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Smith's "Awaiting the king: Reforming public theology" (critical book review)

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Critical Reviews



Transformation and Qualification: A Survey of Contemporary Reformed Political Theologies

Boesak, A. A. (2014). *Dare we speak of hope? Searching for a language of life in faith and politics*. Grand Rapids, MI: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company. 216 pp. ISBN 9780802870810

Smith, J. K. A. (2017). *Awaiting the king: Reforming public theology*. Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic. 256 pp. ISBN 9780801035791

VanDrunen, D. (2020). *Politics after Christendom: Political theology in a fractured world*. Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan Academic. 400 pp. ISBN 9780310108849

In his classic work *Christ and Culture*, H. Richard Niebuhr notes that Calvin, like Augustine before him, represents the transformationalist or conversionist perspective on Christian cultural activity. This means that Calvin “looks for the present permeation of all life by the gospel.”¹ The Reformed tradition fits neatly into the “Christ the Transformer of Culture” type in Niebuhr’s scheme for classifying Christian attitudes toward cultural engagement. Yet, Richard Mouw, the Reformed political thinker, has offered this note of caution when it comes to classifying political theologies: “I am rather quick to identify myself with those who long for the ‘transformation of culture.’ But I get nervous when I have to do so without being able to introduce all of the necessary qualifications.”² For Mouw, the Reformed tradition’s transformational approach to faith and politics carries with it the temptation to triumphalism, the tendency to align the gospel with political power.

The titles reviewed in this essay represent the robust engagement with the political sphere in contemporary Reformed theology. In fact, this essay is something of a survey of the “necessary qualifications” that Reformed political thinkers are making

1 H. Richard Niebuhr, *Christ and Culture*, 50th Anniversary ed. (New York: HarperSanFrancisco, 2001), 217. Of course, Abraham Kuyper’s famous quote “There is not a square inch in the whole domain of our human existence over which Christ, who is Sovereign over *all*, does not cry: ‘Mine!’” epitomizes a robust, neo-Calvinist engagement with every sphere of creation. This quote is found in “Sphere Sovereignty,” in *Abraham Kuyper: A Centennial Reader*, ed. James D. Bratt (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1998), 488.

2 Richard J. Mouw, *When the Kings Come Marching In: Isaiah and the New Jerusalem*, 2nd ed. (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2002), 3.

as they apply the legacy of their tradition to contemporary issues. The hope is that this delve into a particular stream of theopolitics will aid and inform librarians developing their collections in the areas of political theology and Christian cultural engagement.

Dare We Speak of Hope?

Of the three titles reviewed here, *Dare We Speak of Hope?* is the only one that comes from the global south. Boesak's vision of public theology reads like a sermon. His political consciousness was forged in the antiapartheid struggle in South Africa, and his scriptural hermeneutic is attuned to God's concern for the suffering of the poor and the oppressed. Boesak was ordained into the Dutch Reformed Mission Church in 1968, and he rose to prominence as an antiapartheid activist. In the post-apartheid era, Boesak has continued to apply the lessons of that struggle to contemporary injustices and issues of global inequality. In his Foreword, Nicholas Wolterstorff observes that when Boesak speaks to issues of social justice, he "is not writing about this struggle from some perch on high, up above the fray. The location from which he writes is down in the trenches" (p. x). Boesak speaks to issues about faith and politics from the perspective of the protester in the street.

Rather than offering an overarching theory of the relationship between faith and politics or church and state, Boesak engages in a prophetic politics of protest. He speaks to issues both in the North American and South African contexts. Published during the second term of Barack Obama's presidency, the book surveys the contemporary political scene and comments on issues like the failed promises of the South African government, America's failure to address issues of poverty and racial injustice, and the militarism of the United States government. It looks at questions of theodicy through the ancient religion of the Khoi-Khoi, an indigenous South African people group. Boesak turns a critical eye to the just war tradition, taking the United States to task as an imperial power whose militancy has failed to uphold the standards of just war theory and failed to seek peace. In all of this, Boesak takes a "'view from below': seeing the world through the eyes of those who are the victims of violence that society justifies" (p. 99).

More than anything, Boesak promotes a particular *stance* toward politics and social engagement. It is a stance that insists that politics can never be complete without the prophetic role of the church. For this reason, "the political dares not let go of the hand of the prophet. And that is why only prophetic truth can turn politics into the holy calling it is meant to be" (p. 141). Boesak sees the rhetoric of a politician like Obama, who spoke of "the audacity of hope," as an attempt to domesticate justice to serve the status quo of imperial power. He expresses disappointment in the contrast between the progressive rhetoric of Obama the presidential candidate and the centrist positions of Obama the president. He cites the increase in military drone

strikes during his presidency – and the innocent civilians they killed – as a tragic example of Obama’s escalation of militaristic policies.³ In light of examples like this, it becomes clear that true hope comes only from a realization that Christ identifies with the marginalized of society, and the church must be a persistent reminder of this hope to our politicians.⁴

While dealing with the concrete realities of contemporary politics, Boesak understands himself to be working from two major traditions as he articulates a theological stance toward the political. The first is the Augustinian tradition. Boesak reads Augustine as something of a proto-liberation theologian, appealing to the “creative imagination” of his “African mind” (p. 44). In making the case that hope is more than a political platitude, Boesak appeals to this quote from Augustine: “Hope has two beautiful daughters. Their names are Anger and Courage. Anger at the way things are, and courage to see that they do not remain the same” (p. 43). In this statement, Boesak sees a justification for resistance to the oppressive policies of modern governments. A liberative, Augustinian form of hope insists that we see the world through the eyes of the marginalized, identify with them as Jesus has, and fight to see the promise of God’s justice fulfilled.

The second is the Reformed or Calvinistic tradition. Once again, Boesak identifies a liberative stream in Calvin’s thought that often goes unnoticed.⁵ This stream comes through particularly in Calvin’s commentaries on the prophetic books. In the midst of the struggle against apartheid, Boesak clung to the belief expressed by Calvin in his commentary on Habakkuk “that it is as if the Lord hears the cry of God’s own heart when *we* cry out, ‘How long?’” (82). The Dutch Reformed church in South Africa had helped to provide the rationale for apartheid, and many black South Africans struggled with the relevance of the Reformed faith to their struggle.⁶ Boesak locates resources within the tradition that speak to the need for resistance to oppressive powers and identifies the suffering of the marginalized with God himself.

3 Most recently, Boesak has criticized the flourishing of homophobia, militarism, Christian nationalism, and fascist tendencies under the Trump administration. See *Children of the Waters of Meribah: Black Liberation Theology, the Miriamic Tradition, and the Challenges of 21st Century Empire* (Eugene, OR: Cascade Books, 2019).

4 For an extended critique of American empire from a Reformed perspective, see Peter J. Leithart, *Between Babel and Beast: America and Empires in Biblical Perspective* (Eugene, OR: Cascade Books, 2012).

5 For a lengthy analysis of the liberative potential of the Reformed tradition, see John W. de Gruchy, *Liberating Reformed Theology: A South African Contribution to an Ecumenical Task* (Grand Rapids, MI: 1991).

6 For more on this struggle to reconcile the Reformed faith with South Africa’s heritage or racial oppression, see Allan Boesak, *Black and Reformed: Apartheid, Liberation and the Calvinist Tradition* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 1984).

Dare We Speak of Hope? is essentially a collection of prophetic sermons – sermons that call to account the power of global empires.⁷ While he is a profound theologian and an experienced activist and politician, Boesak is fundamentally a preacher. Even on the page, a sense of his impassioned oratory and rhetorical skill comes through. In the tradition of liberation theology, Boesak’s focus is on praxis as he exposit scripture to identify the oppressed and highlight God’s liberating work in the events of the biblical narrative. The result is insightful and surprising interpretations of Old Testament narratives. This is a prophetic politics of protest.

In the midst of our current political and social upheaval in North America, Boesak’s voice is a crucial one. As Christians engage the Black Lives Matter movement and become increasingly aware of the gospel’s implications for racial and social inequalities and systemic injustices, experienced activist voices like Boesak’s are important resources. Boesak heeds Richard Mouw’s warnings about the dangers of triumphalism. His Christocentric approach to the political marries the transformational emphases found in both the Reformed and liberationist traditions. In identifying Christ with the plight of the oppressed, he is robustly transformational while also being emphatically anti-imperialist.

Awaiting the King

With the final installment of his Cultural Liturgies trilogy, James K. A. Smith has added to the growing conversation on political theology in Reformed and evangelical circles. The broader goal of the trilogy is pedagogical, shifting focus from “what Christians *think*, distilling Christian faith into an intellectual summary formula (a ‘worldview’),” and refocusing “on what Christians *do*, articulating the shape of a Christian ‘social imaginary’ as it is embedded in the practices of Christian worship.”⁸ Smith’s trilogy operates on the premise that liturgical theology is not simply a theological subdiscipline. Rather, the liturgy trains our imaginations and our bodies in ways that are formative for our engagement with the world. In *Awaiting the King*, Smith applies this principle – a principle that is more aesthetic than intellectual – to the task of political theology. He applies his “liturgical” theology of culture to our shared public life.

An Augustinian theme animates the book: the political is liturgical and the liturgical is political. As Smith states it, “The political is more like a repertoire of rites than a ‘space’ for expressing ideas” (10). Politics form us; they train us to love certain things through rites of devotion. From another perspective, our politics reveal the things that we love most, the places, people, values, and ideas that guide and coordinate our

⁷ For a *literal* collection of sermons on political themes, see Boesak’s *The Finger of God: Sermons on Faith and Socio-Political Responsibility*, trans. Peter Randall (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 1982).

⁸ James K. A. Smith, *Desiring the Kingdom: Worship, Worldview, and Cultural Formation*, Cultural Liturgies 1 (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2009), 11.

lives together. While Boesak emphasizes the African character of Augustine's political thought, Smith draws out the themes of desire and formation in Augustine's classic *The City of God*. By looking at the liberal political order through an Augustinian lens, we begin to see how the various cultural rites we engage in day to day "teach us to love and how these rites shape and (de)form our devotion" (p. 26).⁹

In this sense, Smith is dealing with "public" theology in the broad sense rather than "political" theology in a narrow sense. When we see the political as more than simply the state or a particular configuration of government, political theology becomes a "theological account of the *polis* that is 'society'" (p. 13). Public theology takes into account not only the state, but also all the mediating institutions, societies, and organizations that make up our shared, public life. This is where the ecclesiological significance of Smith's public theology begins to emerge. If the political is about the rites that form a society of people, the church and its rites will inevitably offer a competing vision of what human society looks like. Augustine's two cities – the city of God and the earthly city – cannot simply sit comfortably side by side. They offer two comprehensive visions of our public life. Yet, the question remains, how do we order our common life in a way that people both inside and outside the society of the church can flourish in their shared life?

The Augustinian legacy of Smith's account is a contested site in contemporary Reformed theology. Smith represents a transformationalist of neo-Kuyperian approach to culture, associated most closely with the Dutch Reformed tradition and thinkers like Abraham Kuyper, Herman Dooyeweerd, Nicholas Wolterstorff, and Richard Mouw.¹⁰ This approach emphasizes the role of Scripture in exerting its influence to transform all spheres of society, including the state. While Smith certainly works out of the neo-Kuyperian tradition, he notes the way that the tradition's emphasis on creation and the independence of cultural spheres has led to a neglect of the church's role in political formation. For Smith, it is the church's liturgy that forms us into citizens of God's kingdom and inculcates the upside-down values of his kingdom. This formation shapes our understanding of what a just political order looks like. This critical appropriation of neo-Calvinism also informs his pluralism. While Smith affirms a Kuyperian account of "principled pluralism," he also wants a pluralism that is more confident in the formative power of the gospel. More than just a sphere to be protected, the church (as well as other religious communities) is where we *learn* and *practice* virtues like patience, tolerance, and diversity.

⁹ In fact, Smith relies heavily on Augustine as an interlocutor in most of his work. Most recently, he has expounded an Augustinian spirituality in *On the Road with Saint Augustine: A Real-World Spirituality for Restless Hearts* (Grand Rapids, MI: Brazos Press, 2019).

¹⁰ See Smith's basic exposition of a Reformed understanding of the relationship between church and state in "A Reformed (Transformationist) View," in *Five Views on the Church and Politics*, ed. Amy E. Black, 139-162 (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2015).

Smith rejects what he calls “spatialized” understandings of Augustine’s “two cities” distinction. This is a tendency to see the city of God and the earthly city as two separate spheres – one governed by revelation and the other by some form of natural law. It is a mistake that Smith accuses David VanDrunen’s “two kingdoms” theology of making. Instead, Smith places these two cities in the “dynamism of time” (p. 76). While we tend to think of the “secular” as the cultural space outside the church, Smith, following Oliver O’Donovan,¹¹ casts the *saeculum* as a period of transition between the rule of one king and another. In the current time between the first and second coming of Christ, we are in a time of overlapping rule. The earthly city still holds sway, but the city of God – the church – is established and extending its reach. To distinguish between the two cities is not to divide between heavenly and earthly realms (VanDrunen’s tendency). Instead, it is to acknowledge two different vision of the *telos* of heaven *and* earth.

Some of the most influential contemporary political theologians have read liberal democracy as a product of Enlightenment rationalism, understanding a liberal political order to be fundamentally at odds with this vision of the kingdom of God as an alternative society. Stanley Hauerwas and John Milbank are two important proponents of this view. While he has many sympathies with their critiques of liberalism, Smith is ultimately neither a booster nor a knocker of liberalism (a position that he and VanDrunen have in common). Instead, he follows O’Donovan’s analysis in seeing liberal democracy as a political order that was born from and remains haunted by the gospel. He identifies ways that liberalism is shaped by the specific context of redemptive history, undermining the assumption that it is a purely “natural” product of human reasoning and organization. As Smith summarizes, “While the politics of the liberal state is still *earthly city* politics, it is nonetheless a configuration of the earthly city that bears the marks of an encounter with the gospel in deep and significant ways” (p. 122). Liberal democracy overlaps with and diverges from a biblical vision of the kingdom in all kinds of ways. Faithful public theology involves attending to the specifics of those differences with discernment.

Another area of commonality between Smith and VanDrunen is their ambivalence towards earthly political engagement – an ambivalence we find no trace of in Boesak. During this period of already/not yet, this *saeculum*, Smith encourages us to learn “how to actively wait” (xii) and to develop the kind of “sanctified ambivalence” (3) appropriate to resident aliens. While Smith is certainly a proponent of the gospel’s ability to transform culture, he is particularly sensitive to the danger of triumphalism that the neo-Calvinist tradition has too often succumbed. While they have different reasons for their ambivalence, both Smith and VanDrunen call us to chasten our expectations of politics. Boesak on the other hand (while all too realistic about

11 While Augustine’s thought provides Smith with a framework, Oliver O’Donovan is his primary interlocutor. Smith engages most extensively with O’Donovan’s *The Desire of the Nations: Rediscovering the Roots of Political Thought* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996).

the failings of politicians) sees political protestant against the oppressive policies of empires as an essential part of identifying with Christ.

The primary point of divergence between Smith and VanDrunen is their respective understandings of the relationship between nature and grace. As Smith frames the issue, different readings of “the relationship between the order of creation and the order of redemption” (p. 153) is what generates two different accounts of the gospel’s impact on the political order. Smith rejects the notion that there is a universally available account of human rationality that can create a common basis for political reasoning. Instead, Smith provides a more contextual reading – one which emphasizes the cultural imagination that informs our notions of the rightly ordered *polis*. He points not to a “natural law” that transcends cultures, but to a holistic vision of human flourishing that informs our reading of creation. In this sense, for Smith, the revelation of God’s grace in establishing his kingdom cannot help but inform all of our endeavors to organize our common, temporal life.

One final feature to note is the color consciousness of Smith’s public theology and his excellent analysis of white privilege. While the Christian liturgy *ought* to form us into the kind of community that seeks justice and mercy, Christendom has consistently failed to deliver on this promise. Relying on the work of Willie James Jennings,¹² Smith points to the way that a distorted theology of creation has been used to justify the dehumanizing of Black bodies in the West. This timely warning – so necessary for our current political unrest surrounding race and police brutality – acknowledges the way that liturgies can be coopted to function in a deformative manner.

Politics after Christendom

David VanDrunen, a trained lawyer as well as a systematic theologian, sketches his framework for public life with precision and clarity. Where Smith works in a more philosophical, even aesthetic, mode, VanDrunen argues his case along more strictly logical and exegetical lines. For VanDrunen, a consistent Christian political theology recognizes that “God has ordained civil government – as the ruling authority of political communities – to be *legitimate*, but *provisional*, and to be *common*, but *accountable*” (p. 25). He recognizes that “Many of the most popular contemporary political theologies contend that Christians should seek to redeem or transform their political communities so that these communities might somehow manifest and anticipate Christ’s coming kingdom” (p. 18). VanDrunen insists that while Christians should be active in their political communities, the contemporary political theologies he references mistakenly seek to redeem these communities according to the model of God’s kingdom.

¹² See Jennings, *The Christian Imagination: Theology and the Origins of Race* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2010).

Like Boesak and Smith, VanDrunen relies on Augustine – particularly on Augustine’s distinction between the city of God and the earthly city. As mentioned earlier, he also relies on the doctrine of the two kingdoms. This is the notion that God rules in the temporal realm through civil authorities and in the spiritual realm through the church. These two kingdoms each have their own ends and therefore function according to different standards. On this scheme, the civil realm is governed according to the common dictates of natural law, and the church is governed by the special revelation found in the Bible’s redemptive story. The doctrine of the two kingdoms is generally associated with Lutheranism, but VanDrunen argues that it has historically been a part of the Reformed tradition as well.¹³

These doctrinal commitments, while not commonly associated with Reformed theology, are mainstays of Christian social thought. VanDrunen’s unique contribution is his grounding of two kingdoms and natural law thinking in the biblical covenants. Specifically, he argues that the Noahic covenant sets forth a sparse set of requirements – a “modest ethic” – that are intended to govern common political life, and that later redemptive covenants have no bearing on those communities or on Christian political theology. The gospel plays no transformative role in our political thinking, but rather, natural law is the appropriate means by which we reason, legislate, and govern. God’s covenant with Noah in Genesis 8 provides the foundation for our political reasoning, and natural law is the appropriate tool to carry out the universal, minimal, and non-redemptive dictates of that covenant.

I will note that VanDrunen does make some important qualifications about the natural law. Smith criticizes natural law thinking for failing to account for issues of context. We find certain notions “natural” or “rational” because of the social imaginaries in which we are embedded. VanDrunen helpfully acknowledges that the precepts of the natural law, which are available to everyone through the created order and apart from special revelation, “presuppose a cultural context, and cultural contexts differ” (p. 136). The precepts of the natural law are minimal and always fleshed out and given shape in a particular cultural context. While the qualification is necessary and helpful, VanDrunen’s acknowledgement of how minimal the precepts of natural law actually are ends up proving Smith’s point. Ultimately, it is not a narrow set of rational precepts that animate our public lives. Rather, it is a vision of the good, of the properly ordered *polis*, that gives coherence to our attempts to organize our common life. Smith’s account of the way that the gospel of God’s redemption and the promise of the kingdom have formed and deformed peoples

¹³ VanDrunen makes the argument that the concepts of natural law and the two kingdoms are part of the development of Reformed social thought in *Natural Law and the Two Kingdoms: A Study in the Development of Reformed Social Thought* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2010). For his more popular articulation of the same concept, see *Living in God’s Two Kingdoms: A Biblical Vision for Christianity and Culture* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2010).

and political traditions tells a more coherent story than VanDrunen's insistence that governing in a fallen world involves focusing on minimal ethical requirements for societies.

The differences between the two approaches are evident even in surface level agreements. As mentioned earlier, Smith is neither a booster nor a knocker of a liberal political order. Similarly, VanDrunen accepts liberalism as an acceptable but not a necessary political arrangement. However, Smith's measured appreciation for a liberal society is based on the "craters of the gospel" that it bears. He reinterprets liberal democracy's emphasis on liberty, mercy, human rights, and freedom of speech as reflecting – however faintly – aspects of Christ's kingship. For VanDrunen, liberalism is an acceptable governing principle because its strictures are limited enough that it can accommodate any number of religious communities without bearing the marks of any particular religious influence.

VanDrunen's understanding of the two kingdoms and the role that the Noahic covenant plays in reinforcing this notion, while original and compelling at a certain level, is ultimately not convincing. While he insists that "Christians live under two divinely established covenants" (p. 150) – one Noahic and governed by natural law, the other the new covenant governed by the grace of Christ – there is no obvious reason to regard these as two mutually exclusive covenants binding different spheres of the Christians life. While he is correct to point out that the Noahic covenant is more universal in application than the Abrahamic, Mosaic, Davidic, and new covenants, the Noahic covenant is still one that sees a particular family carrying the promises of God to the wider world. VanDrunen's claim that these other covenants are redemptive while the Noahic is not is an arbitrary claim at best. There is no reason that the Noahic covenant couldn't provide a basic foundation for civil government (even if VanDrunen finds more warrant for this notion than is biblically justified) while still saying that the covenants that follow develop and draw out the redemptive implications of the Noahic covenant. VanDrunen's understanding of the two kingdoms, and the covenantal theology that he constructs to justify it, perfectly illustrates the "spatialized" reading of Augustine's two cities that Smith critiques so effectively.

Though not a major part of VanDrunen's book, it is interesting to note his observations on liberation theology. He focuses on James Cone's account of Black liberation theology, noting "the overturning of unjust political and other social structures is of the essence of the kingdom Jesus proclaimed and the salvation he offered. Liberation from present injustice realizes the kingdom" (p. 49). For VanDrunen,

liberation theology violates the “provisionality” required of governments and too closely associates the kingdom of God with temporal political activity. No doubt, Boesak, as a Black liberation theologian greatly influenced by Cone, would affirm the description of liberation theology that VanDrunen offers. However, instead of seeing this as a confusion of the kingdom of God with a temporal political order, he would insist that it is a description of the prophetic role the church must play in reminding earthly empires of the upside-down values of Christ’s kingdom. Like Smith, and more radically so, Boesak refuses to seal off the “heavenly” and “earthly” realms.

More than the other two books reviewed here, *Politics after Christendom* attempts to provide a somewhat comprehensive picture of a Christian approach to civil life. It covers a lot of ground, including discussions of pluralism and religious liberty, economics, competing notions of justice, legal theories, and political traditions. These discussions are thoroughly informed and often fascinating. VanDrunen’s discussion of the Bible’s wisdom literature and its relevance to notions of natural law is a particular strength of the book. The broad theological framework that VanDrunen sketches is not as coherent, nor as recognizably Reformed, as Boesak’s and Smith’s. VanDrunen’s call for chastened expectations in the political sphere counters Boesak’s urgent, prophetic call for justice. In fact, his moderate position is susceptible to a kind of quietism that brings to mind the “white moderate” of Martin Luther King, Jr.’s *Letter from a Birmingham Jail*. While all three authors contribute to the rich heritage of Reformed social thought, Boesak and Smith are voices that bring the tradition to bear with particular relevance on the issues of global and racial inequalities.

Reviewer

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