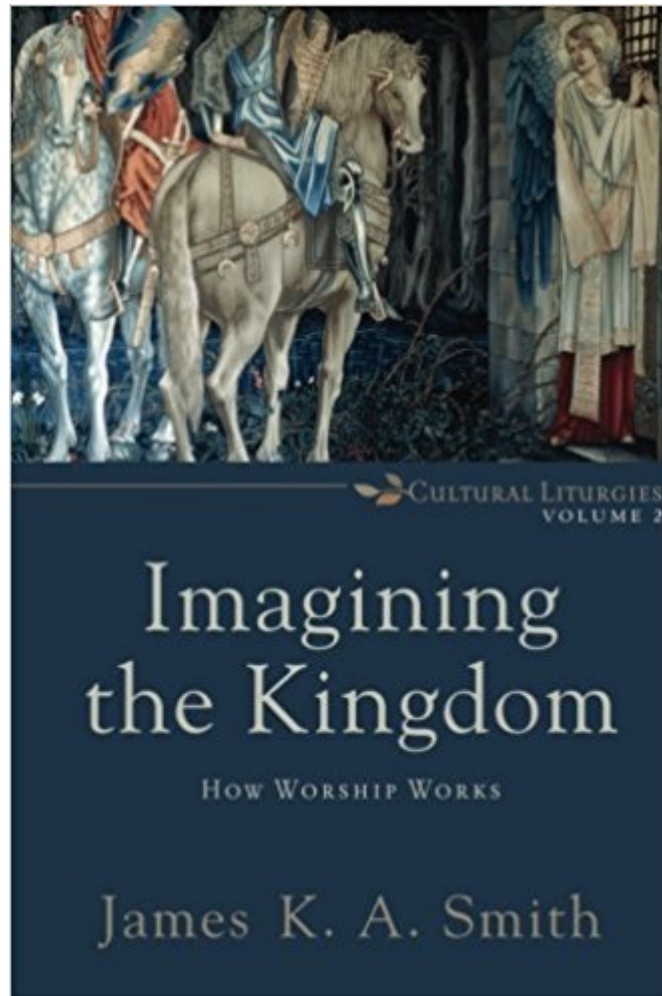


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# Imagining The Kingdom: How Worship Works (Cultural Liturgies)



## Synopsis

How does worship work? How exactly does liturgical formation shape us? What are the dynamics of such transformation? In the second of James K. A. Smith's three-volume theology of culture, the author expands and deepens the analysis of cultural liturgies and Christian worship he developed in his well-received *Desiring the Kingdom*. He helps us understand and appreciate the bodily basis of habit formation and how liturgical formation--both "secular" and Christian--affects our fundamental orientation to the world. Worship "works" by leveraging our bodies to transform our imagination, and it does this through stories we understand on a register that is closer to body than mind. This has critical implications for how we think about Christian formation. Professors and students will welcome this work as will pastors, worship leaders, and Christian educators. The book includes analyses of popular films, novels, and other cultural phenomena, such as *The King's Speech*, *Rise of the Planet of the Apes*, David Foster Wallace's *Infinite Jest*, and Facebook.

## Book Information

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## Customer Reviews

A Liturgical Theology of Culture"Imagining the Kingdom is a fit successor to Jamie Smith's remarkable *Desiring the Kingdom*. The new book is, like its predecessor, learned but lively, provocative but warmhearted, a manifesto and a guide. Smith takes Christians deeper into the artistic, imaginative, and practical resources on which we must draw if we wish to renew not only our minds but also our whole beings in Christ."--Alan Jacobs, Honors College of Baylor University"

this wonderfully rich and engagingly readable book of 'liturgical anthropology,' Smith makes a persuasive case for the thesis that human beings are best understood as worshiping animals. It has important implications at once for practical theology's reflection on religious formation, liturgy, and pedagogy and for philosophical theorizing about just what religion is. And it develops as an engaging and lively conversation among an astonishing mix of people: imagine Calvin, Proust, Merleau-Ponty, Augustine, Wendell Berry, Bourdieu, and David Foster Wallace all in the same room really talking to each other about being human and how to think about it!"--David Kelsey, Yale Divinity School

"Jamie Smith shows us that the gospel does not primarily happen between our ears but in all the movements of the body by which we are formed and in turn form the world. I know of no more thorough and sophisticated account of how secular liturgies form and deform us and how Christian liturgies can help. Though sophisticated, Smith's book is also a delight. Its pages are filled with great poetry and insights from films, novels, and everyday life."--William T. Cavanaugh, DePaul University

"A thought-provoking, generative reflection on the imagination-shaping power of Christian worship practices. What an ideal book for crossing boundaries among academic disciplines and between the academy and the church."--John D. Witvliet, Calvin Institute of Christian Worship, Calvin College, and Calvin Theological Seminary

"It is heartening to set one's eyes on Jamie Smith's bold and creative endeavor to awaken Christians, Protestants in particular, to the centrality of worship in even, nay especially, our moral lives. This thoughtful book is rightly concerned with a restoration of the Christian imagination rooted in habits of virtue."--Vigen Guroian, University of Virginia

James K. A. Smith (PhD, Villanova University) is the Gary & Henrietta Byker Chair in Applied Reformed Theology & Worldview at Calvin College in Grand Rapids, Michigan. In addition, he is editor of *Comment* magazine and a senior fellow of the Colossian Forum. Smith is the author or editor of many books, including the Christianity Today Book Award winners *Who's Afraid of Postmodernism?* and *Desiring the Kingdom*, and is editor of the well-received *The Church and Postmodern Culture* series ([www.churchandpomo.org](http://www.churchandpomo.org)).

The second installment of the Cultural Liturgies series, *Imagining the Kingdom* continues James K. A. Smith's provocative analysis of worship, spiritual formation, and the difference our practices make for Christian existence today. Smith brings together a diversity of biblical and theological scholarship, philosophical argument, and examples from the arts and culture in a manner that is both creative and profound. Smith is sure to remind the reader that our ideas are vitally important,

but so are our loves. This book challenges existing paradigms and opens a door to an ancient way of formation, the practice of worshipping God and of unmasking all that might divert our hearts and minds from the calling that is ours in Jesus Christ.

“When we worship on Sunday, it spills over into our cultural labor on Monday” (3). *Imaging the Kingdom* is volume two of James K. A. Smith’s *Cultural Liturgies* series. I previously reviewed volume one *Desiring the Kingdom*. At the core, Smith argues, “[W]e are, primarily and at root, affective animals whose worlds are made more by the imagination than by the intellect” that humans are those desiring creatures who live off stories, narratives, images, and the stuff of poises (xii). Smith’s stated goal is “the renewal of practice” (xvii). If the end of worship is action (going into the world) then we must “recruit our imagination” (6). Our imagination is what will grab our hearts as we go out into the world on the *missio Dei*. Love and our affections are at the center of his proposal (7). *Imaging the Kingdom* splits into two neat parts. Part one reviews French theorists Mzerleau-Ponty and Bourdieu laying the foundation for his liturgical anthropology. Part two offers a more “tangible discussion” that the “theoretical toolbox” from part one furnishes (xvii). Part one is technical and more in depth as Smith explores Ponty and Bourdieu as a foundation for the more practical concerns of part two. I would encourage the average reader not to become discouraged as you read through. You may not catch everything, but these chapters are important as Smith connects all the links in part two. One key take away. Smith argues again and again that many of our actions are not thought decisions, but more like embodied reflections of what we love (see below and also 106). For example, “We don’t decide our way into every action. Our being-in-the-world is characterized by inclinations that propel us to all sorts of action without thinking” (79-80). “That emotional perception of a situation is not merely a hardwired, biological reflex; it is an acquired habit, a product of a passional orientation that has been learned in and through paradigmatic stories. And those stories and narratives that prime and orient my very perception of the world tap into deep wells of my embodied unconscious. I learn these stories with my body” (39). I was reading *Imagining the Kingdom* as much of the unrest erupted over Michael Brown and Eric Garner’s death and this point struck me as a reason for the tension especially among Christians on both sides who might speak of racial reconciliation,

but when it comes down to the grit of getting it down cannot agree and do not understand.

There's a story and narrative behind all of this that as Smith says primes the response we give to situations like this, and so to move past talk we must understand these stories and narratives and also enter each other's habituation process.

That's why talking about racism being a gospel issue isn't enough unless it is accompanied by embodied habitation together. That is a great transition into part two. Smith says, "[M]undane routines conscript us into a larger story that begins to shape who we are, what we love, and hence what we do. Our hearts traffic in story" (108). It is not enough, therefore, to have grand plans to change the world. It must start with our very ordinary daily activities. Smith goes on, "Our identity and love are shaped ecologically precisely because liturgies are those rituals and practices that constitute the embodied stories of a body politic. . . . Liturgies are compressed, repeated, performed narratives that, over time, conscript us into the story they tell by showing, by performing" (110). This mundane liturgical task must be taken up by the church in the church so that she can send out Christians to take up their "creational and re-creational calling to bear God's image for and to all of creation" (151). That is how we re-story the world. By going out, living, and working with Christian imagination. Smith says, "We don't just need teachers and preachers and scholars and doctors of the church to tell us what to do; if the gospel is going to capture imaginations and sanctify reception we need painters and novelists and dancers and songwriters and sculptors and poets and designers whose creative work shows the world otherwise enabling us to imagine differently" (163). I cannot recommend *Imagining the Kingdom* highly enough. It's a much needed corrective for the Church especially in our current climate where secular liturgies often are more formative. Christians have failed to tell and live our story in a way that's believable and affective.

I really like James K. A. Smith's work generally. I find his arguments quite convincing. This is probably because I read Alexander Schmemmann's "For the Life of the World" 25 years ago and I have been steeped in an sacramental worldview ever since. If I could give it 3.5 stars, that's about where I'd put it. This book was much harder slogging than "Desiring the Kingdom". Far too much of the book was spent laying groundwork through explicating the work of Maurice Merleau-Ponty and Pierre Bourdieu and their theoretical models of habituation and formation. In the preface, Smith

notes that he had intended volumes 2 and 3 of this Cultural Liturgies series to be scholarly monographs, but due to the cross-over popularity of the first volume with pastors and educators, he had decided to broaden this appeal of this volume as well. Sadly, I don't think that he accomplished that. The last part of this book is certainly brilliant and ties in well with the first book. Individuals not well versed in Merleau-Ponty, Bourdieu, and modern French philosophy may have a hard time getting to the last part of the book. I know I did. I had hoped to find more material that I could translate pastorally and practically. I will certainly draw upon ideas in part 2 for inspiration in that regard.

What a wonderful exploration into the mystery of the human. Smith's "liturgical anthropology" avoids the often reductionist approaches to anthropology, taking seriously the depth and differentiation of what constitutes humanity. Smith's anthropology integrates the whole person into his analysis, including in it the body, the imagination, the narrative aspect of experience, story, emotion and consciousness. I particularly appreciate his appreciation for the pre-cognitive, pre-conscious dimension of knowing - and the realization that that is the world in which we "live and move and have our being". It is being in touch with this deeper world rather than the more ephemeral "worldview" that is the key to transformation and discipleship. Bravo.

The work James K. A. Smith is doing is a much needed and refreshing exploration of the overly Cartesian approach to the human person and how that molds and shapes Christian practice, especially worship. He gives expression to quietly held convictions that formation is more than information and the liturgy we do does something to us.

Great!

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