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# A Response to Critics

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[journals.sagepub.com/home/sce](http://journals.sagepub.com/home/sce)**Abstract**

The author responds to critics of *Awaiting the King*, addressing especially questions about Augustinian liberalism and the church's complicity in, and responsibility for, disordered liturgies, raising fundamental questions about the relationship between church and world.

**Keywords**

Augustine, liturgy, political theology, Oliver O'Donovan

My first word must be thanks to Leigh, Farneth, Lee, and Gregory for generously spending their valuable time to take my work seriously enough to engage and critique, and to Davey Henreckson, our maestro, for bringing us together. These responses have been provocative and generative for me, and I can't possibly do justice to them in this short space, especially since they have dropped rocks in the pond of my thinking that are still rippling. I am grateful for Leigh's summary of the project in light of the entire Cultural Liturgies trilogy. Her brief points of critique are further developed by Farneth and Lee, so in what follows I will focus on the helpful challenges posed by Gregory, Farneth, and Lee.

**Ad Gregory**

If I am the prodigal son who has returned to the Augustinian liberal fold, then Eric Gregory is the best elder brother one could hope for. Indeed, it is gracious of him to gently rib me instead of simply gloating, 'I told you so'. Since I arrived home in the train of Oliver O'Donovan, Eric not only didn't spurn or resent the return, he's brought out the robe. I'm grateful, but like that other prodigal son, I've been rehearsing my speech along the way and it goes simply like this: 'You were right. I left home for Hauerwas. I don't even deserve to be called an Augustinian liberal, can I at least adjunct at Princeton? I'll even pretend to read Barth'.

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More seriously, Gregory is such a careful reader that he could still detect the earliest source documents of *Awaiting the King*, the antithetical J manuscripts that got folded into the EDP that came later. So he's right that, given what I say later in the book, I probably don't want to talk about liberalism as an 'insidious tradition'; but then again, I might be more favorably disposed to O'Donovan's George-Grant-ish distinction between early Christian liberalism and late liberal *autonomism*.

But let me dive into one of Gregory's more substantive questions: 'How is political action related to beatitude, if at all?' Or 'how sacramental can a *providentialist* account of politics be? ... Is all politics equi-distant and equi-present to the reign of God?' Let me risk an answer that I fear is naïve.

I point to a providentialist account to push back on tendencies within my own Reformed, Kuyperian tradition. As I say in the book, every political theology is exorcising demons; it just depends upon *which*. A big part of my conversation, as you will have noted, is internal to this tradition. But with respect to exorcising demons, perhaps my younger, quasi-Yoderian self could indulge in the luxury of castigating liberalism precisely because I could take it for granted at the same time. But in our current political climate, under this administration, it is precisely a theological defense of liberalism that's called for—which is why I think the Rod Dreher and Patrick Deneens of the world, in their demonization of liberalism, are both ignorant of this providential history and playing right into the hands of those who want to burn this all to the ground. So if, in the end, you're asking, 'Who's afraid of Niebuhr?', my quick and resolute answer is: Not me! I'd happily await another, hopefully similar, St. Reinhold.

Anyway, about providence: the Kuyperian school has tended to affirm the good of politics with a bland, vague appeal to 'common grace' and then settled for something *like* a natural law approach to social goods. In contrast, and with O'Donovan, I argue that in some way Christian engagement in political life bears witness to something much more specifically Gospel-ed than that. And the providential point is about the contingencies and vagaries of history: that legacies of our political institutions and practices are not just the fruit of some broadly 'common grace' or natural law but more like the residue and remnants of a specifically biblical, even Christological, impact on political institutions over time.<sup>1</sup> So I don't imagine the political is sacramental, but I think the political has been shaped by the spillover of the sacramental, even underneath our secularization.

That's why I don't think all regimes or systems or policies are 'equi-distant and equi-present to the reign of God'. Indeed, to be very frank, and a little bit too simplistic, what I found in Augustine was a more nuanced way to analyze even what might still be seen as disordered political life—one could say more than 'a pox on all your houses'. One could discern regimes, practices, policies that are closer to the flourishing and fullness of creation hoped for by the prophets. But then, with my Kuyperian tradition, I envision an eschaton where the goods we manage to realize sail into the kingdom on the ships of

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1. Looking ahead to Farneth, I actually imagine this as a kind of Hegelian way of thinking, that the norms of our political life have not descended from Kantian a priori *Moralität* but rather emerged from the specific contingencies of a *Sittlichkeit* shaped by Jewish and Christian traditions.

Tarshish.<sup>2</sup> In that sense, I suppose one could say some of our political life gets caught up in the salvation history in which Christ is reconciling all things to himself, whether ‘thrones or dominions or rulers or authorities’ (Col. 1:16-19). But, as I said, this reply feels naïve, and I may not properly appreciate the implications of the question.

## Ad Farneth

In a way, Gregory’s closing question dovetails with the key point that Farneth raises. I am so encouraged that she sees mine as a ‘tending’ project rather than one of refusal. That is exactly what I was hoping to articulate. Which then makes her question all the more germane: If I paint a picture of how the formative practices of communal worship can shape us to be *sent* to tend and care for our neighbors *by* tending for our common life and shared institutions, do I envision that sending as another opportunity for formation? In other words, can I imagine being surprised in that sending and coming *back* to worship differently—even reforming the ecclesial community because of those surprise encounters?

The short answer is: Yes! But Farneth is right that this side of the dialectic is largely missing in *Awaiting the King*. Or rather, this side of the dialectic is considered, but *mostly* in a negative mode as a dynamic of assimilation—the deformative power of cultural liturgies that coopt us and make us a people who love consumption and comfort and protecting ‘our own’. So what’s missing in volume 3 is a *positive* account of the dialectic in which, through the surprises of being sent, we actually discern something about the kingdom that is disclosed in that encounter and that leads us to *reform* the ecclesial community.<sup>3</sup> So let me think out loud about this for a moment.

First, I hope I don’t ever pretend that the church’s formative practices (‘liturgies’) are pure or ‘uncontested’. I certainly don’t think they fall from heaven pristine and a-cultural. They are contingent extensions of inherited practices, from Israel especially, and what we receive as a catholic repertoire of worship is itself a fruit of the sort of dialectic Farneth describes.<sup>4</sup> But I don’t think this precludes the conviction that, by the grace of God and the leading of the Spirit, a repertoire of practices can aspire to be rooted in and governed by the biblical narrative. In other words, to use somewhat Brandomian language, the conviction is that we are heirs to practices that are *normed* by a biblical vision, which is actually how we absorb a kind of biblical *know-how* that then nourishes our own discernment when we are *sent* to be surprised.

But being surprised is more complicated than we might assume. The ‘world’ is not self-evident; even the surprises of the Spirit in that encounter need to be recognized, discerned, affirmed *as* goods and challenges to our own complicity and deformation. In

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

3. There are hints of this in volume 1, *Desiring the Kingdom: Worship, Worldview, and Cultural Formation* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker, 2009) in the affirmation of bohemian liturgies in *Moulin Rouge* as better expressions of biblical conceptions of ‘the good life’ than the stern, bourgeois consumers who judge them, pp. 75–79.

4. I address this in more detail in volume 2, *Imagining the Kingdom: How Worship Works* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker, 2013).

other words, there is always a hermeneutics to our surprise. It would be important for us to be sent *open* and *expecting* and *humble* enough to be challenged and surprised. But I would suggest that this itself requires the kind of tacit attunement that we acquire as a pneumatological know-how in the sacramental life of the body of Christ.

This is why *reform* is always a complex dynamic: it is never simply the disclosures of ‘the world’ showing up the injustices and deformation of the church. It is a biblical vision attuned to the surprises of the world that is able to see in those surprises a call of the Spirit to repent. The reason why those surprises can be catalysts is because they are narrated as a challenge to the hypocrisy of the people of God. So when Jennings and Bantum, for example, issue their stinging, necessary challenges to the church with respect to the racial injustice inscribed in its very repertoire of practices, they do not appeal to the authority of the world but rather bring us face to face with these injustices and point out what makes them unjust and heinous vis-à-vis the Gospel. That is a biblically attuned reading of the world’s shocks and surprises. But with that attunement, we can be sent expecting *disclosure*, where our neighbors teach us what we’ve forgotten, or have never even seen. So the dialectic is an ongoing adventure of centering, sending, decentering, confessing, recentering, and so on.

Finally, I appreciate Farneth’s point, following Rom Coles, about the surprises carried in the liturgies of political life and civic activism. It reminds me of Luke Bretherton’s ethnographic work on community organizing in the UK. As he points out, integral to Saul Alinsky’s vision was a *festive* element that finds expression in public rituals, litanies, and liturgies. He sees in such creative, festive endeavors a kind of ‘fusion’ that generates something we couldn’t understand otherwise.<sup>5</sup> What will surprise us are not ‘messages’, but songs of the Spirit groaned by those who suffer. When the church is *sent* in this way, she learns to sing the blues, and then sees they were in the psalms all along.

## Ad Lee

When I learn from an expert like Gregory Lee, I realize what an Augustinian dilettante I am. So I am really just at the beginning of absorbing what I have to learn from him. Let me address the question about my ‘selective’ retrieval of Augustine and then close with a consideration about the dynamics of race and multiethnic congregations.

Lee is right that there are aspects of Augustine’s political thought I don’t address. But I would note that my project was not to summarize or re-pristiniate Augustine’s political theology. Rather, my project was to articulate a liturgical political theology for which I

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5. ‘Through incorporating the festive, the action recognized that life exceeds the political and the economic ... In contradiction to the Weberian vision of politics that dominates so much contemporary political activism, it embodied the recognition that political life needs to engage us in all dimensions of what it means to be human and not simply as rational, rights-bearing units of production and consumption.’ Luke Bretherton, *Resurrecting Democracy: Faith, Citizenship, and the Politics of a Common Life* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2015), p. 156.

found Augustine to be a key source. In this sense, I see my retrieval akin to Gregory's 'rational reconstruction' in *Politics and the Order of Love*.<sup>6</sup>

Vis-à-vis Lee's worries, while I draw on both Augustine and O'Donovan, I don't particularly draw on O'Donovan's reading of Augustine and feel free to demur from it. I think Lee somewhat conflates O'Donovan's reading of Augustine and the sorts of claims I affirm in O'Donovan (e.g., democratic liberalism as a 'crater' mark of the gospel). Lee is right that Augustine is no liberal; I wouldn't want to claim that he was. And I don't think O'Donovan suggests he was. Not all of the claims in *Desire of the Nations* are found *in nuce* in *City of God*. But we could certainly argue that Augustine's political theology opened up trajectories and possibilities that later were realized in early Christian liberalism.<sup>7</sup> The intervening centuries of history and providence make all the difference.

This is relevant, for example, to the question of coercion. Is Augustine's political theology a 'package deal', such that I can only avail myself of his analysis of the two cities in the *saeculum* if I also buy his anti-Donatist affirmation of coercion? I don't think so. O'Donovan's articulation of Christendom explicitly refuses it.<sup>8</sup> We can read Augustine against himself.

Finally, let me comment on Lee's important point about whether or not my response to Jennings's critique is adequate. I am not at all confident that it is. As Lee points out, it would be odd to imagine some kind of liturgical response to racism and white supremacy having any kind of effect if the congregations where these are rehearsed and enacted remain segregated. In particular, he points out a lack of reflection on the formative dynamics of *place* and 'the material composition of our communities' in my project.

Now that I look at it, Lee is right that this hasn't occupied 'a central part' of my project—which is jarring to me as someone who lives in the core city, walks to our congregation in the core city, a congregation where we are constantly, in failing and flailing ways, trying to serve our multiethnic parish. It's also odd that this isn't adequately reflected in the Cultural Liturgies project since it's been part of both my teaching and research in collaboration with my colleague Mark Mulder, an urban sociologist, which has produced several publications on the dynamics of place, the built environment, and evangelical patterns of residential segregation (in many ways catalyzed by Smith and Emerson's *Divided by Faith*,<sup>9</sup> which we teach in a course on 'Church and Society').<sup>10</sup>

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6. Eric Gregory, *Politics and the Order of Love* (Chicago, IL: Chicago University Press, 2008), pp. 6, 31. I was already describing my project as a 'deconstruction of Augustine' (reading Augustine against himself) in *The Fall of Interpretation* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2000).
  7. So the more relevant passage here is not the fundamental antithesis between the loves of the earthly and heavenly city but rather Augustine's measured, qualified affirmation of even the *pax romana* despite its inability to *ever* be heavenly peace (*De civ* 19.26).
  8. See Oliver O'Donovan, *The Desire of the Nations: Rediscovering the Roots of Political Theology* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996), pp. 220–21.
  9. Christian Smith and Michael O. Emerson, *Divided by Faith: Evangelical Religion and the Problem of Race* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2000).
  10. See, for example, Mark Mulder and James K. A. Smith, 'Subdivided by Faith? A Historical Analysis of Evangelicals and the City', *Christian Scholar's Review* 38 (2009), pp. 415–33;

But it should have been more integral to this project, perhaps. However, I would note that already in volume 1, *Desiring the Kingdom*, I noted the importance of this, while also trying to be honest about the degree of our failure.<sup>11</sup>

So yes, definitely, I expect and assume this is part of the goal of any congregation that is trying to practice what the kingdom looks like. Indeed, I think this also jives with the argument of *Imagining the Kingdom*: the only way to undo the perceptual habits and bias of racism is in environments that provide an opportunity to rehabilitate our habits of perception.<sup>12</sup>

But I think it is important to note that multiethnicity is not its own magic, either. Indeed, it is possible to have consumerist multiethnic congregations that reinforce the status quo, even white supremacy.<sup>13</sup> I suggest this is both/and, not either/or: we need to address the material environments that produce segregated communities and segregated congregations, and we need multiethnic congregations immersed in a thicker, more intentional liturgical form, haunted by widows, orphans, and immigrants. We also need liturgical forms that keep us practiced in confessing our continued failures in this respect, and hold before us a vision of how the world should—and will—be otherwise.

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idem, 'Understanding Religion Takes Practice: Anti-Urban Bias, Geographical Habits, and Theological Influences', in Christian Scharen (ed.), *Explorations in Ecclesiology and Ethnography* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2012); idem, 'Making Sense of Church', *Perspectives* 25.3 (March 2010), pp. 5–6. See also my commentary on 'the incarceration state' in 'The Rule of Law and the Way of Love', *Comment* (Spring 2016), pp. 2–4.

11. In *Desiring the Kingdom*, for example, I offer an ethnographic snapshot of the act of 'gathering' that points out the scandal of racial segregation vis-à-vis what we celebrate in Christian worship (pp. 161–62).
12. See the Merleau-Pontian analysis of racism as embodied perceptual habit, and how it could be unlearned, in Helen Ngo, 'Racist Habits: A Phenomenological Analysis of Racism and the Habitual Body', *Philosophy and Social Criticism* 42 (2016), pp. 847–72.
13. This was some of my own experience in a multiethnic Pentecostal congregation in south Los Angeles, in the Hawthorne neighborhood, where racial diversity seemed to come 'naturally', but the structures and practices of the congregation continued to foster an effectively colonial mindset that was absorbed by people of color who, for example, were enthusiastic voters for Donald Trump.