

BOOK REVIEW

***Beyond the Myth of Self-Esteem: Finding Fulfilment.* By John Smith with Coral Chamberlain, Victoria, Australia: Acorn Press, 2014, 236 pp.**

John Smith is in his seventies, and having undertaken a "sea-change" with his wife Glenna, now resides in Ocean Grove in south-east of the Australian mainland. Smith may be known around the world as the founder of the Christian motorcycle club, *God's Squad*. He has also been in the forefront of many other initiatives at home and abroad that boldly commend the Good News of Jesus Christ to marginal and vulnerable people. In 2002 he completed a Doctoral Thesis from Asbury Theological Seminary entitled "The Origins, Nature, and Significance of the Jesus Movement as Revitalization Movement" (Asbury Theological Seminary Series in World Christian Revitalization Movements In Intercultural Studies, Volume 5, Emeth Press, 2011). This book is full of Smith's careful reflections on his life as a preacher of the Gospel and initiator of Christian communities. He is the advocate of justice and promoter of a bold community-lifestyle that reaches out to embrace those who are on the margins of our society. But the book (written with the researching and editorial assistance of Coral Chamberlain) is more than that, and has a specific focus. *Beyond the Myth of Self-Esteem: Finding Fulfilment* brings together Smith's persistent efforts to track the development and proliferation of self-help psychology. It is pop psychology's mythology of human fulfilment through enhanced self-esteem that is in his sights. This is a secular view of human fulfilment that presupposes a highly individualized, if not abstract, view of personhood. The author augments his exposé with cogent anecdotes from his many experiences in a variety of contexts.

So, it might be asked, is this the book he has always wanted to publish in his retirement? It certainly brings together the results of research undertaken over decades. He may now live by the sea, but the book gives every indication that its author is as active now as he ever was. In *Amazing Grace*, John Newton deflects his youthful protégé, William Wilberforce, away from a life of solitary contemplation: "Wilber, you have work to do!" As I read this book, I imagined I could hear Newton say to its author, "Smithy, you've still got work to do!" This is certainly not the idle musings of one who considers his work to be done. Clearly he is not "retired." The book expresses Smith's ongoing desire to prod critical evaluation of a wide-spread movement that promotes an unhealthy individualism. For decades he has been confronting the self-obsessed and idolatrous lifestyle that conveniently avoids community and public responsibility. He continues to warn against a way of life that denies our calling to serve our neighbor with love. The book contains many reflections which help us understand the author and gain insight into his life story. But it is more than just a published *aide memoire* for himself and those supportive of his work.

What kind of volume is it? Will it find a home in a specific academic discipline – "positive psychology" perhaps? There is a set of *YouTube* videos in which he explains why he wrote this book. He refers to Martin Seligman, the American psychologist who has initiated the burgeoning field of positive psychology. Smith's summary of Seligman is this: "Our self-esteem is not something we find by looking for it, but the sense of goodness, the sense of life being worth living comes from living a life that is worth living, and you can see that." (This quote can be found at 30:23 in Part 1 of his *YouTube* discussion of the book <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=MngyziE8f00>). This sounds like the advice from the book of Proverbs. "The beginning of wisdom is this: get wisdom, and whatever you get, get insight" (4:7 English Standard Version). Wisdom is to be found by respecting what is there staring us in the face.

Positive psychology is like the development economics of Amartya Sen. Both seek to reform a well-established academic discipline by drawing attention to how capacity is under construction well before any professionals come on scene to overcome deficits with their therapeutic wizardry. The aim is rather to emphasize mechanisms that are already in play in the life of a person or community, rather than by merely helping people to cope and hold on.

In this sense then, Smith's book can be viewed as negative, but it is focused on the deficits that are implicit in a pervasive pseudo-therapeutic approach. He is concerned that, all too often, claims are made that assume that one only has to unleash one's inner self-esteem and problems will evaporate. To isolate a person's life and proclaim release from personal problems by an emphasis on feeling good, by blotting out the pain, by trying to look good, confirms an unhealthy obsession with "me" and will not actually build a person's capacity. Smith is concerned with techniques of pop-counseling that lead people astray. Overcoming life's difficulties should never be reduced to feeling good about oneself, as if that is the clue to a "successful life."

Smith is particularly good at "getting alongside" those with whom he disagrees. He is even not ashamed to admit that he has watched the TV performances of these pop-psychology gurus. He tells us that he has, at times, tried the techniques commended by Oprah and Dr. Phil. This gives a personal touch to his narrative, and also makes his arguments about their mythologizing more cogent. He takes careful note of the advice they proffer, turns it over carefully, even, on occasion, being willing to deepen his understanding by acting upon some of their suggestions. Because he is willing to give credit where credit is due, even to the most notorious of these "snake oil merchants," he brings discussion back to the point he is making, confirming his warning with humor.

High-sounding, but often vacuous quotations or assertions are one of the hallmarks of the myth of self-esteem. These are often affirmations of love or praise for oneself. Oprah seems especially partial to this approach. I remember watching one of her shows in which she encouraged her audience to look in the mirror and say nice things to the image facing them. She said the image would

then say nice things back to them. This was supposed to build their sense of self-esteem. I tried it. I told my image, 'You are a handsome, attractive young man', but the image replied, 'You've got to be joking.' (pp. 79-80).

Here he pokes fun at himself, and indirectly he exposes the fatuous advice of the famous television celebrity. But he does not leave it there. The further point is crucial: "If the projected image of self is untrue, then the self-esteem derived from it will also be phony and, at some stage, reality will kick in" (*ibid*).

This book is as complex as the cultural phenomena Smith has investigated. By taking note of the method he has employed, we can also appreciate his contribution to the study of popular culture. This is the published report of the fieldworker telling us what he has uncovered from his years of working in "the field." Smith's "field" is not so much pop psychology (which he at points implies) but more significantly, popular culture in general. In that context, the "All-About-Me" syndrome, promoted by pop-psychology, is a symptom of a widespread misdirection of our cultural life.

Smith has long felt compelled to develop an outgoing Christian ministry that also forms a distinctive lifestyle. This lifestyle has been characterized by a persistent effort to identify with the people with whom he has shared his life and his vision of service. He confesses that God has called him to serve these people. He also reckons with the fact that he has been able to do all this because of the support of his wife. This is no token acknowledgment. It is evidence of his understanding of how his responsibility before God pre-supposes the responsibilities God continues to give to others who have in turn had an impact upon his life.

Smith's recognition of the support he has received is basic to this book. The idea of his interdependence characterizes the method of his research. To some of Smithy's long-term followers, such a statement might just sound like a truism, a complex, perhaps "high-sounding and vacuous" description of this man's "way of life." Yes, that is indeed what I am saying. His method of research grows out of this way of life. But by characterizing his book by referencing his fieldwork methodology, we begin to discern how his instinctive "getting alongside" – well known from his many-sided and distinctive "ministry" – is the leading characteristic of how he explores popular culture. This indeed helps us to appreciate Smithy's distinctive "career" here in Australia and abroad. And indeed, his doctorate was in cultural anthropology. His fieldwork methodology is basic to this volume.

Some readers, having read what I have noted about his views of Oprah and Dr. Phil, and learning that the author has spent many hours watching their TV programs in preparation for this book, may well conclude that this book can be ignored, just as Oprah and Dr. Phil can be switched off and left alone. But it is important to note that the author is not suggesting that readers go out and purchase Oprah's latest best seller. He is, *qua fieldworker*, reporting on his fieldwork, his research. That is what this book is. And in that sense he is also suggesting that various people – parents, teachers, public officials, ministers, those involved in local sports – might well deepen their understanding of what

they are confronting in the attitudes of young people (and their parents) by actually taking the time to listen seriously to the purveyors of popular culture, however banal and fatuous their contributions may seem. He is not saying readers should become advocates of Dr. Phil's perspectives by watching his programs. His point is rather that in our search for cultural wisdom we might well learn more about what is troubling grandma or the young teenager if we take some interest in the day-time TV shows that fill their lonely hours.

As such, this book is no primer in psychology, even if it may be utilized as such in some Christian higher education quarters. Yet it may be helpful to students who are already immersed in trying to understand the scientific discipline of psychology, at whatever level. Its primary intention is to contribute to a discussion of a view of human life, given support by extensive commercial interests, which is leading people astray and causing harm by its extreme individualism. Smith's aim is that his readers will become much more critical of self-centered individualism.

Clearly this contribution presupposes Smith's profession of Christian faith. But it is also a contribution that looks forward to a wider and deeper discussion that opens up on many different fronts. It is within the many sides of that anticipated discussion, I suspect, that John Smith would like to hear further from those seeking to develop the pertinent concepts for a psychological theory that presupposes a Christian view of personhood.

Beyond the Myth of Self-Esteem may well help the student to work harder on such theoretical work, but it should not be read as a substitute for the difficult conceptual theorizing that is still needed. The book belongs to a genre that redirects scholarly reflection to a general and popular audience. Contributions to "Christian scholarship" very often seek to mediate between the "academy" and the "Christian community." This is not exactly what this book does; nor is it concerned with theoretical reflection as such. But it does provide a critical account of public attitudes and taken-for-granted intelligence. Smith is, I suggest, a Christian "public intellectual" rather than an academic. Nevertheless, his book could be a valuable resource for undergraduates who are studying with psychology, counseling, or social work in mind. It will also be worthwhile reading for youth leaders, whether in a church or youth club setting. Parents trying to understand how popular culture is confronting their children with many complex and demanding issues will also find valuable insights in this book.

In conclusion, I would suggest that the most salient of Smith's many-sided contributions in this book can be found in his research method. His book commends the effort to expose mythologies that lead people astray. They can be uncovered by a sustained effort employing what is in many ways an anthropological fieldwork methodology. His book demonstrates that it is worthwhile to study everyday life in a determined effort to assist in the formation of a truly Christian way of life that avoids all cheap substitutes. The disciples of Jesus in every age have been called to promote a community of love as they bring the Good News to the world in word and deed. We stay close to Jesus Christ by wholeheartedly serving our neighbors, whoever they are, actively promoting a healthy, just, and peaceful

way of life. That is the platform from which the results of John Smith's fieldwork methodology have been given to us in this book.

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