing, and hearing by the Word of Christ” (Romans 10:17).

3. Smith begins by building his philosophical, anthropological case, but I would have liked a little more engagement with Scripture, which is almost absent until the second half of the book. (After an admittedly cursory examination of the book, it appears that the first reference to Scripture is on page 79, and the first citation on page 135.)
4. Smith is beholden to “proven” historical forms of worship, with little scriptural warrant offered. He clings to the “elements of Christian worship that, over time, have been judged as essential aspects of the gathered body of Christ in its praise and worship of the triune God” (152–53). There may well be some legitimacy to that kind of historical “canonization” of practices, but there must be firmer roots than that, as there are other branches of Christendom that would claim as equally “proven” some other practices which Smith would probably deem as inappropriate. And, looking beyond Smith’s obviously Western purview to a more global context, the practices and structures he deems as historically ratified may be less so in other cultures.
5. Smith drives his main points home clearly, but eventually his restatements start to come across as unnecessarily wordy and repetitious.
6. He gives vent—unnecessarily, it seemed to me—to some of his political leanings, coming down hard on capitalism (at least in its more consumerist manifestations) and especially on nationalism and patriotism, and particularly “Americanism.”

## Conclusion

This is an important book, and rereading much of it in preparation for this review gave me a deeper appreciation of Smith’s accomplishment. He demonstrates compellingly what is at stake in “Christian education” in its broadest understanding. Christian education of course extends far beyond the walls of the Christian college (his original audience), into the lives of individual believers and of course into the local church; hence equally far-ranging are the implications of this work for any of us involved with the work of discipling others, with the goal that we all be molded “to be a certain kind of people whose hearts and passions and desires are aimed at the kingdom of God” (18). The “classroom” which kindles this kind of growth, Smith argues convincingly, will be within the context of the practices of Christian worship.

As E. Byron Anderson has said, we are “catechized by consumerism”;<sup>1</sup> we are drinking deeply at the well of “cultural liturgies,” which are incredibly formative in our lives, whether we are aware of that or not. That enculturation is of course taking place, in different ways, in every culture in our fallen world. So the implications, and the solution, are true in every culture and people group on earth. The need for and significance of worship as a formative influence in our hearts, desires—and minds—is incalculable.

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<sup>1</sup> E. Byron Anderson, “Worship and Theological Education,” *Theological Education* 39, no. 1 (2003): 120.