

James K. A. Smith, *Desiring the Kingdom: Worship, Worldview, and Cultural Formation* (Baker Academic, 2009), 238 pages, pbk \$25.50, ISBN 978-0801035777.

Reviewed by F.G. Oosterhoff.

James K. A. Smith is a professor of philosophy at Calvin College and the author of *Who's Afraid of Postmodernism* (2006) and *Introducing Radical Orthodoxy* (2004). Like these earlier studies, the book now under review has been well received, also in Reformed circles. It is an important, thought-provoking study that deserves our attention, even though I do not believe that all its conclusions are convincing. I shall begin by mentioning positive aspects of the study and then raise a number of critical questions.

Smith's focus is on the character of Christian education. It was traditionally assumed, he writes, "that education is about ideas and information... And so distinctively *Christian* education is understood to be about Christian ideas – which usually requires a defense of the importance of 'the life of the mind.' On this account, the goal of Christian education is the development of...a Christian *worldview*, which is taken to be a system of Christian beliefs, ideas, and doctrines" (p. 17).

Christian education, then, has generally focused on the cognitive, the mind, and therefore on ideas rather than on the development of affections. It is this educational model that Smith rejects. Its proponents wrongly assume, he says, that when someone *thinks* as a Christian, he automatically *acts* like one. Human beings, however, are not first of all "thinking things" but lovers. As such they are motivated by a pre-cognitive desire for the "kingdom" – that is, for their vision of the good life, of ultimate human flourishing. Their desire *should* be for the kingdom of God, for humanity was created in order to love and worship Him. Sin, however, has distorted our affections and all too often we focus our love on a secular kingdom. Among these secular versions Smith counts materialism, nationalism, the sports stadium, and consumerism – including the shopping mall (see his description of the mall as a "liturgical institution," pp. 19-23). Whatever kingdom we immerse ourselves in becomes the focus of our ultimate desires and determines the kind of worship we slip into, gradually and perhaps largely unwittingly. Thought and cognition have little to do with it. One can't think of the mall, for example, in worldview terms.

Because our ultimate desires are formed not by our intellects but by habits, practices, or "liturgies," Christian education should concern itself with the formation of the proper habits and practices. Rather than focusing on information, it should aim at formation and transformation. Smith's rejection of the centrality of worldview thinking is not to be understood, he explains in a footnote (p. 17), as a proposal for a newfangled form of anti-intellectualism. For him it's not a choice between heart and mind; he simply wants to establish the *priority* of affectivity, i.e., of the heart. His point is that it is affection that makes the work of the mind possible ("we love in order to know"), and affection is formed not by ideas, but by practices. What people believe in and love and worship grows out of what they do. Students at Christian schools must therefore first of all learn the "liturgies" that will direct their love and worship to God.

How is that to be done? It is not until the last chapter that Smith gives attention to the way in which the Christian schools and colleges are to fulfill this task. Most of the book deals with the

formation of Christians at home, in society, and in the church. Among the habits and practices shaping the proper desires, he counts daily prayer and the reading of Scripture, going to church on Sunday, and especially participating in the church's liturgy. On the latter topic see Chapter 5, "Practicing (for) the Kingdom: An Exegesis of the Social Imaginary Embedded in Christian Worship," which gives a fine description and explanation of the various aspects of Sunday worship. Here Smith stresses the fact that humans are relational beings and that all Christian worship must ultimately centre in communal worship where Christians meet not as individuals but as members of one body. In the final chapter Smith turns to the specific task of Christian education itself. Here he mentions, among other things, the need of combining academic instruction with Christian practice – including communal life and worship, but also participation in "outreach" programs such as work at homeless shelters in the inner city or in refugee ministry.

### *Evaluation*

Smith says more than once that he wants to leave room for worldview thinking and for the cognitive aspect of the faith in general. He fears intellectualism, however, and not infrequently refers to worldview and head knowledge in an almost pejorative manner. It is especially Protestantism, he thinks, that has focused too much on the head rather than on the heart. He admits that in the Reformed tradition worldview thinking has been modified by a stress on the role of *faith* in knowing, and by teaching that we believe in order to understand, but he does not think that that correction warrants a return to worldview education. There is, he writes, not that much difference between the human being as a "thinking thing" and as a "believing thing." Also in the latter model the focus is still on cognition and therefore on information instead of transformation (p. 45). We are moved and motivated neither by thought nor by faith but by the desires of the embodied heart, that is, by love.

I think that Smith underestimates the function of faith, but he is making an important point in his remarks on religious intellectualism. Although things may be different today, I remember a time when doctrinal orthodoxy scored at least as high as true piety, and when proper knowledge of doctrine (let's say, knowing the Catechism), was the primary gateway to confessing membership. The fact that God desires our love was not ignored, and certainly not in the Heidelberg Catechism, nor was it forgotten among believers. But I fear that especially in the education of young people doctrinal instruction at times trumped the work of shaping the proper desires and cultivating an attitude of love. If that is indeed so, and if this tradition is still with us, then Smith's book serves as an important antidote. The kingdom is not for those who know or for those who think correctly about certain issues (even though knowledge and orthodoxy are important) but for those who hunger and thirst for righteousness – whose desires are focused on the kingdom of God.

So much for what I see as some of the book's positive aspects. I now voice some questions and reservations.

1. While attempting to correct one imbalance, Smith introduces another. He admits a (limited) role for worldview teaching and denies any anti-intellectualist intentions, but the book's general message is that the heart has absolute pre-eminence over head knowledge. There is little or no emphasis on doctrinal teaching. The Catechism and its role in instructing the youth

is not mentioned. This is especially regrettable, as some of his critics have pointed out, at a time when in our culture as a whole head knowledge is considered largely irrelevant, when many evangelicals (and Reformed?) are close to being biblically and doctrinally illiterate, and when emotions and feelings are considered more reliable guides than intellectual understanding.

2. As the foregoing already suggests, Smith's anthropology is one-sided. Very little attention is given to the fact that reason and rationality are genuine aspects of humanity and that not just our heart and our desires must be transformed, but our mind as well. The Bible mentions both. In Romans 12 we are urged not only to offer our *bodies* as living sacrifices, but also to be transformed by the renewal of our *minds*. And similar messages can be found elsewhere in Scripture.

3. It is a pity that this otherwise so worthwhile study, while rightly warning against the dangers of intellectualism, largely ignores those of the opposite vice – namely anti-intellectualism. We could learn here from C.S. Lewis's Screwtape, who observed (in Letter XXV) that humans have a tendency to cry out against vices that threaten their society least (such as, today, the dangers of an exclusive reliance on "understanding") and to ardently promote those that are already becoming prominent and even endemic (such as, today, the reliance on feelings and emotions). It seems to me that on this score the book is insufficiently counter-cultural.

4. The book tends to paint things too much in black and white. The reminder that we are embodied beings and that our desires affect our worship is to the point. But is it only practices that shape our desires and worship? Surely ideas play a role as well? And is love the product of practices only and not of a realization of the *truths* the Bible reveals to us? Similar questions can be raised in connection with Smith's critique of worldview teaching. He is right in admitting that right thinking does not necessarily lead to right living. But does that *eliminate* the need for right thinking? Why should we not make use of both: worldview (and therefore doctrine) as well as a manner of teaching that focuses on the embodied heart? A related question is whether liturgy, including church liturgy, necessarily leads to conversion. Experience does not confirm this. Perhaps more mention should have been made of the role of Scripture and of the Spirit, who works faith not first of all by means of liturgical practices, important though these are, but by convincing us of the *truth* of the gospel. Smith does not of course deny this – he more than once mentions the transformative power of Word and Spirit – but at times I wish he had spelled out more clearly that faith, love, and a spirit of discipleship are not the result of doing only.

5. In the foregoing I have expressed concern about the danger of ignoring the role of the mind. I return to that point, now in connection with the absence in Smith's study of any acknowledgement of the fact that we must be prepared to give a *reasoned defence* of the faith. This lack is perhaps understandable in view of the author's primary thesis. I hope, however, that the rejection of intellectualism (with which, once more, I fully agree) will not be understood as a denial of the gift and value of human intelligence and rationality. Such an understanding would be especially regrettable in a time when atheists publish scores of best-selling works to "prove" that the Christian faith is irrational, that God is a delusion, that religion "poisons everything," and so on. Christians, and certainly Christian students, must learn that while religion is indeed a matter of the heart, the heart does not normally operate apart from the head (although it may do so in the case of small children and the severely mentally handicapped). Human intelligence and

rationality are gifts of God, talents that may not be buried. Our faith is *intellectually* defensible. Throughout the ages, intellectual defences have been made. They continue to be made today, not just in response to the challenges issued by unbelievers, but also to strengthen the faith of believers. Apologetics, together with doctrinal instruction and worldview teaching, should continue to have a place in the curriculum of the Christian school.

But Smith is right in warning that all this must not be taught as simple head knowledge. Information must lead to formation and transformation and discipleship. It is this primary message that makes this book such essential reading for all those concerned with Christian education – not only in our schools and colleges, but also at home and in church.