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Review of *Reason in the Balance: The Case against Naturalism in Science, Law and Education*, by Philip E. Johnson. Downers Grove, Ill.: InterVarsity Press, 1995

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REASON IN THE BALANCE: THE CASE AGAINST NATURALISM IN SCIENCE, LAW AND EDUCATION. By Philip E. Johnson. Downers Grove, Ill.: InterVarsity Press 1995. Pp. 245. (Out of Print.) \$19.99. ISBN: 0-830-81610-0.

“Is God the true creator of everything that exists, or is God a product of the human imagination, real only in the minds of those who believe?” (7) Thus asks Johnson in the very first sentence of *Reason In The Balance*. Johnson has much to say in this important book, and he wastes no time cutting to the chase and asking the question upon which all other questions in life turn.

Several years ago, in *Darwin On Trial*,¹ Johnson weighed the evidence for Darwinian evolution and found it woefully inadequate. Now, he has even bigger fossils to fracture. He argues that the “naturalistic creation story,” (13) which “substitutes a purposeless material process for the Creator,” (14) has been employed by modernists to marginalize traditional religious perspectives not only in science, but also in law, education and, remarkably, even in the development of society’s moral imagination.

Johnson understands that, at bottom, the culture war in contemporary America is over the existence (or non-existence) of God. As a popular theologian once said, there is all the difference in the world between “God is, therefore . . .” and “God is not, therefore” Thus, when organized society rejects the traditional account of creation by God and adopts the naturalistic (or Darwinian) creation story as “The Established Religious Philosophy of America,” (35) the consequences are profoundly deep and far-reaching.

Should abortion be criminalized, or protected as a fundamental constitutional right? Should homosexual unions be discouraged, or recognized? Should public schools teach children about the good, the beautiful and the true, or how to become self-defining adults who choose their own values and lifestyles? All of these questions are determined by the creation story that dominates organized society. As Johnson observes, the Darwinian creation story presently “dominates all the disciplines of the university,” (8) and, as a consequence, the accepted meaning of rationality “requires that we recognize the Creator as the imaginary being he always has been, and that we rely only on things that

1. Phillip E. Johnson, *Darwin On Trial* (2d ed., InterVarsity Press 1993).

are real, such as ourselves and the material world of nature.” (8)

There is perhaps no better example of the dominant naturalistic view of rationality than Professor Bruce Ackerman’s remarkable statement, at the 1996 Annual Meeting of the Association of American Law Schools, of his personal creed:

When we die, we die. The only meaning we will ever experience is in the here and the now. The challenge is to make this life as deep in its significance as possible. Much—not all—of received religion stands in the way of this by inviting us to avoid, evade, deny the fact of our mortality. If we are to live in the truth, the place to begin is by rejecting all false projections of life after death, all false assertions of transcendent meaning beyond those that we ourselves create. Only then can we proceed to live in the manner of Socrates by asking how best we are to live the life we actually have rather than suppose this question has been—or will be—answered elsewhere in a more authoritative fashion.²

If Ackerman is right about the absence of a purposeful Creator, then it is indeed irrational to base any decision on “false assertions” of God’s will or His purposes. But what if Ackerman is wrong? What if God really does exist and has a purpose for His creation? In that case, says Johnson, it is the “naturalists who are deluded, and it may be that our intellectual culture is based on a false assumption.” (9) Indeed, if God is real “then to lead a rational life a person has to take account of God and his purposes. A person or a society that ignores the Creator is ignoring the most important part of reality, and to ignore reality is to be irrational.” (7)

Johnson understands that naturalism “was able to attain cultural dominance” only after Charles Darwin published his theory of natural selection. (14) In other words, as biologist Richard Dawkins observes, Darwin “made it possible to be an intellectually fulfilled atheist.” (14)

Moreover, once the Darwinian creation story becomes accepted as an underlying assumption of “how things really are,” (128) ethical relativism becomes inevitable because there is “no absolute reference point from which to judge competing interpretations of reality.” (124) Thus, “[t]ruth apart from utility cannot be known to us, because at bottom we are merely animals whom a profligate nature happened to endow with more neurons than were strictly necessary to survive in a hunter-gatherer environment.” (131) When naturalistic metaphysics reigns in society, the “truth” in ethics, law, social science, and even

2. Richard F. Duncan, *Public Schools and the Inevitability of Religious Inequality*, 1996 *BYU L. Rev.* 569, 582 (on file with reviewer).

literature is just what “the most influential people” happen to believe. (130)

Johnson-the-law-professor is particularly lucid when analyzing the impact of the creation-story paradigm shift on the development of law. The “traditional and modernist conceptions of law differ,” he says, not just on specific issues like abortion or homosexual rights, “but in their basic understanding of what morality is and how it influences law.” (138) Traditionalists believe in an objective moral order, and a just law is a law that comports with the moral order. (138-139) Modernists, however, believe morality is subjective and that laws should be based on utilitarian considerations and the protection of “rights.” (139)

Johnson recognizes that is not possible to “read morality out of the law,” (142) as modernists say we should. Thus, the practical effect of modernist lawmaking “is to enlist the law on behalf of a new morality, based on relativism.” (142) The product of this new morality is a legal regime that is both extremely permissive and redistributionist:

Everyone has a right to live exactly as he or she pleases, but if something goes wrong, some abstraction called “society” is to blame and must pay the bill for damages Everyone must be free to make risky choices, and everyone must be protected from unpleasant consequences by social insurance that is ultimately provided by government, which is to say by nobody. In consequence there is a “moral deficit” of huge and growing proportions. (148)

Johnson uses the confirmation hearings of Justice Clarence Thomas and the issue of abortion to illustrate his thesis. Senator Joseph Biden and other liberals were very concerned that Thomas might believe “in a natural law-based right to life for unborn children,” (135) one based on the recognition that the fetus is a human being created in the image of God. Biden, of course, also said that he believes in natural rights endowed by “our Creator,” but the Creator Biden had in mind “was a modernist entity whose commands evolve along with circumstances and never stand in the way of what the most enlightened human beings think is appropriate.” (136) In a society like ours that has established the naturalistic creation story, the fetus is only a potential life whose existence depends upon the individual moral choices of his or her mother. Indeed, feminist legal scholar Frances Olsen once defended abortion rights by claiming “[w]omen *create* children from fertilized eggs To think a zygote is a baby is to devalue the work that

pregnancy requires of a woman.”³ Olsen’s views may seem extreme and even shocking, but they place her squarely in the mainstream of modernism. Indeed, as Richard Posner observes, even the term “natural law” has become “an anachronism. The majority of educated Americans believe that nature is the amoral scene of Darwinian struggle.” (143)

My teaching and writing often focus on issues involving freedom of speech and religion, and I find Johnson’s description of the limits of modernist toleration particularly powerful. According to Johnson, the new established religious philosophy of naturalism “is tolerant only up to a point, specifically the point where its own right to rule the public square is threatened.” (37) Although competing religious philosophies are not outlawed, they are marginalized and denied equal access and respect in public institutions. Public schools must have a monopoly on tax funds for education, and the curriculum in the public schools must be strictly secular. As Johnson puts it so well: “When liberals argue that voucher plans would violate the constitutional principle of separation of church and state, what they mean is that the established religious philosophy might lose control of public education.” (159)

The government school monopoly has become a powerful engine for the secularization of America. As Michael McConnell has put it so eloquently, “A secular school does not necessarily produce atheists, but it produces young adults who inevitably think of religion as extraneous to the real world of intellectual inquiry, if they think of religion at all.”⁴ As Johnson might say, these schoolchildren have been taught to believe in naturalism, the established religious philosophy of America.

Johnson calls himself a “theistic realist,” a person who is “convinced that God is objectively real, not merely a concept or fantasy in my own mind.” (49) So am I. What are the likes of Johnson and me to do to challenge the cultural and legal power of naturalism and secularism?

The new priesthood, of course, “like the old ones, has a vested interest in safeguarding its cultural authority by making it as difficult as possible for critics to be heard.” (199) But we must not remain silent. We must be willing to follow truth to the end and proclaim “that God is real and that the evidence reflects the truth that nature was created by God.” (202) We must dedicate ourselves “to discover the first principles

3. Frances Olsen, *Unraveling Compromise*, 103 Harv. L. Rev. 105, 121 note 71 (1989) (emphasis in original).

4. Michael W. McConnell, *God is Dead and We Have Killed Him!: Freedom of Religion in the Post-modern Age*, 1993 BYU L. Rev. 163, 181.

and premises that will help us to base our lives, worldviews and communities on truth and not error.” (203) When the minds of the most enlightened persons snap shut upon hearing the name of God, we must pry those minds open and proclaim with Jefferson: “We are not afraid to follow truth wherever it may lead, nor to tolerate any error so long as reason is left free to combat it.” (198)

Reason in the Balance is one of the most important books written in many years. If you read it with an open mind, it may transform your understanding of nature and of the nature of reason.

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