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HOW SHOULD WE THEN BE FORMED?

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Awaiting the King

An Interview with James K. A. Smith

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The transcript of this conversation has been edited and condensed for clarity.

Stephanie Summers: In *Awaiting the King*, you say that Christians have been “deformed” when it comes to political theology. While it’s probably easy for us to see this in someone else’s culture, can you explain your diagnosis of that deformation here in our own culture, particularly since this is something I think most Christians are unaware of?

James K. A. Smith: This is the animating impetus for the book. In the American context in the 1970s and 1980s, we acquired a theology of culture that, rather suddenly, made us care about engaging in public, political life. In fact, we might have even had quite confident visions of how we were going to march into the public square and transform culture, because we were equipped with what we knew to be this capacious, wise Christian world view in which the Gospel had something to say to every sphere of life.

However, I think we overestimated how effective our ideas would be, and we underestimated the deformative power of cultural currents that were already in the water in the public square. So we marched out to transform culture, and it turns out that culture ended up transforming us. Instead of transformation, what we got is our own assimilation.

For example, Evangelical and Protestant folks who had a vision for Christian contributions to the public square might have had what they thought was a biblical vision of what economic life should be

based on clues and cues and signals in Scripture about what a healthy economy might look like. And yet in the process of the sheer pragmatism of trying to get that done, we missed the deformative dynamics of things like consumerism, or libertarianism. We didn't realize how loaded the economic game was, and so then we ended up conceding to economic models and principles that I don't think sit very well with the biblical narrative. Yet now we are more committed to those kinds of partisan economic principles than we are to that biblical vision of economic flourishing.

I think this happens on both the left and the right. The failure I've just described in my example probably is characteristic of the rightward end of the continuum. I do think something very similar can happen on the leftward end of the continuum, for lack of a better term. For some Christians, all of a sudden, we read the Scriptures in a way that we've never ever seen them before, and we realize that God cares about widows and orphans and strangers and aliens. We become newly animated by this passion for justice and feel a need to answer this call and be out in the public square working for justice.

We are motivated by this deeply biblical attunement, but then we underestimate the forces and currents of the status quo and we start aligning ourselves with people who seem to be the ones talking about justice. Before we know it, we've just signed up for the platform of whatever the leftish party decides justice is, even if in fact it sits in deep tension with biblical visions of justice that we've kind of forgotten in the process.

Summers: One of the things that I noticed you do in the book is to set the table by detailing your autobiographical account with this journey that you take from fundamentalism to Kuyperianism to secularized Kuyperianism to Hauerwas to O'Donovan and Augustine. Have you found that journey in political theology is a common one?

Smith: I do think I'm not utterly idiosyncratic in that kind of trajectory, and I see a lot of folks, my generation and younger, who've walked something like this. We grew up in very fundamentalist, dispensationalist versions of Christianity, where nobody ever told us that God cared about something other than soul rescue. And then we encountered the Reformed tradition, and more specifically the Kuyperian tradition for many of us. And all of a sudden we got this vision that God's concern is as far as creation is wide and as far as the curse is found. And so then we were animated by this biblical vision for engaging in public and political life and caring for justice.

But then I think those of us who experienced the religious right or the Ralph Reed Christian Coalition and who lived through the George W. Bush presidency and its dynamics became disenchanted with what Christianity was getting hooked to in the public square. At that point, we all started reading Stanley Hauerwas and John Howard Yoder who pointed out to us the really deep antithesis between the politics of Jesus and the politics of the Republican party.

And yet, I also think a lot of us who walked through that in the 90s and early 2000s became a little bit concerned with this vision of "Well, we're just going to be an alternative society, we're not going to

participate in the dark machinations of the state,” and so on. We started to realize that it's a luxury to be able to check out of politics, one more likely available to a bunch of white men. And the folks who are left, the most vulnerable, are the marginalized.

So we walked back to the reinvestment in politics and in what Skillen calls the “good of politics,” with a certain tempering of our investment.

Summers: I've been thinking particularly about folks who are the generation younger than the generation of millennials. Many of them are not coming out of fundamentalist traditions and have fewer negative associations, and they are deeply committed to caring about the well-being of their neighbors. But they may not know how to do that in a way that connects the dots beyond their immediate investments in mercy ministries. They recognize that opting out is a privilege, and they are asking “Okay, what do I do?”

Smith: I think that's very insightful, that they don't have the same demons to exorcise as some of us who had a different generational story. But it also strikes me that they haven't been thrown into the world with the same trust or investment in institutions per se, like the church or government. They have never really seen examples of healthy, life-giving institutions. A big part of what I am trying to do in *Awaiting the King* is to suggest that if you really care about your neighbor, if you care about mercy, if you care about compassion, then one of the most stable, enduring ways to try to make that a reality is to invest and contribute to healthy, life-giving institutions.

Summers: This leads me to my next question. In *Awaiting the King*, you talk about solidarity, particularly in relationship to the political. You write, “Solidarity points to liturgy. And insofar as solidarity is at once the ground and goal of the political, the political requires us to consider the liturgical.” For folks who might be unfamiliar with your use of terminology here, could you define the term “solidarity,” and then your use of “the political” and “the liturgical”?

Smith: Let me do that in reverse order. What I call liturgies are not just churchy, institutional religious things. I'm broadening the term. Liturgies are love-shaping practices; they are communal social rhythms, routines, and rituals that we immerse ourselves in, that we give ourselves over to, that aren't just something that we do, but they're doing something to us. They're forging in us an orientation to the good life. They're inscribing in us a conception of what we think flourishing is. And because there are competing versions, so there are rival liturgies.

As for the political, let's say the most generous conception of political here isn't just governmental. It's not only the institutions and practices and systems of government, though it includes that. It's harkening back instead to something like Aristotle's notion of the *polis*, so that our political life here now is broader than government. It's our civic life that we share in common that comprises a *polis*, that makes us a people, that gives us some sort of shared sense of responsibility for one another, to one another.

In terms of the idea of solidarity, I think at risk right now in our cultural moment is the loss of any concept or lived reality of solidarity. And by that, I mean a sense of shared life together and a co-responsibility for and to one another.

What's been most disheartening about our political discourse over the past generation is how it has devolved to a kind of atomism and autonomism, and that has left us as these individual authentic selves who are all trying to forge our own sense of the good. We're losing the capacity to imagine a shared good, a solidarity that we have in common. I think we need to tend to our liturgies in order to see what kind of political vision we are absorbing, and whether or not that is eroding or contributing to solidarity.

Summers: How is solidarity then both the ground and the goal of the political? Connecting back to your diagnosis, why does that then require us to consider the liturgical?

Smith: Solidarity is a really fundamental concept for how we approach the political because the political now is about the ways we forge life in common beyond family, beyond those sorts of natural communities that bind us together. That's a pretty remarkable idea. It doesn't come out of nowhere, and it is something that has to be fostered. It's something that has to be continually renewed. God created us to be in solidarity in this way, and I think it is at the heart of the biblical vision for what a flourishing society looks like, but that does not mean that it comes naturally to us.

We need to analyze if some rituals of our culture are eroding our solidarity. Are they compelling us into swirling eddies of self-interest and self-concern, to become these little atomistic islands unto ourselves? Or are there cultural rituals or practices that are happening or that can be renewed or strengthened that deepen our sense of solidarity with one another, and therefore our concern for our neighbor?

Take the rituals of social media, for example, and how they might be corrosive to solidarity, even though they claim to be social. They might be rituals that breed in us a posture that tends toward self-interest or tribalism, rather than transcending both of those things to see in my neighbor, and even the neighbor I disagree with, somebody who I have to forge a life in common with.

Summers: Throughout *Awaiting the King*, one thing that comes forward is that you're inviting Christians to rediscover the church's *polis*. You use the language for new ecclesial center of gravity in political theology. This isn't something particularly new in itself, but you have a pretty specific account of the church as a community of political formation in which worship is central and is its own well for political theology. Are there good examples of this already? And if it's rare, why is that so?

Smith: If you go back to Augustine's *City of God*, when he analyzes the Roman Empire, what he sees in it fundamentally is disordered worship. So Augustine suggests that actually worship is at the heart of any *polis*. The question isn't whether the *polis* worships, it's what or who. Then he turns to consider

the church as an outpost to the City of God and says now let's see who is king here, and what habits are we learning.

I'm suggesting that it's not that the church is the state, but rather that there is a sense in which the body of Christ is a social reality. It's an outpost of the kingdom of God, of the City of God, and there are rhythms and rituals and routines that comprise the people of God. We are both learning what God's vision of flourishing, healthy societies looks like, but we are also being equipped and formed. We're being habituated to that vision, precisely so that we can be sent out into this earthly city in which we find ourselves, and try to labor in that regard.

Part of what worries me about the state of the North American Evangelical Protestant church, and why we were so primed to be assimilated to deformed politics, is precisely that the church itself has already ceded its imagination to secular liturgies rather than the historic practices of the people of God. In the name of relevance, or mission, or being seeker-sensitive, we have just sped up our cultural assimilation because we've lost these counter-formative practices that really carry the gospel in them, in unique ways that are a counter-weight to these other cultural liturgies.

It's not an argument for some mere traditionalism. It's an argument for looking anew at the wisdom that's carried and curated in the historic worship of the church. And to realize that there's always something going on in there about a public vision, that God is training us in what God wants the world to look like. So that when we pray "thy kingdom come, thy will be done," that is being enacted and rehearsed in worship.

Summers: Besides that awareness of that ongoing deformation project, what else do you see is needed for the political formation of Christians in pluralistic societies?

Smith: I'm not ever suggesting that if you go to church, you're going to get everything you need to be a good senator or a civil servant. It's more about how to center your imagination, and as well, a call to embrace the wisdom of Christian social science in ways that we've been oddly averse to.

Christians still look to theologians and pastors to be their primary articulators of political wisdom, but I think we need generations of Christian political scientists and sociologists who are attending to the empirical realities in which we find ourselves, and who are drawing on wells of expertise about what legislation is and how law works. Kevin Den Dulk, a good friend of mine who has had long association with the Center for Public Justice is a great example of someone who is doing this critical work that we should pay attention to. Another friend, sociologist Mark Mulder, is also doing important work helping us understand the social dynamics of race and inequality. It's why I regularly feature both of them in *Comment*.

Christians in North America, especially Evangelical Protestants, need a much better attunement to history and the contingencies and the zigzag of real historical heritage. We are prone to imagine that we've got these eternal principles, and we can just put them on a rubber stamp, and in any age and

time and place we could just put that stamp down, and now we know what Christian political faithfulness looks like.

I've become convinced that's actually not only wrong-headed, but unfaithful, because it doesn't take seriously providence. It doesn't take seriously how we got to where we are. It doesn't take seriously the sins of the church in the past. I would love to see a new generation of Christians thinking about public and political life who realize that one of the first questions we have to ask is "What time is it? How did we get here? What are the legacies and heritages of injustice that we're dealing with and therefore, what is faithful *now*?"

For example, a white Christian sees a Black Lives Matter sign and then says, "Well, all lives matter. Because all humans are created in the image of God." That is unattuned to the realities of sin in history such that it doesn't take seriously the fact that, well of course no one ever questioned that white life mattered. What we're saying is that black lives matter now, here, in this place, at this time, precisely because of the contingent injustices and sins of the church and of the nation with respect to African Americans.

Summers: At the Center of Public Justice, we talk a lot about creational theology, and our teaching and our work is rooted right there. In your book where you talk about Christian political theology, you use the phrase "rooted in creational theology." Could you define this and discuss the importance that you see of Christian political theology being rooted in creational theology?

Smith: By creational theology, I mean the sense of a theological affirmation of the cultural labor of humanity, unfolding and unfurling institutions for administering our lives and caring for the vulnerable. So, politics and political institutions are an outworking of culture. In this rich biblical vision, that is not something that is accidental. It's not something that's regrettable. It's not something that is plan B. It's actually built into the warp and woof of what it means to bear God's image in the world.

We have this fundamental affirmation of how the messy, mundane domestic work of building communities and institutions and political lives together is actually how we bear God's image to the world. It's an affirmation of the political as really built into the very design of what God calls us to.

But a big part of my burden in *Awaiting the King* is also to push back a little bit on my own Kuyperian tradition, which tends to talk about creation more than the cross, and can lead to thinking that a Christian political theology is merely about restoring or resorting to a creational set of categories. I would argue that a Christian political theology also has to bear the marks of Christ, of the cross, of his resurrection and ascension and kingship. The specificity of the gospel and the scriptural narrative also has something to contribute to the work that we would bring to public life as Christians.

As you know, the book still argues for a really robust pluralism. This isn't theocracy. This isn't imposition, but it is arguing that we bring the specificity of what we know in Christ and speak from

the thickness of that perspective. In *Awaiting the King*, I suggest that the civil rights movement is an excellent example of that. Where on the one hand, someone like Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. was absolutely appealing to the public and he wanted the state to change, he was also unashamed to articulate that from the specificity of what he knew in Christ and from the Scriptures. I think there's room for a certain renewal of that kind of Gospel and imagination in the Kuyperian tradition.

Summers: Let me tease this out a little bit. So, is that about language and how one presents one's case, or is it about something more than language?

Smith: It's both. I don't mean, by the way, that we don't try to translate our ideas or our vision into language that those who don't share the biblical narrative would understand and appreciate. But I'm not sure how much just a bare bones kind of "creation theology" or a natural law perspective offers for the specificity of what we're hoping for, say, in immigration policy, or refugee policy. What I would suggest is that a truly Christian vision of what a just immigration policy would look like is also going to be informed by all kinds of intuitions that God shows about flourishing throughout the entirety of the Scriptures.

So we need to be looking for ways to both make that picture winsome and attractive and powerful, but also to still be shrewd and pragmatic and wise and prudent, while translating that picture so that it can be a winning vision in the public square.

It's really about what kind of imagination is fueling what we're working for, what is centering us, what is nourishing us, what is energizing us for this work as we go about hoping to bend society just a little bit more towards kingdom come.

Awaiting the King can be purchased from [Hearts and Minds Books](#). PJR readers receive 20 percent off the price—just mention CPJ at checkout.

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