[Review] Imagining the Kingdom, James K. A. Smith

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Introduction

> "… one of the best things we can do to ensure the transformative, rehabituating power of Christian worship is to foster a reflexive intentionality about what we're doing and why."

Imagining the Kingdom is the second book in James K. A. Smith's planned trilogy under the banner of "Cultural Liturgies." Whereas the first book, *Desiring the Kingdom* (2009), focused on transforming and reshaping our desires through liturgy and worship practices, this second volume focuses on imagination and the crucial role it plays in pointing people towards the Kingdom of God.

Smith's central premise is that the capturing and directing of imagination is crucial to Christian formation. He approaches the issue of worship from two levels: the first volume addresses the formation of our desires, and now this second volume takes a further step back to examine our imaginations, which in turn shape and direct our desires.

> We become a people who desire the kingdom (or some other, rival version of "the kingdom") insofar as we are a people who have been trained to imagine the kingdom in a certain way. (125)

This second book, like the first, is also billed as a hybrid: "too scholastic for practitioners and too colloquial for scholars" (xvii). Those who just want to read and consider Smith's primary theses may find the book long and tedious. However, for those interested in how and why he arrived at these conclusions, Smith's chapters provide a significant development of his philosophy and support for his arguments. The book does not reference much scripture at all; Smith is not building a theological case for how we worship so much as a philosophical and anthropological one. This is a different but important angle; in the book we are encouraged to consider how our Creator made us, how he designed us for worship, and what that means for us as practitioners.

The book comprises two main sections. Part 1 is a "theoretical toolbox that gives us conceptual resources and a fresh lexicon to be able to name and articulate a Christian liturgical anthropology" (101). Part 2 uses this framework to explore how worship works. The following sections highlight some of the important concepts Smith outlines in this book.

Imagination

> Much of our action is not the fruit of conscious deliberation; instead, much of what we do grows out of our passional orientation to the world—affected by all the ways we've been primed to perceive the world. In short, our action emerges from how we imagine the world. (31)

What we imagine is what we desire. If we are going to "recalibrate our attunement to the world," and desire the Kingdom, "it is not enough to have a Christian 'perspective' on the world; we need nothing less than a Christian imagination" (157). Smith describes worship as an "alternative imaginary," a way that we participate in the story of God reconciling his people to himself (150). For that Story[1] to sink in and influence our lives, to "capture our imaginations," it needs to get into our hearts via the body (150). And what is our "heart?" This leads us to a crucial point in Smith's line of thinking: our in-betweenness.

In-betweenness

> We are not just "subjects"; neither are we mere "objects." We are incarnate inhabitants of our world. (44)

Smith relies on French theorists Maurice Merleau-Ponty and Pierre Bourdieu to define this important concept: the "messy complexity of our being-in-the-world" (85). Merleau-Ponty describes a model of the human person that is not limited to considering only the mind/intellect, but also acknowledges the "betweenness" that we exist in: logical, thinking, and intellectual, yet also emotional, physical, and instinctual (44). Bourdieu's concept of the *habitus* (a "nexus of dispositions by which we constitute our world without rational deliberation or conscious awareness" but which does not exclude "deliberation or . . . 'strategic calculation'") completes the foundations for Smith's liturgical anthropology (82).

In our in-betweenness, Smith argues, we're more "moved by stories" than "convinced by arguments." We're more "aesthetic than deductive, better captured by narrative than analysis" (108). "We have spent a generation thinking about thinking. But . . . we don't think our way through to action; much of our action is

[1] Smith capitalizes "Story" throughout the book, in order to designate the grand story of God and man and salvation.

not the outcome of rational deliberation and conscious choice" (6). This line of reasoning has serious implications for the potentially positive significance of aesthetics and the arts in worship. I'll stop here, lest I get ahead of myself; we'll return to these implications in a moment.

Aesthetics and form

As the book progresses and Smith further develops his line of reasoning, aesthetics and the arts become central to the picture. Here we begin to see his thoughts on worship and "cultural liturgies." Smith states:

> If liturgies are "rituals of ultimate concern" that form identity, that inculcate particular visions of the good life, and that do so in a way that means to trump other ritual formations, they do so because they are story-laden practices that are absorbed into our imaginative epicenter of action and behavior. (109)

In other words, liturgies, both secular and Christian, have the potential to affect us at a deeper level; not just logic and not just emotion but an elusive in-between combination of the two sides of our dichotomous selves.

Smith advocates for something that most artists already agree with: the "irreducibility of the aesthetic" (120). In other words, the "truth of art" does not "reduce to mere representation or correspondence" (134). The truth of a work of art is inextricably intertwined with its form; they are inseparable. Through a lengthy series of arguments, Smith leads the reader to this simple conclusion: form matters. It matters not because of "traditionalism" or "preservation of the status quo," but because "it is the form of worship that tells the Story (or better, enacts the Story)" (168). God speaks to us through more than just our intellect; he also speaks to us through our in-betweenness, and that in-betweenness is right where the arts affect us. The arts speak to us in a way that is not always rational and explainable, and Smith believes that we are ignoring an important part of who we are when we restrict our liturgies to the intellectual.

> The point isn't that both form and content matter. The point is more radical than that: in some significant sense we need to eschew the form/content distinction. Because worship is not just the dissemination of some content or the expression of an "inner" feeling, the very form of worship tells the Story. (169)

Smith addresses the planning of worship services when he asserts that we should not only be "discerning about content—the lyrics of songs, the content of a pastoral prayer, the message of a sermon—but also discerning about the kin/aesthetic meaning of the form of our worship" (174). Rather than discussing form and content as separate issues, he would like us to consider them together as a whole.

Issues and concerns

While this is an important book and most of Smith's conclusions are sound, I have a few points of concern. First, I don't quite follow Smith's logic regarding form, and the issue stems from his apparent Western and historical viewpoints. I completely agree with his main point that form matters and is not neutral. However, Smith takes his argument for form one step further and advocates for a return to "ancient Christian sacramental wisdom carried in the historic practices of Christian worship and the embodied legacies of spiritual and monastic disciplines" (39), as if those forms are the most appropriate for us today because they are the originals. Smith asserts we have "assumed that Christianity is primarily a 'message' and is thus defined by a 'content' that is distillable from historical forms." He believes we wrongly assume that "forms are basically just neutral containers for the message, selected on the basis of taste, preference, or cultural relevance" (168).

It appears that Smith is arguing that these ancient forms are transcultural and thus useful and applicable to every society, everywhere in the world, at any point in history. He is arguing that form is not neutral and that these historical forms are intertwined with the message in a way that makes them impossible to separate. As I said, I agree that form is not neutral; the meaning of a message can be inextricably bound up with the form of communication. Perhaps I am oversimplifying the issue, but I would have concerns stating that an ancient form that was appropriate to the early Christian culture in the Middle East would therefore be appropriate to Christians from a very different culture worshiping halfway around the world, thousands of years later.

This prompts further questions: how do I choose which "ancient form" is the best? What is the most historical, most original form? How do I know musical performance practices? Which ancient liturgy am I going to use, and how do I know which one communicated the gospel most effectively in its form? How far back in history is far enough? Why do we believe that those forms are better? What language did they use, and what if that is the only way to adequately express the ideas contained in that form? Will the meaning become lost in translation? The questions could be endless, and the answers few. Is Smith advocating that only original forms and languages are acceptable? From there it would follow that translation can never communicate the full meaning because language is part of the original "form" of the gospel message; therein lies the source of my confusion with this topic as it is presented in this book. Perhaps my particular concern for this is due to my cross-cultural work and experiences in Indonesia. Considering the extensive foundation Smith has built in Part I, and how thoroughly he works out his arguments in Part II, I would appreciate further discussion of this particular topic as it feels under-explored by comparison.

We should examine ancient forms of worship and try to understand the cultural contexts in which they were created in order to better inform how we worship today. However, to stop at that point and return to using those exact forms today is missing the extremely important theological concept of the incarnation which leads to such activities as Bible translation and contextualization. If I follow the argument that we too often carelessly "treat the historical, received forms of Christian worship as a kind of disposable husk that can be shucked (and chucked!) as long as we keep the kernel of the gospel 'message'" to its ultimate conclusion I am left with a philosophy that does not appear to allow for the cross-cultural contextualization of that gospel message (168).

Indonesia has a long history of Christian presence, beginning hundreds of years ago with the arrival of the Dutch and the Portuguese. My experience has been with several denominations in eastern Indonesia that have roots in the Dutch Reformed tradition and can trace their lineage back to the first colonial churches (circa 1605). The form of worship and liturgy, the style of music, the style and architecture of the church building, the clothing worn by the pastor, and many other elements reflect this heritage with both positive and negative implications. An easy example is the musical style used for worship in many of the Dutch Reformed-tradition churches. Many old hymns from the 1800s, translated from Dutch or German into Indonesian, are still sung every week. This musical style is not to be found in local culture outside of the church building and is completely foreign to anyone not raised in that environment. When asked why these songs are still sung, people invariably answer "tradition," "that's the way it has always been," or "that's what worship music sounds like." While pride in heritage and history are good qualities (and Indonesia does have a rich history of the Dutch church that should not be completely overlooked), I would argue that much of the original meaning in that musical style has been lost. This is negative in that an opportunity to add meaning and depth of experience through contextual, local musical styles has been missed.

From one perspective (and this supports Smith's conclusions), the churches seem to appreciate the unifying aspects of their history and traditions: they worship in the same way that their Christian brothers and sisters in the Netherlands and other liturgical Protestant churches worship all around the world. This is a wonderful unifying tradition that brings the body of Christ together. From a different perspective, it's imperialistic to impose Dutch or European forms of worship (based on ancient Greek and Roman forms, as Smith asserts) on the Indonesian church as better and more meaningful (as the Dutch originally did several hundred years ago). Worship in the church is a complex and delicate issue with few obvious solutions; ultimately the final decisions rest with the synod or denominational leadership. I would appreciate more clarification from Smith with regard to this section of the book. Various arguments in the book support either contextualization of form within the local culture (and the broader point that form matters) or a return to ancient, proven worship

forms; but what I find missing is a resolution of the inherent tension I feel exists between those two seemingly disparate perspectives.

Finally, I also agree with Ron Man's concern with the first book in this trilogy (Man 2014): I would have liked to see more biblical basis for Smith's arguments—or at least an acknowledgement of why he has chosen to approach this issue on philosophical and anthropological grounds and has not addressed this with more support from the discipline of Biblical studies. I appreciate the new ideas Smith brings and I found most of his arguments theologically sound, but adding more support from the scriptural narratives might strengthen his final book in the trilogy. If biblical support is specifically not being included, I would appreciate more explanation of the reasons.

Conclusion

Based on my experience in Indonesia, I wholeheartedly agree with much in Smith's book. His arguments (with the exception of my concern about the underdeveloped discussion of ancient forms) firmly reinforce the importance of local arts in worship. Smith asserts that form matters, and I interpret that statement as supportive of local, contextual forms of worship. If the meaning in art is inextricably tied to the form, translating hymns from a foreign culture will never be enough; the form will never be right even if the message is. (And is the message still "right" if the form isn't? Or is the meaning irreversibly distorted by using the wrong form?) In Indonesia, the form can communicate that something is from the Dutch (that is, colonial), from the Contemporary Christian Music (CCM) movement (that is, from the West), or from their own culture. In a workshop about contextualization, I saw firsthand that this concept revolutionized how some Indonesian pastors saw themselves in light of the gospel. When they recognized that meaning and understanding were important, they also recognized at a deeper heart level the truth that God is not foreign, he is not someone else's God but he loves them the same as everyone else. In a post-colonial situation, this truth is desperately needed.

Admittedly, I found this volume tedious at times, and some of the appeals to philosophers seemed more like side points to the main thesis. However, as the book winds down it refocuses on the main point: how we are created as imaginal beings and what that means for how we worship our Creator. Smith also provides an excellent philosophical rationale for the crucial importance of the arts in worship:

> The formative power of cultural narratives cannot be . . . countered with mere didactics. Counterformation requires countermeasures that capture our imagination and don't just convince our intellect. . . . [T]his should be the basis for an arts manifesto rooted in that first lesson of literature:

> show, don't tell. . . . [I]f the gospel is going to capture imaginations and sanctify perception we need painters and novelists and dancers and songwriters and sculptors and poets and designers whose creative work shows the world otherwise, enabling us to imagine differently—and hence perceive differently and so act differently. (163)

This quote reflects what I see as the main thesis of this book—and at the same time it reflects my confusion with some of Smith's arguments (as explained in more detail above). When I read this quote I find that it supports my issues with Smith's discussion of returning to ancient forms; it is almost as if he disagrees with himself, or perhaps the reasoning for how all this fits together is what I feel is missing. Why do we need artists to create new things if we should just copy the past?

The concerns mentioned above should not take away from the significance of the main argument for our in-between existence; that is what makes this book tremendously important. This is a seminal work in reflecting on and advocating for Christian arts, communication, and worship and I highly recommend it as an addition to the ethnodoxology corpus. Smith's primary concern is with the state of Christian education, but his arguments for the centrality of the imagination in worship are equally applicable to missiology, ethnodoxology, and worship studies. He fleshes out this topic more thoroughly and with a deeper philosophical basis than any other resource I have encountered.

I conclude with an aside from Smith in which he admits his goals and hopes for the reader:

> I am making an allusive argument (I hope) for the irreducibility of the aesthetic. I am providing an intellectual analysis of why and how incarnate significance eludes our intellectual grasp. I'm trying to convince you of the fact that we are more fundamentally moved than convinced. I'm offering you the laborious detail of a "philosophical anthropology" and a "liturgical theology of culture" to prompt you to consider that God gets hold of us in stories and poems and the performed narrative of liturgies. (120)

Bibliography

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