
What Hippo and Grand Rapids Have to Say to Each Other

Studies in Christian Ethics

2019, Vol. 32(1) 119–123

© The Author(s) 2018

Article reuse guidelines:

sagepub.com/journals-permissions

DOI: 10.1177/0953946818806788

journals.sagepub.com/home/sce**Eric Gregory**

Princeton University, USA

Abstract

This essay situates James K. A. Smith's *Awaiting the King: Reforming Public Theology* in the context of contemporary social criticism, Augustinian politics, and the cultural turn in religious ethics. While commending Smith's liturgical ambitions and newfound appreciation for the democratic tradition, I raise critical questions pertaining to eschatology, war and nationhood, and the extent to which he overcomes familiar debates in Christian social ethics.

Keywords

Calvinism, Augustine, evangelical, democracy, liturgy

Let me thank Davey Henreckson for organizing this panel, and Jamie Smith for this book. It is a fitting conclusion to his trilogy that defies scholarly boundaries and conventions. My endorsement on the book's cover suggests my admiration should not come as a surprise: the publication of this work makes it no longer possible to say evangelicals lack a viable political theology. I very much welcome his critical yet constructive, funky, ascetical, postcolonial and eclectic Kuyperian political theology that is actually theological. It stands in contrast to the *practical atheism* of many God-and-Heaven forgetting evangelical discussions of religion and politics, shalom, worldviews, cultural transformation, natural law, and common grace. And it is because of his theology—for us creatures of desire in a world that will not fulfill those desires—that Smith broadens our imagination for what counts as politics, how to be political, and the tasks of theology for a time between the times. Refusing the Benedict Option or the culture wars, he extends the gifts of neo-Calvinism to American evangelicalism beyond analytic philosophy of religion and principled pluralism.

Corresponding author:

Eric Gregory, Princeton University, 1879 Hall/Religion, Princeton, NJ 08544, USA.

Email: gregory@princeton.edu

Now, on occasion, Professor Smith has been critically appreciative of my own efforts in Augustinian political theology, challenging my assessment of liberalism as insufficiently suspicious of its status as a rival liturgy and, relatedly, my assessment of Augustinianism as insufficiently Pentecostal and Triune, which is to say letting my supposed Barthian Christology trump attention to pneumatology, habituation, and ecclesiology.¹ He also has raised important questions about audience and method in the work of reconstruction, especially if a pre-commitment to liberalism distorts Augustinian credentials. I welcome this opportunity to return the favor, less by way of *apologia*, which I have done elsewhere, but through his own confessions of a pilgrimage beyond ‘activism and quietism’ (p. xii). Smith offers a vision that cultivates a creational, incarnational, and eschatological ‘posture’ (p. xiv), demands the ‘hard, messy work of discernment’ (p. 17) in our political resistance, and calls for collaboration that emerges from ‘substantive visions of the good *for the sake of* our neighbors’ (p. 34, original emphasis) through a virtue-centered ‘political phenomenology of love’ (p. 43). Indeed, when joined to his newfound selective affirmation of constitutional democracy as fruit of Gospel proclamation, at the risk of pride and self-deception, I want to welcome my fellow, always reforming, Calvinist back home. He was our prodigal son, lost and found, swinging between the troughs of fundamentalism and ‘Kuyperian secularism’, and even his own rhetorical excess in *Desiring the Kingdom* (cf. p. 95 n. 8). Let me bring the best robe, put it on him, and see what kind of feast we might have.

Smith tells us he expected to write Hauerwas for Kuyperians; instead, after ordering his loves and a bit of gene splicing that retains some of that DNA, we have Augustine made Reformed by way of Anglican Oliver O’Donovan, but also Hegel, Barth, Milbank, Stout, Leithart, Marsh, Taylor, Murray, Wolterstorff, Mouw, Radner, Jennings, Thaler, Corleone, Levin, Don Quixote, and Cormac McCarthy for the holy catholic church. *Awaiting the King*—which calls for a hastening that waits, an evangelical mission to the *saeculum* as the free response of grace, and an anti-gnostic theology of history—may be the Barth that North American Protestants have been waiting for.

Smith calls it a liturgical and missional political theology that claims to move beyond current debates, or at least reframe them, by rejecting ‘spatializing’ metaphors of Christianity and politics that focus on ‘boundary management’ (p. 8) and ‘rationalizing’ metaphors that assume belief-centric citizens as ‘decision-making machines’ (p. 8). The focus is habits and desires ‘that make us who we are’ (p. 10) across a range of practices and scripts. Here, he follows what many describe as the cultural turn in religious ethics: more Hegel, less Kant, but deeply Augustinian, inspired by that great ethnographer of Christian religion and Roman culture who blurred the boundaries of psyche and culture. He wants us to stop asking ‘*where*’ and start asking ‘*how*’ (p. 19), taking us through an insightful tour of various civic theologies and deforming liturgies that claim our souls: the stadium, the National Mall, the internet, and international airports, to be juxtaposed with the political acts of Christian worship that have a ‘spillover effect’ including renewal of moral agency and imagination (p. 59) which prophetically admit ‘an unapologetically providentialist account of political development’ (p. 62 n. 23). The church, of course, is

1. See James K. A. Smith, ‘Formation, Grace, and Pneumatology: Or, Where’s the Spirit in Gregory’s Augustine?’, *Journal of Religious Ethics* 39.3 (2011), pp. 556–69.

not immune to these deformations as well. Its worship does not always track the marks and grooves left by the Gospel.

Amen. First, a few quibbles and queries about places where Smith may go against his better self. By my lights, while effacing nostalgia and resentment, Smith still harbors an unhealthy penchant for castigating ‘the modern liberal view’ (p. 10 n. 25) and the purring of ‘Lady Liberalism’ (p. 21), even slipping between language of democracy and empire (p. 51). Generalizations have their place, with kernels of truth. I do not oppose analogies between Romanization and Americanization as colonizing ways of life in need of prophetic critique (and lament). But these loose, essentializing terms seem contrary to the spirit of a book with historicist and theory-deflating ambitions even if we can distinguish early modern from late modern liberalism, or democracy as an abstraction from democracy as an ‘*insidious* tradition’ (p. 39, emphasis original). There also is more textured attention to virtues and dispositions than institutions and practices for a book that claims the salience of institutions as liturgical bodies, especially given current threats to various political institutions. Additionally, while Smith is not silent about revelation, there is less exegesis of the Bible than you might expect from a good evangelical and less attention to ‘actual’ liturgy than you might expect from a Grand Rapids Calvinist, especially when paired with his Milbankian conception of theologians as the ‘unacknowledged legislators of the world’ (p. 91). I worry a bit that Smith’s phenomenology does more of what Hans Frei called ‘a philosophical kind of theologizing’ than his sociological emphasis on church as organism should permit.² I also found odd and misleading the opposition of the *Democracy and Tradition* Stout and the *Blessed are the Organized* Stout, particularly with respect to the formative (and *malformative*) role of churches and religious practices. It would have been interesting had Smith allowed the latter book to shape his reading of the former (or, belatedly, now Stout’s own trilogy with the Gifford lectures), given their shared desire to see ‘hidden figures in the story of Western liberal democracy’ (p. 70), to expose the semblances of virtue in false piety, and, as Stout puts it, to make ‘the dangers of our situation visible without simultaneously disabling the hope of reforming it’.³ In short, I wonder if Smith fully absorbs his admiration for *Blessed* and what it might mean for church as counter-polis political theology. Finally, I take Smith to agree with O’Donovan that the state is epistemically capable of responding to Gospel proclamation. Here, he stands in contrast to Barth, despite the intriguing yet unexplored affinity with (spatial?) language of concentric circles in Kuyper, Barth, and O’Donovan. It was not clear to me whether or not, given our cultural moment, Smith thinks mission should be oriented to society rather than its rulers. This laundry list does not strike me as central reservations. I simply register them. So with the space allotted, let me raise a few substantial issues in more detail.

-
2. Hans Frei, *Types of Christian Theology* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1992), p. 22. By contrast, see the work of another Smith: Ted A. Smith, *The New Measures: A Theological History of Democratic Practice* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2007).
 3. Jeffrey Stout, *Blessed are the Organized: Grassroots Democracy in America* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2010), p. 259. See also Jeffrey Stout, *Democracy and Tradition* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2004).

Already and Not Yet

A consistent theme of the book is the pursuit of the common good with Gospel integrity, one that involves eschatologically relating worship and politics, eschaton and *saeculum*, history and providence. He wants to do so without recourse to language of natural/supernatural or ultimate/penultimate, let alone ‘Thomistic’ renderings of nature/grace. I take this to be related to his concerns about Jonathan Chaplin’s efforts to distinguish political and directional truth for a limited state. Drawing from O’Donovan, Smith also rejects a choice between an ‘ethics of creation’ and an ‘ethics of the kingdom’ because the resurrection is the ‘reaffirmation of creation’ (p. 154). This move is central for O’Donovan’s effort to bridge the gap between theology and politics through a salvation-historical approach. It is an approach that Smith endorses, with occasional nods to participationist language of anticipation and proleptic realization. So I want to hear Smith say a bit more about the relation of ‘political history’ to ‘saving history’ and what he means by Gospel integrity. Here, I can simply repeat one of my questions for O’Donovan’s project refracted through Smith’s emphasis on teleology and providential history. How is political action related to beatitude, if at all?⁴ Smith, for example, more than O’Donovan, lifts up the civil rights movement as a Christian event for both church and society. His pneumatology, and passing reference to Henri de Lubac, may also provide more by way of theological interpretation of political history as the theatre of divine action than O’Donovan’s Anglican reserve. To be sure, Smith’s account of messianic arrival still awaits a divine completion. All is grace. And yet, within the ‘already’ and ‘not yet’, Smith offers more connective tissue between the temporality of the common good and eternal happiness. But, as O’Donovan reminds us, not every act of providence is an act of salvation, and salvation is not a political achievement. So, how sacramental can a *providentialist* account of politics be? Are these events witnesses and secular parables legible to the kingdom, or something else? Is all politics equi-distant and equi-present to the reign of God? Moreover, does a providentialist account tell us anything about the new creation that awaits us? How should we understand the continuities of the earthly and the heavenly, especially if the new creation is more than a restoration of the goodness of creation (not to mention a destruction of the present)? Is this new creation the *telos* of history, or as Augustinians typically have construed it, a transmutation of creation’s potentials? In short, how do we maintain the integrity of each aspect of salvation history (if that is what Smith wants to do) and relate it to politics? Is the political now a *locus* of Christian faith: the political reality of the resurrected Christ and the Spirit in the church and the world, rather than something we talk about *after* we do our fundamental theology?

War and Nations

I am in deep sympathy with Smith’s expansion of our understanding of the political, but can a liturgical political theology also be a *political* political theology? This is not to say

4. See Eric Gregory, ‘The Boldness of Analogy: Civic Virtues and Augustinian Eudaimonism’, in Robert Song and Brent Waters (eds), *The Authority of the Gospel: Explorations in Moral and Political Theology in Honor of Oliver O’Donovan* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2015), pp. 72–85.

I wish there were more public policy in this book, or even a better theory of liberal democracy. He does provide revealing discussions of educational pluralism and the misuses of sphere sovereignty and subsidiarity. But two ‘political conceptualities’ seem missing, especially given his invocations of Rwanda and American patriotism. How does Smith understand the use of force in a Christian political theology and why is that not part of this book given the emphasis on spirited incubations of virtue and God’s providential ordering of the world? Also, given his discussions of place and territory, can Smith help us think about states, as organs of collective self-governance that pursue policies that favor the interests of compatriots over those of foreigners? Again, I am not asking for policy proposals but, to put it bluntly and grandly, is there a theology of war and a theology of the nations for those who await the King?

Last Words, Missing Figures

Smith’s call to praxis, like that of Hauerwas, might have benefited from an even more diverse set of interlocutors, including liberation theology, but also Social Gospel luminaries who share his concerns with spatializing and rationalism. His Augustinian response might be predictable, which is not to say wrongheaded, and I do not want to drag this new book into old debates. But let me ask anyway. He calls the political ‘less a realm and more of a *project*’ (p. 9) that ‘labors in the hope that our political institutions can be bent, if ever so slightly, toward the coming kingdom of love’ (p. 17). Is that Smith, or Walter Rauschenbusch and nineteenth-century evangelicalism? I agree with Smith’s analysis of the danger of spatial metaphors, and others that have defined Reformed political theology, but I am unsure if his repeated appeal to that strenuous word—a ‘project’ that unites us—is quite the right alternative. At the very least, it stands in tension with his admiration for—and effective use of—Charles Taylor, given Taylor’s more critical use of the term, as in the ‘project of Reform’. Smith, of course, also worries about instrumental-rational projects, even though he speaks about ‘bending’ public policy in a Christian direction. He might have made a stronger case for repairing the term rather than abandoning it. This rehabilitation would correlate projects and waiting, liturgies of delay and fulfillment, waiting like a lover for their beloved with ‘holy longing’ for the One who creates and the One who waits for us. At the same time, Smith tells us his new disposition is ‘calculated ambivalence and circumspection tempered by ad hoc evaluations about selective collaborations for the common good’ (p. xiv). Ambivalence and circumspection about historical process are joined to hope as the closing virtue of Smith’s book. Is that Smith, or Reinhold Niebuhr? Of course, Smith wants that elusive third way, perhaps apophatic negation and sacramental mediation. But, at the end of the day, who are you more afraid of given current evangelical temptations: Rauschenbusch or Niebuhr? Or, to be a bit playful, has Smith given us both with a liturgical twist! If so, where do we find that living Protestant witness today?