

You Are What You Love: The Spiritual Power of Habit.

James K. A. Smith. 2016. Grand Rapids, MI: Brazos Press. ISBN 978-1-587-43380-1. \$13.95.

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You Are What You Love deserves a wide audience within the pastorate and Christian higher education. It is a pushback against the urge to compartmentalize one's life into the "spiritual" and the "secular," and moreover it drives one to think about a higher education that is explicitly Christian rather than a higher education that is *by* or *for* Christians—where disciplines at a Christian institution are largely secular but students might occasionally dip their toes into Christian themes. Smith asks us to consider the liturgical practices by which the whole person is formed. These liturgies can be profane as well as sacred, and we choose with every moment the ones that will shape our character. Over the course of seven concise chapters—the text comes in at fewer than 200 pages—Smith explores the way all of life is liturgical in some sense: every action is fundamentally an act of worship *of something*. The final three chapters will leave the reader on a high note as Smith applies his insights about liturgy and worship to our lives at home, child-rearing, and vocation.

Smith confronts us with the fact that the pursuit of *telos* is fundamentally human and inescapable. We are all living for something—whether it be the Gospel or cigarettes and alcohol—and (hauntingly) that something might not be what we think or say we're living for. The book makes strong and effective use of literary and cinematic allusions in service of Smith's thesis (pp. 27ff.), perhaps ironically, given that in the book's last chapter, on youth ministry, Smith criticizes the attempt to popularize the Gospel with movie clips and pop-culture allusions. He refers first to Russian filmmaker Andrei Tarkovsky's film *Stalker*, in which the characters are taken to a place called the Room. In the Room, they get what they truly want, which causes the characters no small amount of angst because they have to confront the possibility that their deepest desires differ from their stated desires. In the same section, Smith discusses the Oscar-winning film *American Beauty* and the ways in which the lead character mangled his life in a bid for "authenticity." I'm reminded of a former pastor who said he had never had a counseling session in which a man trying to pick up the pieces of a marriage destroyed by an affair began the session by saying he had set out to destroy his life. People say

they want the liturgies of autonomy and authenticity. They practice the liturgies of a ravening lion.

The disconnect needn't be as dramatic as with adultery. Smith argues that the shopping mall is a liturgical space into which I become a "consumerist" not because of compelling arguments for consumerism but because "I'm covertly conscripted into a way of life because I have been *formed* by cultural practices that are nothing less than secular liturgies" (p. 45; emphasis in original). Shopping, like anything, can be an escape from responsibility and other unpleasantness that will still be there when we return.

Here I take issue with Smith's argument not as a matter of principle but as a matter of getting the economics right. He is identifying as an American pathology something that is distinctly human—namely, the drive for *more*. People elsewhere do not have less stuff because they want less stuff. They have less stuff because they can't afford to buy more stuff. And when comparing Americans and Europeans, the mix of products people consume differs, but their underlying motivations remain the same. Americans would live in smaller houses, like Europeans, if the tax code didn't privilege owner-occupied detached housing. Americans would probably vacation like Europeans too if they had to pay European taxes.

This does not weaken his overall argument—rather, it suggests we should rethink these particular examples. He's too quick to dismiss consumption, which is like drug use and eating in that it can be used as a replacement source of elusive joy (but need not be). He makes claims about consumption that need to be revised, arguing that the American way of life "is unsustainable and selfishly lives off the backs of those in the majority world," that it "is destructive of creation itself," and that it "creat[es] a system of privilege and exploitation" (p. 53). That 5 percent of the world's population (the United States) uses about a quarter of the world's energy is offered as support of this thesis. I infer from the context that this is meant as evidence that we are rapacious consumers formed by bad liturgy when, I suspect, most economists would say we are formed in no small part by the incentives, property rights, and rule-of-law structures that we face.

The discussion could benefit from some of the unrealized implications in the discussion of Smith's eating habits on page 61: "The nudges from my health insurance company are getting a little more insistent."

As they should be, as prices convey information and carry powerful incentives—but for many observers the policy problem in insurance is not that the insurance companies know too little about their customers’ risk profiles but that they know too much. He points out that the Weight Watchers app he uses to track his food intake is “the conduit of a community” of nutritionists, experts, and other users sharing their wisdom (p. 63). This can be generalized to market exchange, where objects are defined according to their ability to satisfy wants and where prices transmit the wisdom of the ages in an easy-to-interpret signal. The community that produced his Weight Watchers app is incalculably large. It includes those who share expert opinion, but it also includes those who wrote the code that made the app work on a given software platform, which in turn works on a device that embodies knowledge that cannot be known by a single mind.

Again, this does not cause a problem for his larger argument, which is quite secure. Rather, it shows that it is easy to critique one profane liturgy for the wrong reasons and fall into the trap of indulging another: the economically misinformed liturgies of some forms of environmentalism. Environmentalism can also have the features of a religion, complete with high priests (Bill McKibben, Al Gore), heretics (Bjorn Lomborg), liturgies (“reduce, reuse, recycle,” “buy local”), and sacraments (recycling). He notes (p. 59) that “through the steady evangelism of my wife, Deanna, I have become more and more convinced about the injustice and unhealthiness of our dominant systems of food production and consumption.” In this he is illustrating the importance and power of changing habits. He notes an apparent irony of reading Wendell Berry in a Costco food court, but I suspect the marginal dollar spent at Costco is spent more “sustainably” than the marginal dollar spent at the local farmer’s market. This entire set of arguments would benefit tremendously from engagement with Robert Nelson’s *The New Holy Wars: Economic versus Environmental Religion* and Pierre Desrochers’s and Hiroko Shimzu’s praise for “the 10,000 mile diet.”

Virtues are moral habits we acquire by imitating the virtuous. They become, with sufficient repetition, “second nature” habits that we practice without seriously thinking about them, the same way we don’t think about breathing or the way we don’t think about driving. Liturgical habits shape us, and as Smith argues, “secular” liturgies form us as profoundly as sacred liturgies. Importantly, we don’t have to be conscious of the

forming. We don't have to seek out formation in order to be formed. Alfred North Whitehead argues that civilization advances by the increase in the number of things we can do without thinking about them. Friedrich Hayek quotes this in his classic 1945 article "The Use of Knowledge in Society," and it is in this light that I'm not convinced being able to eat or buy clothing without spending much time thinking about the production process is a bad thing. We should marvel at these things as virtual miracles of social cooperation, as did Adam Smith in his discussion of the worker's woolen coat and as did Leonard Read in "I, Pencil."

James Smith's larger point is profound but perhaps easy to miss. We are formed by our liturgical contexts. Many so-called secular contexts have their own liturgies, and the form our worship takes is influenced by these liturgies and by the views and beliefs we adopt, often without deliberation, but by imitation—from the cultural air we breathe. We run the risk of going astray if our liturgies reflect political and social culture more than the pure word of the Gospel, and we further run the risk of compromising the faith of the young by forming modern worship liturgies that cater to their (superficial, culturally formed) preferences rather than their (deeper, spirit-formed) needs. *You Are What You Love* deserves careful consideration from students of Scripture and students of society, first because of how we treat the ways we approach and think about God, and second because the illustration of the author feeling bad for reading Wendell Berry in Costco shows us that we need to get the social science right if we're going to evaluate the contexts that form our worship.

References

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