Welcome to the Religion and Culture Web Forum's public discussion board for December 2007. In this thread you will find the invited responses from Eric Gregory, D. C. Schindler, and Paul Williams.

To leave your own question or response to James K. A. Smith's essay or to another posting, choose "post reply." In order to submit a comment, you must register with a personal user ID and password.

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It is hard to exaggerate the importance of the theological critique that Smith offers in his essay, “The Gospel of Freedom, or Another Gospel?” Too often, cultural critique tends to aim at symptoms rather than the roots of problems, engaging in the debate without reflecting deeply on the meaning of the terms of the debate. Smith does us a great service by drawing our attention to the importance of the concept of freedom in our discernment not only of American foreign policy but also of the patterns of contemporary culture more generally. He suggests that there is a connection between the kind of “economic desire” fostered by free-market capitalism and the “political and military” strategies that America has used, particularly in response to September 11. What links these is a particular conception of freedom, namely, as mere choice. Such a conception is inherently imperialistic, because, in its indeterminacy and thus its detachment from any principle of natural...
order, there can be no “end” (telos) to its demand for the expansion of options.

In the face of the problems that stem from this conception, Smith calls for the recovery of a teleological understanding of freedom, and insists, following David Burrell, that this will require even more fundamentally the recovery of an adequate doctrine of creation. As creatures, human beings are ontologically dependent on God. This means, first, that they have determinate natures, ordered to determinate ends, and, second, that there is no competition between divine and human freedom, but that God’s active presence, as final causality, enhances rather than compromises our freedom as creatures. The doctrine of creation, properly understood, gives rise to a view of freedom as participatory in the Good, and thus as principally responsive to what brings genuine flourishing rather than purely spontaneous and therefore arbitrary. The non-teleological, libertarian view of freedom, by contrast, implies precisely a God who does not create in the proper sense: “it requires rejecting anything more than a deist creator.”

If Smith’s analysis on this point is basically true—and I believe it is—we run into an interesting question. It turns out that what lies at the root of this cultural problem, to put it starkly, is a false conception of God. The only way to address this problem, then, is to address the theology behind it. In other words, we cannot get to the root of the cultural disorders without making substantive theological judgments about the nature of God and his relation to the world. It is commonly objected that such judgments cannot be made in a pluralistic culture such as ours. This is clearly an important and difficult objection, the response to which constitutes, in my opinion, one of the most pressing tasks of our age.

Though his reflection on the cultural implications of the notion of freedom is a contribution to the work required, I think it would be necessary to push Smith further on this particular point. After stating that the way we live our freedom will follow from our ultimate end, or as he puts it, our “ultimate confession,” he observes without further comment: “In our pre-eschatological situation, there will be a plurality of such confessions, and thus a plurality of (perceived) ultimate ends.”

Two questions need to be raised in answer to this observation. First, if we thus separate the pre-eschatological situation from the eschaton, do we not in fact threaten to transform ultimate ends into mere “options” once again, at least as far as this life goes? If we do, then I would claim that the theological critique Smith articulates undermines itself, and in the end comes to reinforce precisely the libertarian, non-teleological notion of freedom it sought to criticize. The simple separation of the pre-eschatological and the eschaton is a repetition of the God-world dualism of deism.

Second, how real is in fact the pluralism that Smith mentions? Our culture is virtually unanimous in affirming freedom as the capacity to
choose, even if there is debate about whether this capacity ought to be limited, what it ought to be used for, and so forth. But if Smith is right that this view of freedom implies a deist creator, then it means that there is in fact profound uniformity in our culture, in spite of the appearances of diversity and pluralism. Indeed, the very objection against the “imposition” of a substantial notion of goodness or of God itself rests on a substantial notion of goodness (as mere option) and of God (as deist creator) that it imposes, however unwittingly, on those who belong to something other than the Western liberal tradition. The objection, therefore, is self-contradictory. It implies that the issue facing us is not in the first place how to deal with a plurality of traditions, but which tradition to privilege over the others.

I don’t wish to claim that there is any easy answer to these questions, but rather to affirm the importance of the theological critique that Smith proposes, and to point out that, if we take it seriously, it will lead to the need, not only to judge the responses of different Christian theologies to contemporary social problems, but to rethink the theological, metaphysical, and anthropological foundations of the Western liberal political tradition out of which the American experiment arose.

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Posted: 20 Dec 2007 04:31    Post subject: Paul Williams reply to James K.A. Smith

James Smith has written an engaging and challenging paper in which contemporary notions of freedom are seen to lie at the root of modern manifestations of ‘Empire’ and American foreign policy. I am in agreement with the substantive points of this paper which I enumerate as follows: 1) ‘Empire’ is best understood in terms of the hegemony of global capitalism and this new imperial ideology cannot straightforwardly be identified with American national sovereignty. 2) The laissez-faire market-based notion of freedom as unrestricted choice lies at the root of global capitalism’s ideology, the sense of ‘American freedom’ and the freedom that Americans “go forward to defend.” 3) This notion of freedom as unrestricted choice is not consonant with a Christian articulation of freedom which must give credence to a (teleological) moral orientation toward the Good and particularly toward God’s nature and being.

Despite being in agreement with these substantive points I find myself disagreeing with Smith’s argument at times and indeed cannot therefore unreservedly support what I take to be his primary thesis, namely that “only the notion of freedom found in the Augustinian tradition – along with its attendant ecclesiology – constitutes a real alternative to that of Empire.” (p.5)
First, Smith argues that the same notion of unrestricted freedom that links laissez-faire economics and American libertarian Republicanism, also links evangelicals to these same aspects of “freedom’s ‘Empire.’” Although there are a few qualifiers made in the paper, it is possible to gain the impression that Smith is referring to all evangelicals, whereas in fact he means US evangelicals, and only some of them. Admittedly this comprises a large and wealthy group but it is hardly representative of global evangelicalism, let alone global Christianity. One could hardly describe Pentecostals in South America and Africa or evangelicals in Asia as supporters of global capitalism and American foreign policy. Even in my own country, the United Kingdom – the birthplace of laissez-faire capitalism and liberalism – mainstream evangelicalism is regularly opposed to the unrestricted view of freedom typified so clearly by James Smith in this paper. Plenty of examples could be given but a quick review of the evangelical alliance website at www.eauk.org should make the point.

It seems therefore that capitalism’s notion of unrestricted freedom cannot explain the support of US evangelicals for US foreign policy and the extension of free market policies. It may be that an idolatry of patriotism is closer to the mark and that Smith is a little too dismissive of theological critiques of ‘American Empire.’ The consumer church is also often the flag-waving church. It may be that the United States is not the sovereign power controlling global capitalism but rather is a ‘privileged colony of Empire,’ but if it is so possessed by the new ‘Empire’ of capitalism it is hardly an unwilling victim. American national interest and the interests of the global market overlap remarkably, and the US certainly lends its not inconsiderable sovereign power to the cause.

Secondly, and on a similar vein, I think that ‘freedom’ is given too much work to do in explaining the failings of global capitalism. Two further elements are important – the notion of rationality and the notion of the individual – because the root of capitalism’s theoretical ideology is first that unrestricted freedom is required for rational individuals to pursue their own goals and secondly that pursuit of these goals leads to overall societal utility, welfare or happiness. The dominant ideological defence of capitalism is thoroughly utilitarian and the main Schumpeterian alternative (a favourite of business though not typically of academic economists) still involves a thorough-going individualism.

Utilitarianism is a teleological moral theory. Procedural rationality is the device which enables individual economic agents to order their preferences and act so as to maximise utility or happiness. It is not true to say, therefore, that the notion of freedom at the core of capitalism is strictly non-teleological. The problem is rather that the individual alone decides what is good for them. At this point, it is true that “any determinate specification of ‘the good life’ [from any source of authority other than the individual] - would constitute a restraint on legitimate options and therefore a restriction of freedom” (p.7, my
Part of the problem with this concept though is not its notion of freedom, but its notion of rationality. Rationality is assumed to be complete – agents have (or act as if they have) perfect information about choices, perfect information about the ordering of choices needed to achieve the goals the individual sets, and a perfect ability to carry out planned actions. In reality, we find that rationality is bounded, limited and weak - we usually have quite poor information, partial self-understanding, and weakness of the will in doing what we want to do. This inadequate conception of human rationality leaves us wide open to the selfish manipulation of producers, advertisers and lenders who increasingly act so as to create the desires for the goods and services they want us to buy and the debt needed to purchase them. The market does in fact operate as a puller of desire but often it functions to pull our desires precisely away from any orientation toward the Good. A Christian doctrine of Sin is therefore at least as critical as a Christian doctrine of Creation in redeeming our current cultural enslavement.

My final comment concerns the particular Augustinian notion of freedom that James Smith affirms. I suspect it will not be adequate for the task required on two, related grounds. First, the freedom of the market is the freedom of the individual, understood as an autonomous agent of choice. This individualism also needs directly countering but I am not convinced that the Augustinian model can counter it adequately because of Augustine’s ‘psychological’ understanding of the Trinity. The recent revival of social Trinitarian thought, particularly in the form articulated by Colin Gunton, provides a more robust understanding of how our freedom is dependent on relationship, rather than dependent on autonomy. Fundamentally this applies to our relationship with God but it also and importantly applies in human relations also. My freedom to drive my car is dependent on your willingness to pay taxes for road-building and obey traffic laws. My freedom to speak honestly my deepest thoughts and desires is dependent on your willingness to listen attentively. I get out of bed in the morning, often not because I am enticed by the day (p.13) but because of the help and encouragement from my family community!

Second (and finally) I am in agreement with Smith’s basic thrust that much has been lost with the shift away from participatory accounts of freedom that retain a focus on the final moral orientation of action toward the Good. However, I also think that something important was gained through Scotus’ insight that morality also requires some element of libertarian freedom – freedom from oppressive authority. At its best, this kind of freedom has been mediated at a societal level by that ancient inheritance from Judaism - the rule of law. It ought to be a salutary lesson for us that despite its ancient pedigree, the rule of law did not achieve widespread and deep effects on European societies until after the influence of an Augustinian notion of freedom had dwindled. It must also be noted that it is now precisely the ‘Empire’ of global capitalism that is providing the greatest threat to our libertarian freedoms, as well as to our teleological freedoms. The concentration of
power taking place today in the marketplace and the state is arguably the greatest threat to human freedom ever witnessed. Unmasking this evil will require a clear and sustained prophetic witness on the part of the Church, including the willingness of rich and powerful Christians to use their influence to secure the freedom of those who are increasingly marginalised and oppressed by the global capitalist system. And yes – we must also re-ignite a moral discourse about the purpose of human life and the nature of the Good. I am grateful to Jamie Smith for provoking this much needed debate.

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Those of us who think that theology matters should applaud Smith’s provocative effort to get beyond conventional approaches to “religion and politics” as defined by classical liberals, media pundits, cliché wielding enthusiasts, and many modern day Augustinian realists. One implication of his essay is that we need to get our theology right in order to meet the deepest and most subtle challenges of “Empire.” I happen to agree with many of his theological moves. I also agree that Augustinian reflections about the dynamics of desire are a neglected resource for resisting idolatry. Nevertheless, I want to consider another possibility that does not aim quite as high as Smith—at least on this side of the eschaton.

Here is what I take Smith to argue. Theological critique tends to be misguided by its preoccupation with the nation-state. America nonetheless remains deeply implicated within Empire because of a non-teleological notion of freedom that it exports to the world. Freedom understood as libertarian choice is parasitic on a host of contingent theological mistakes that give rise to pernicious intuitions about the capacity to choose. Exposing the relationship between this heterodox idea and the Bush Doctrine invites constructive alternatives rooted in Augustinian ecclesiology and “participatory” freedom.

I have a few initial reservations. First, Smith is convinced by Hardt and Negri that we are “dealing with a new mode of Empire that is unhooked from territories and (modern) nation-states.” It may well be that older models of critique are deficient. But, for now, I am not sure what it means to say that a transnational market is unhooked from nation-states. Despite the rise of global markets, it seems strategically unwise to jump on the post-national bandwagon just yet—especially given the emerging role of China, India, and Brazil. Second, while I share Smith’s diagnosis of the market production of consumer desire, I am less certain about his immediate move to indict “economic globalization.” Ambivalence about globalization and “liberal modernity”
strikes me as a better Augustinian posture. They provide conditions for both virtue and vice. Third, the language of God as a “transcendent object of desire” seems at odds with the goal of undermining competitive accounts of divine and human agency. Deists might think of God as a really big object, but Christians shouldn’t. Finally, the rejection of teleological notions of freedom is not the exclusive domain of secular liberals, Charles Finney, and Ted Haggard. Indeed, as Smith knows, concerns about teleology as Pelagian temptation occupy a prominent place in Protestant theology. For that matter, Henri de Lubac’s account of creation and grace has not won the day in Catholic circles. There are more theological choices than Smith implies, so to speak.

My major concern, however, has to do with the relation between theology and cultural theory. More precisely, I want to hear more about the implications of “theology as cultural theory” for political institutions and practices. At one point, Smith approvingly cites Burrell’s linking of Scotus with Rawls’s defense of liberalism as “political, not metaphysical.” I do not rise in defense of Rawlsian neutrality, but charity demands a close reading of Rawls’s rather restricted domain for his story about the right and the good. Theoretical liberalism of that kind may have bad sociological consequences given its ostensibly low flying focus on the really bad, but Rawlsian bracketing is not meant to evade philosophy everywhere. It just thinks as citizens we don’t have to agree on everything in theology or philosophy (something highly unlikely even for Christians). We should not embody the “whole truth” in politics, and there are many aspects of political freedom to value. Other liberals emphasize freedom as non-domination rather than libertarian choice. Given the history of totalitarianism, it is easy to see why another politics of “the Good” and “ultimate confession” is unattractive. Augustinians who know about the danger of pride should be particularly attentive to these dangers. To use Smith’s terms, Augustinians have acted like pushers rather than pullers—“compelling” others to accept the gift of grace and a determinate “shape of the good life.” Premature appeals to sin or this history should not cripple a more ambitious political Augustinianism—especially as political agency is increasingly threatened by “market freedom.” But they might allow us to be more patient with second-order theoretical confusions before enjoying the libertas of the saints. They might also encourage us to focus on the quality of our desires and attachments in considering the nature of freedom and human flourishing.

Schindler rightly notes potential problems with Smith’s eschatological soundings. I would not abandon these thoughts. Rather, they might be amplified in order to offer a Christian defense of secularity that encourages democratic friendship across philosophical divides. Isn’t that an Augustinian point of locating politics within history rather than being or nature? Defending secularity without abandoning justice or the aspirations of other virtues that sometimes restrict negative liberty (and market freedom) is a hard enough task. Embodying alternative practices that cast up better notions of freedom should be high on the
agenda for today’s Augustinians—especially in a climate of excessive fear and distrust. Critique is not the only mode of theological discourse. Smith only hints at one viable option: “Augustine’s ecclesial multitude.” The problem for many, however, is that this multitude—at least in Augustine’s imagination—was not very multitudinous.

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