

Two Smiths

Institute for Christian Studies

Perspective

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Although James K.A. Smith and David Smith are not related, and were raised on different continents, they have more in common than just a last name. Both were students at ICS in the mid nineties. Both studied under ICS's Dr. Jim Olthuis. Both got their Masters in Philosophical Foundations from the Institute. And today, both Smiths are professors at Calvin College in Grand Rapids, Michigan.

When Jamie Smith first arrived at ICS from Stratford, Ontario, he had no idea what he was getting himself into. "It rocked my world in some ways," he recalls. He found the Institute's summer "boot camp" for incoming students, where he was introduced to a Reformational tradition that included thinkers such as Herman Dooyeweerd, upsetting. "My whole intellectual framework was imploding."

In hindsight Jamie calls those the most important years of his education, giving him the habits of thinking that he continues to use today. "That's when the intellectual framework that I live and work in was formed and established. It's amazing how much can happen in two years. In a way, my whole intellectual framework was dismantled and rebuilt," said Jamie.

David Smith also found the Institute's academic atmosphere formative. "It set in place an intellectual trajectory that I'm still following. It framed some very basic questions for me that guided subsequent research. I'm still chasing the same questions ... in teaching and research." He published a paper this past year, in fact, which he had written for a seminar while at ICS.

David, now director of Calvin's Kuyers Institute, which considers the relationship between faith, teaching, and learning, originally came to ICS from the UK looking for a graduate school where he could explore a Christian perspective in foreign language education. Jim Olthuis's anthropological work caught his attention. "I came to work with Jim," he says.

David reports that ICS's academic community continues to influence him. "There were some really good people at ICS. Bob Sweetman is one person on the planet that I think most highly of, and Doug Blomberg remains an influence."

Jamie also attests to the significant role played by community in his ICS experience. "A real big part of it was relationships – relationships with Henk, Bob, Jim, Cal, George. I felt privileged to be there with the Old Guard. It was a treat to be able to learn with those figures," Jamie said.

As the two Smiths moved on, they found their ICS education continued to be of value. David, who obtained his PhD at the University of London, said that the Institute's focus on intense small-class discussion, its close reading of texts, and its engagement with ideas served him well. "After finishing the MPhil (Master of Philosophical Foundations) at ICS, completing the PhD was not much extra work."

Jamie commented that ICS led him to a strong sense of vocation as a distinctly Christian scholar. "The Institute gave me a robust vision of what Christian scholarship could be. It gave me a solid foundation," he said, adding that several leading voices at Calvin College, as well as others who are regarded as intellectual leaders by that community, are either from the Institute or have a connection to it. "I remain very grateful for the time at the Institute," he said.

The Institute had from its very start a strong international flavor. It was a meeting place for Christian scholars of many countries – I mention especially Canada and the US, Great Britain, Korea, South Africa, and the Netherlands – and a beautiful international mixture of students.

In the time that I was fully academically active, some of my university colleagues spoke about the “spirit of Toronto.” What was the mystery behind that beautiful statement? I think that it was mainly ... the radical openness to the significance of Christian faith for all academic disciplines ... the conviction that being a sincere Christian could also offer you the gate to become a better student, a more responsible teacher, and a wiser scientist.

Bob Goudzwaard
Professor Emeritus, Vrije Universiteit,
Amsterdam; former member of the Dutch
Parliament; Distinguished Associate, ICS

ICS has long provided an intellectual home for Christian graduate students. What I appreciate about this is that ICS is a loving home, with a broad sense of who belongs. In particular, women who feel called both to a life of the mind and a heart of faith have been welcome members of the family.

Helen Sterk
Communication Arts & Sciences
Department Chair, Calvin College,
Grand Rapids, Michigan

The strong academic accomplishments of the Institute’s faculty have made significant contributions to the Toronto School of Theology and to graduate programs at the University of Toronto. Through its engagement with contemporary scholarship, ICS has become a valued partner in our common academic enterprise.

Paul Gooch
President, Victoria University
in the University of Toronto;
former ICS Senator

ICS has done an admirable job through its 40-year history, both in demonstrating how academic excellence can be related to a basis in the Reformed Christian tradition to produce competent scholarship and articulate graduates, and in making this case to authorities in the public and academic arenas in this province and beyond. Hearty congratulations!

Justin Cooper
President, Redeemer University College
Ancaster, Ontario; ICS Alumnus