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Learning and Loves Envisaged Through the Lens of James K. A. Smith: Reimagining Christian Education Today

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Abstract

This chapter introduces the reader to the notion of learning and loves in relation to Christian education. In particular, it draws from James K. A. Smith's (2016a) keynote address at the 2016 research symposium "Learning and Loves: Reimagining Christian Education" and sketches a range of contemporary perspectives on the nature and purpose of Christian education today. Critical to this discussion is the educator's understanding of what it means to be human and Smith's (2016a) presupposition that "every pedagogy implicitly assumes an anthropology". Given that Christian education has been shown to be concerned with the making of 'whole' persons (Holmes 1987; Ream and Glanzer 2013), holistic approaches that are both theoretically grounded and practically beneficial are critical to and for such a transformative endeavour. This discourse also introduces the content and organisation of the book *Reimagining Christian Education: Cultivating Transformative Approaches*, which focuses on some of the manifold facets, expressions and experiences of Christian education encountered in innovative contemporary research and practice today. The book is organised into five thematic sections and includes the introduction of both theoretical perspectives and pedagogical methods and tools, which are field-tested and practice-approved: (1) Conceptual Perspectives; (2) Pedagogical Implications; (3) Inclusive Education and Hospitality; (4) Trends in Learning, Business and Technology; (5) Promoting Reconciliation and Social Justice. By looking at Christian education through the lens of James K. A. Smith, this chapter offers fresh perspectives on (re)imagining education as the passionate pursuit of learning and teaching by lovers of God.

1. Reimagining Christian Education

Christian educators continue to seek education which is “Christian in the fullest sense of the word” (p. xiii), and this end, according to Knight (2006), requires “clearly understanding their basic beliefs and how these beliefs can and must affect their educational planning and practice” (p. xiii). The focus in education has most often centred on the ‘what’ and the ‘how’ of education rather than the ‘why’ and the ‘who’ (Palmer 1998).

Over its recent history, the emphasis for the purpose of Christian education has been on developing and living a Christian worldview (Greene 1998; Walsh and Middleton 1984; Wolters 2005); responsible discipleship (van Brummelen 1998; Wolterstorff 1980) and more recently, the notion of equipping to live in the Biblical metanarrative has been influential (Bartholomew and Goheen 2004; Goheen and Wolters 2005; Wright 1991). Integrated through these approaches is the idea of educating for character with references back to scriptural passages such as Micah 6:8, Galatians 5:22-23, Titus 2 and 3¹. In terms of higher or adult education, similar foci have increasingly been on transformational education where the focus is typically on changing one’s way of understanding, perceiving and engaging the world (Craig and Gould 2007; Cranton 2002; Dockery and Thornbury 2002; Norsworthy 2011) leading to changed ‘ways of being’ (Rom 12:1-3) or dispositions with commitments to hopeful educational outcomes such as justice, shalom and faithfulness (Garber 1996, 2014; Plantinga 2002; Shortt 2017; Wolterstorff 1980, 2004). Christian educators would claim that the premises which inform and shape their educational philosophies are, as one would expect, referenced back to Biblical foundations.

2. Learning and Loves

Recent works of James K. A. Smith (2009, 2013, 2016b), which intrinsically link learning and loving in a fundamentally different manner, interrupt these more traditional approaches to Christian education by suggesting a change of focus for educational endeavour to shaping or forming one’s loves, or desires. At the heart of his argument is the axiom that “every pedagogy implicitly assumes an anthropology” (Smith 2016a); an understanding of what it means to be human. This is not a new idea in terms of developing one’s philosophy of education. For example, authors such as Sergiovanni (2005) and Palmer (1993, 1998) drew attention to the fact that our learning, work, service and leadership are autobiographical or embodied expressions of our ‘inner most being’ (Entwistle 2010; Forsyth and Kung 2007; Iselin and Meteyard 2010; Norsworthy 2006; see also Psalm 1:1-3 and Psalm 37:4).

The contribution and challenge which Smith presents is that a teacher’s understanding of humanity is not restricted to how they conceptualise people, and therefore students within their philosophical framework, but is evidenced by their choice of pedagogies. However, first things first: How do Christian educators conceptualise people? How do we answer the question, “What does it mean to be human?” Smith (2016a) claims that “the assumed model of the human person is ‘the thinking thing’ model [...] that human beings are primarily brains on a stick”. This inadequate but contemporaneously pervasive anthropology leads to a simplified understanding of the purpose of education as “the depositing of ideas and beliefs [...] into the intellectual receptacles of thinking things in order to equip them for various tasks” (Smith 2016a). With reference to the work of Jean Leclercq (1992), Smith (2016a) reminds us that in the eleventh century the university had a very different purpose based on a different anthropology. It invited people into a way of life to make them lovers of God who desired to learn so that they could be image bearers of God to and for the world around them. There is agreement that “human beings are defined by their creation ‘in the image of God’” (Sands 2010, p. 28), but currently the dominant understanding of what this means continues

¹ All scripture quotations are from the *Holy Bible, New International Version*.

to be from structuralist (or substantialist) or functional (or relational) viewpoints which give the impression that “humans are ‘stamped’ with attributes such as reason, self-consciousness, moral sense, self-transcendence and as such resemble or mirror God on earth” (Norsworthy and Belcher 2015, p. 2). Authors such as Sands (2010), Sherman (2011), Welz (2011), and Anderson (2014) have more recently drawn attention to the concept of *imago dei* (made in the image of God) as one’s vocation, in terms of being God’s representative on earth. Norsworthy and Belcher’s (2015) research invited 120 teachers in Christian schools to articulate their generic understanding of ‘image bearer’ and its application to their students and its influence on their teaching. While multiple understandings of the nature of image bearing were presented, their conclusion was captured in the words of a participant who claimed that “it changes everything when you view people and your pupils through this lens” (p. 8). It made all the difference to how classroom management, curriculum decision-making, teachers’ role and the very purpose of education were understood and therefore enacted or embodied.

Smith (2009) challenges the dominant ways of understanding *imago dei* and their reliance on reason and rationality. He claims “to be human is to love and it is what we love that defines who we are” (p. 51). On this basis, as highlighted by Anderson (2014), education becomes “the process of learning to love the right things, of learning to love what God loves so we can reflect what He is and what he does” (p. 97; see also Psalm 78 and Jeremiah 9:23-24).

Smith’s (2016b) proposition that educators understand humans as those who have desires, who are by nature lovers rather than predominantly thinkers, presents more challenges for the Christian educator than those of an ontological nature. He draws from an Aristotelian model of the human person to highlight that humans are purposeful; the needle on their compass is always seeking some telos, goal or end. What he suggests is “that the human creature is created by God as the kind of being who is animated and oriented towards some end and that end is something that they take to be ultimate” (Smith 2016a). This idea is inherent within Augustine’s (trans. 1944) famous confession and prayer: “Thou hast made us for Thyself and our hearts are restless till they rest in thee” (p. 1). The purpose of Smith’s links to Aristotle and Augustine is to identify three components of the design claim that is being made.

First, we are made *for* something. In fact, as creatures we are made *for* our Creator. This design claim has implications for education which seeks human flourishing: The process of becoming fully human. In his presentation at the “Learning and Loves” conference, Smith (2016a) suggested that the task of Christian education might be framed as the process of helping “people find what they were made for” and “help me learn to love what I’m made to love”.

Second, it is not our minds that are restless until we find rest. It is not a matter of knowledge or a quest for information. Smith (2016a) argues that “the centre of the human person is the heart; the heart is the seat of our loves and our longings”. The consequence of this for education is, as previously indicated, that it is aimed at the heart. The most holistic education will be the one that helps me to understand and live what I’m made to love.

Third, Smith (2016a) invites us to make sense of Augustine’s notion of ‘restlessness’. While, “Every human creature is created by God as a lover, as a desiring creature, as an erotic creature and every human being is actually created with this sort of engine of desire that drives them towards something ultimate”, the effect of sin and brokenness means there is “no guarantee that they find their end in the one who has made them”. In other words, it is likely we will choose to love alternate things and to love them in the wrong way. We attend to things that are not ultimate as if they were ultimate. In the words of Romans 1, we worship

the creation rather than the Creator. This is idolatry; idolatry of the heart; a misplacement of our desires (see Rom 1:25-32).

In the light of the three components of Augustine's confession and the focus for the "Learning and Loves" symposium and therefore this book, the key questions become, "How do I learn to love? How does my heart get 'aimed'?" Smith's (2016a) response is that this occurs through practice. He explains:

You learn to love by practice. That is your heart, your desires, your ultimate longings are in some sense not just the outcome of ideas and beliefs that have been deposited into your mind. They are more like habits, dispositions, internal inclinations that in fact you acquire through being immersed in rhythms and rituals and routines that over time train your loves, even at a kind of unconscious or preconscious level to be oriented toward something ultimate. (Smith 2016a)

Pedagogies, traditions, rituals and the overarching narratives in which we teach are not naïve or neutral, they 'do something to us'. For example, Postman (1995) argues that, "public education creates a public" and the kind of public which is created is totally dependent on "[...] two things, and two things alone: the existence of shared narratives and the capacity of such narratives to provide an inspired reason for schooling" (pp. 17-18). We see this same idea in Biblical passages, such as Psalm 78 and Judges 2, which clearly link the nation's well-being to the education of the youth *and*, in particular, the fact that they "know who God is and what He has done" – both experientially and vicariously through the continual telling of the narrative. As Smith (2016a) noted, educational practices are:

[. . .] really pedagogies of desire that are training us to love some vision of the ultimate, some version of the good life. Not because they are targeting our intellect but because [they] capture our imagination [they] get hold of our hearts [... and over time commit] our loves towards that vision of the good life.

The challenge for those of us involved in Christian education is that there is often a gap or mismatch between what we say we love and the desires which have been captured through routine, ritual and hidden curricula. According to Smith (2016a), "we underestimate the extent to which our desires have been co-opted by secular liturgies that have trained us to love other gods".

Smith's (2016a) understanding of humans and the consequential implications for education is reminiscent of the work of American educator James A. Beane (1995) with regard to his democratic model of integrated curriculum where he wrote, "Curriculum integration does not just mean doing the same things differently but doing *something different*" (p. 619, italics in original). In other words, if we take Smith's (2016a) premise that learning is about forming students' loves or desires, then the resulting approaches to Christian education at all levels become 'something different'. He suggests that the more holistic approach to education which is needed is one which designs intentional routines and 'ways of being' which enable us to form habits or dispositions through engagement, involvement and embodiment of those practices. These practices he calls liturgies. The repetitive participation in these "inscribe in you a habitual disposition [...] that means you become the kind of person who's default leans in that direction" (Smith 2016a). He argues that, in this sense "what Christian education should be about then is a re-habitation of the heart" – something which is not achieved as a "trickle-down effect of what you know and believe" but rather "they are caught bottom up from the practices" in which you are immersed (Smith 2016a). The 'something different' which Smith (2016a) argues for "is a holistic, radical Christian education" which is understood as "the re-habitation of what we love" that moves from a narrow focus on information "so the scope [...] includes our gut, our

loves, our longings, our cardia”. According to Smith (2016a) “it may be that Christian colleges and universities are the last outpost to remind us how to be human”.

The exploration of and engagement with these ideas have implications for how we understand the nature and purpose of education, our pedagogy, policies related to enrolment and behaviour guidance, curriculum design and decision-making as well as for the way students and teachers are organised and grouped. There are also arising implications for research both in terms of what we choose as the focus of research and also the methodologies which we choose and their ability to honour the participant as an image bearer rather than a statistic. Recent research also suggests opportunities for proactively inviting the contributions of marginalised people with little formal education and enlisting them as active participants, contributors and educators (Luetz et al. 2018, in press). Advocating “reversals of learning”, the authors of that research offer that poor and marginalised people with little formal education:

[...] are a valuable, although largely under-utilised and under-appreciated source for ‘bi-directional learning’ [...] ‘Reversals of learning’ need to be standardised and normalised [... This will] empower passive ‘recipients’ and ‘beneficiaries’ (of benevolent concern) to become active ‘stakeholders’ and ‘partners’ (of a common [education] agenda) [...] A Judeo-Christian Theology underpins this discussion, offering hopeful historical perspectives on the Divine preference for self-revelation and human betterment through the least expected voice. (Luetz et al. 2018, in press, pp. 1, 18-19)

There are many other examples from research and practice that elaborate and illustrate the outworking of how educators may live and work as image bearers of God. The chapters within this book (Section 3) are presented for their ability to support or illustrate such exploration and engagement.

3. Pertinent Literature: A Succinct Overview of Contemporary Research and Practice

The chapters of this book are organised according to particular themes or foci in Christian education. In Part One, “Conceptual Horizons for Christian Education: Theoretical, Theological and Philosophical Perspectives”, the authors of Chapters 1-5 explore the implications for the very nature and purpose of education in terms of a holistic understanding of humans and their task. Chapter 1 – the current chapter – first discusses the notion of ‘learning and loves’ within the context of Christian education according to James K. A. Smith and then introduces the remaining chapters (Norsworthy et al. 2018). In Chapter 2, Benson (2018) uses a theological narrative approach to investigate the dimensions of shalom with a view to reimagining Christian education in terms of a pilgrim’s journey of growth under divine tutelage. In Chapter 3, Messmore (2018) argues that Christian educational institutions are most effective when serving as communities of ‘enchanted learning’ and that this necessarily implies an orientation towards the Trinity. Chapter 4 discusses education for environmental sustainability, including reducing global poverty and advancing the United Nations’ sustainable developmental goals. In the process, Luetz et al. (2018) use theological, hermeneutical and eschatological perspectives to conceptualise education for environmental sustainability and “creation care” as an intrinsically Christian endeavour whereby the plight of the poor and needy is attended to according to both physical and spiritual dimensions. Chapter 5 reimagines Christian schools by arguing that approaches to the integration of faith and academic learning can be reimagined holistically in the form of revelatory learning communities (Murison and Benson 2018).

In Part Two, “Holistic Pedagogical Perspectives: Integrating Spiritual and Practical Approaches”, the authors of Chapters 6-14 explore the relationship between a holistic view of students and practical approaches. Chapter 6 utilises a visual research methodology in order to explore the experiences of first year students in an undergraduate counselling degree in

terms of their identity and experience as learners (Norsworthy 2018). The chapter then elucidates how the methodology appeals to the Christian educator for its ability to honour the participant as *imago dei* (made in the image of God). Drawing on the belief that ‘we counsel out of who we are’, Chapter 7 discusses teaching of counselling from the perspective of a Christian worldview with the intention that students will engage in personal transformation in terms of accessing shalom (Bulkeley 2018). In Chapter 8, Alexander (2018) ponders how we might transform Christian tertiary institutions and rediscover the way of Jesus by sharing an understanding of ‘living the kingdom’ with students. Chapter 9 discusses the teacher-student relationship in terms of creating a space in Christian education whereby the learner will not only flourish but also experience the joy of ‘transformational knowing’ (Crawford 2018). In Chapter 10, Stanton (2018) reimagines a pedagogy of Bible engagement in secondary education that sensitively responds to the developmental needs of adolescents. Chapter 11 considers a conceptual framework for Christian student formation in tertiary education in terms of the four sources of reason, tradition, the Bible and experience (Hey 2018). In Chapter 12, O’Brien (2018) reimagines reflective practice in terms of life-long learning for professional development and for nurturing leadership within Christian ministry. Chapter 13 discusses a reflective approach to helping primary students to deal with conflict within their friendship groups (Ayling 2018). In Chapter 14, Ransford and Crawford (2018) propose a narrative approach to enable Christians to effectively articulate their spirituality and thus embed the story of their spiritual journey in the contemporary context.

In Part Three, “Inclusive Education and Hospitality: Educational Perspectives on Voice, Agency and Inclusion”, the authors of Chapters 15-17 illustrate approaches to the more holistic education advocated in Smith’s (2016a) keynote address that design new ‘ways of being’. Drawing on two qualitative research studies of Christian teachers’ experience of hospitality in the classroom, Chapter 15 examines the nature of Christian hospitality in light of Derrida’s theories, Biblical hospitality and classroom hospitality (Chalwell 2018). In Chapter 16, Hills et al. (2018) discuss a personalised learning and teaching approach for a student with an intellectual disability in a Christian tertiary education context in Queensland. Chapter 17 reflects on an ‘appreciative inquiry’ research project undertaken in a Christian tertiary education context in Aotearoa New Zealand (Arkwright and Chihota 2018). The project explored how staff journeyed together to nurture more conscious and intentional attachments with God, which resulted in a transformed professional community.

In Part Four, “Contemporary Trends in Learning, Business, and Technology: Proactively Engaging Socio-Cultural Realities”, the authors of Chapters 18-21 discuss ways that Christian education can articulate and interact with other sectors of society. Chapter 18 discusses the case of a non-profit community organisation in Queensland that used a values-based learning approach, underpinned by a Christian worldview, to help adolescents develop robust personal values (Dowden and Drager 2018). In Chapter 19, Jenkins (2018) explores the intersections between some important Biblical themes and mainstream business activities before going on to discuss implications for educators when engaging in business contexts. Chapter 20 describes and explains the ‘5P’ model of missional business that is used in the business curriculum of a Christian tertiary education context in Queensland (St Hill 2018). In Chapter 21, Hockridge (2018) reimagines Christian formation for theology students in the online learning and teaching context.

In Part Five, “Promoting Reconciliation in a Changing World: Social Justice, Environmental, Historical, and Global Perspectives in Education”, the authors of Chapters 22-24 reveal some original ways for Christian educators to assume missional responsibility. Chapter 22 utilises the example of William Wilberforce, and his efforts to secure the abolition of slavery in the British Empire during the nineteenth century, to discuss how history education best advances moral understanding when pedagogies use all the available

historical data and avoid oversimplification (Stephens 2018). In Chapter 23, Leo (2018) examines the advantages and pitfalls of critiquing societal and cultural liturgies within the context of history education. He discusses ways to circumvent the creation of the 'Winter Christian' whereby the student becomes overly critical of perceived disconnects between faith teachings and practices of faith.

4. Concluding Synthesis

As suggested by the title of this chapter ("Learning and Loves Envisaged Through the Lens of James K. A. Smith: Reimagining Christian Education Today"), Christian education is a vocation for lovers as much as thinkers. In this sense, it is a life-long endeavour for all those students of life who passionately desire to learn so that they may optimally and fittingly bear the image of God for and to the world around them (Smith 2016a, attributed to Leclercq 1992). In short, and as discussed in Sections 1 and 2, Christian education is a process of formation and holistic endeavour that enlists our passions more than perceptions (Smith 2013, 2016b). It involves the shaping of an educational environment in which students can learn to know and love God, themselves and others so that consequently, all may flourish. Simply put, it invites the student to imagine how they might live as a proactive, influential and enlightened protagonist in God's redemptive story. As suggested by the verb *to educate*, which stems from the root word, *ex ducere*, 'to draw out', education requires a process of holistic human development intended to culminate in the formation of 'whole' persons. Well-known Professor of Philosophy Arthur Frank Holmes (1987) once contended: "The question to ask about an education is not 'What can I do with it?' but rather 'What is it doing to me – as a person?'" (p. 25). Relatedly and importantly, education is concerned with the making of 'whole' persons. This state of affairs illustrates the need for integrated approaches to Christian education that are both theoretically sound and practically beneficial, and for the identification of innovative pedagogical methods and tools, which are field-tested and practice-approved. Holistic approaches, which engage the head, heart and hands open up expansive horizons. The myriad facets, expressions and experiences of Christian education are exemplified by the diverse range of innovative research and practice presented in Section 3. It is within this framework and the possibilities which emerge from the questions raised that "Reimagining Christian Education: Cultivating Transformative Approaches" has arisen as a truly interdisciplinary contribution to the Christian education discourse, offering a thought-provoking commixture of reading, reflection, inspiration, and (re)imagination of education as the passionate pursuit of learning and teaching by lovers of God.

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