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Book Review: Smith, J.K.A.: Desiring the Kingdom: Worship, Worldview, and Cultural Formation

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Abstract

What if education was not first and foremost about what we know, but about what we love? (Smith, 2009, p.18)

This is one of the driving questions that frames Smith's book; a question worthy of educational reflection. Smith organizes his argument around the ideas of the dichotomy between thinking and doing; work and worship [liturgy]. His argument is that worldview must not be merely cognitive and intellectual, but must include a robust 'social imaginary' (flowing from the work of Charles Taylor) that is grounded in the practices of Christian worship. So far so good.

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Smith divides his book into two sections: Part one presents the case that humans are desiring creatures who 'are what we love'. Part two questions how we practice that desire in Christian life. Smith has some interesting examples of 'desire' such as his view of the shopping mall as spiritual centre as a 'vision of the good life' (p. 23-27). This metaphor is similar to the work of Middleton & Walsh, (1996); in their view of postmodern life; Postman, (1988), in his exegesis on viewing commercials hermeneutically, and Zacharias, (1996) in his view of the postmodern building. The point of all of these examples is that symbols shape our lives far more than we may at first be aware, and that it is easy to become a person who 'thinks with the eyes' in ways that form habits and preferences (or idols) for life. Smith does well to bring this to our attention. In a technological age where image and virtual reality have a powerful impact (Schultz, 2002; Oppenheimer, 2003; De Zengotita, 2004; Duncan & Jones, 2005) the power of symbolism is a crucial topic for further consideration. Smith then progresses to present this in light of the danger of faith being reduced to an

'intellectual exercise' or unexamined consciousness when liturgy is removed, providing an assent to 'worldview beliefs' without an accompanying commitment to living out those beliefs. These points provide good food for thought and I am sure they will instigate hearty debate in educational circles. His preface and chapters 4 and 6 have the most to say about education and his views on Higher Education in particular. I shall not expand on these, but shall suggest you read them for yourselves.

My concerns about Smith's text lie in the 'black and white' contrast, postmodern leanings and dualism I find here. First, in his emphasis on being 'desiring beings', Smith minimizes the intellectual to a point where I wonder if the postmodern aspects of desire and symbolism almost have preeminence. We are also told in Romans 12: 1,2, to be 'transformed by the renewing of our minds', not just our desires. Perhaps what we love can also get us into trouble? Smith is right in cautioning readers against the possibility that an assent to a 'worldview' without application may even be seen, in my understanding of his work, as a form of religion. However, more could be said about the fact that we are not called to live by 'Scriptural principles' but rather, by being transformed to live out the character of Christ. Smith's book evidences examples of stark contrast. These focus on the 'and' and 'in' problem that Christian education grapples with and will continue to grapple with until the language is changed. It is not faith and learning, heart and soul, intellect and desire, – but rather, in my opinion, faith in learning, heart in soul, intellect in desire and vice versa – I do not think these were ever meant to be separate – we are whole beings, not half ones.

In attempting to open up, reflect more fully upon, and reconcile some of these areas of disequilibrium, I would like to see the element of grace emerge in a conversation that leads to more shalom in a broken educational world rather than ways to debate the

shortcomings of the term ‘worldview’ (which Smith does not reject by the way) in cognitive areas. Smith does want to discern Christian faith as a form of life (p. 134). However, Smith really does not tell us very much about pedagogy in the classroom to meet his desired end. If the end is to bring ‘worldview desire’ as a merge in doing and being, further emphasis on reasoning and reflection in the light of our educational call to live as Christ (such as in the work of Parker Palmer, 1998, 2004) would be good here as well. Perhaps he will do this in Volume 2.

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