

## WRONG QUESTIONS, NO ANSWERS

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A Review of *The Right Questions: Truth, Meaning and Public Debate*, by Phillip Johnson, InterVarsity Press, Downer's Grove, IL, 2002. 191 Pages.

Phillip Johnson inhabits a world in which ill-defined groups of people engage in unspecified calumnies against truth and honor. "Influential scientists" allow their ideologies to cloud their assessments of the facts (p. 191). "Many scientists and philosophers" believe animals are the moral equals of human beings (p.91). "Most Christian professors" claim to accept evolution to avoid offending the secular biologists whose respect they crave (p. 52-54). No evidence of any sort is produced to defend these generalizations. For Johnson, evidence is beside the point. He writes for people who will respond to his gross stereotyping with approval, confident they know all about *those kinds of people*.

This book contains neither index nor bibliography nor endnotes, and gives the impression of being less a book than a lengthy opinion editorial. Its central conceit is that Johnson has seen clearly where innumerable over-educated, left-wing atheists have not. So confused are the nation's most prominent opinion makers, they don't even know the right questions to ask. The result of all this confusion is a nation adrift, utterly devoid of the sort of clear thinking only conservative Christianity can provide. In each chapter, Johnson chooses some topic of interest and explains to the hapless reader the right questions to ask about that topic.

For example, in pondering the right questions to ask about science, God, and morality, do you ask questions like: What is the most effective means of gaining information about the world? How can we know whether God exists? In a world with thousands of religious viewpoints, how can we find enough common ground to forge a civil society? If you do, then you are probably a Communist. Turns out the right questions are three in number: Is it wrong to mix science and religion, or is such mixing inescapable? If God is dead, is everything permitted, or does

moral judgment continue as before but on a secular basis? Is God safely buried, or should we anticipate a resurrection?

Don't even try to answer these questions until you have fully assimilated Johnson's idiosyncratic use of terminology. Outside of Johnsonland, science is thought of as a collection of methods for investigating the natural world. These methods include experimentation, observation, data collection, and inductive reasoning, and they are effective regardless of your opinions on the ultimate nature of reality. Seen in this light, what could it possibly mean to mix science and religion? If the world's religious traditions possessed viable investigative methods, they would have been absorbed into science long ago.

Johnson uses language differently. To him, "science" refers to the collection of statements commonly regarded as true among educated people, while "religion" refers to the particular brand of Christianity he believes. Thus, in his first question he is expressing his standard complaint about the low status of traditional religious belief among educated people. And since by "God" Johnson means "the God in whom I believe," the second question amounts to asking whether there can be any basis for morality outside Christianity. As for the third question, I can't imagine what Johnson has in mind.

As an example of Johnson's style of argumentation, consider his ruminations on a 1981 National Academy of Sciences (NAS) statement concerning science and religion:

As with the supposed "scientific finding" that humans have no unique moral or spiritual status, the scientists intended the resolution to be nothing more than a weapon for use against creationists. They apparently gave no thought to the larger implications-whether it is even possible to avoid religious implications altogether when explaining the origins of human life. (p. 44)

These two sentences contain everything you need to analyze Johnson's assumptions. Note the conflation of "moral" and "spiritual," thereby precluding the possibility that morality can be based on anything other than the supernatural. Note how his first sentence attributes to scientists a view no one actually holds, much less views as a scientific finding, and note the use of sneer quotes to imply the moral superiority of Johnson (and by extension his readers) over all those godless academics. Observe the suggestion that the evolution of humans from primitive ancestors, a theory offensive only to one especially narrow form of Protestant Christianity, constitutes an attack on religion generally. Or consider the idea that the statement of the NAS

represents not the considered judgment of most professional scientists, but instead is part of a propaganda war against creationists.

Johnson's claim to fame lies in his attempt to make creationism respectable, an effort he began with his 1989 book *Darwin on Trial*. There, and in several subsequent books, he insisted that his was a purely scientific critique of evolution, unlike the arguments of those creationists who came before him. Here he makes explicit what his critics have accused him of for years—his scientific arguments were merely a tactic for making palatable the introduction of Christianity into public discourse:

In my role as the leading edge of the Wedge of Truth, attempting to make the initial penetration into the intellectual monopoly of scientific naturalism, I needed to stay away from the book of Genesis. I did not want to become involved in the long-standing and deadlocked battle between the Bible and science. Rather I wanted to point out that the real battle is not between the Bible and science, but between science as unbiased, empirical observation on the one hand, and science as applied naturalistic philosophy on the other. To put the issue clearly before the public, I moved away from Genesis as the primary Scripture and urged people to begin instead with the most important teaching about the meaning of creation in the Bible, the prologue to the Gospel of John. In chapter two of this book I contrasted the first words of John, "In the beginning was the Word," with the first words of the scientific materialist creation story, "In the beginning were the particles."

I put Genesis aside temporarily so that my readers could focus their attention on the irreconcilable conflict between Darwinism and even the broadest view of divine creation (p.136-137).

I have quoted this passage at length because it serves as the clearest possible statement not only of Johnson's view of life but the view of the intelligent design movement generally. Accepting evolution is the equivalent of rejecting Christianity; since Christianity is true, evolution must be false. This is the substance of their movement; all else is propaganda. The endless arguments about irreducible complexity or complex specified information, peppered moths and the Cambrian explosion, that's all cover for the promotion of a fundamentalist Christian

political agenda. Reading Johnson's views on homosexuality, Christian education, or religious tolerance makes it clear that making small changes in state school standards is hardly the end of his ambitions. Lest you think I'm exaggerating, here are a few examples of Johnson's views:

For example, when law reformers in the 1960's liberalized the laws of divorce, in the process they transformed marriage (at least as it's understood legally) from a sacred bond to a mere civil contract voidable at the option of either party. Although the reformers did not intend to approve same-sex marriage and probably never conceived of it as a possibility, a sufficiently far-sighted person could have seen that the tracks were headed in that direction. (p. 29)

Begin with Genesis, and you are on a logical track that leads to the conclusion that our sexuality reflects God's purpose for our lives. Begin instead with Darwinism, and fantastic as the suggestion would have seemed to Darwin or Huxley, you are on a logical track that leads ultimately to the trans-gendered son. (p. 132)

If I were asked whether universities now protect freedom of expression regarding religion, politics or sexual preferences, I would answer something like this: Freedom to advocate agnosticism or to oppose Christianity is zealously protected, and instructors sometimes exercise this freedom in the classroom in coercive ways, by ridiculing students who hold conservative religious views and encouraging other students to join in the ridicule. (p. 158)

The notorious American Taliban soldier mentioned in chapter five and the transgendered son of chapter six are not freaks but colorful examples of the logical consequences of underlying ideas that are enthusiastically approved in American educational circles. These are, specifically, the absolutizing of the racist or multicultural version of "diversity" and the delusion that the difference between boys and girls is merely a matter of

socially constructed “gender,” which can be altered or abolished at will. (p. 188)

One is left to wonder about the logical consequences of a religious philosophy that condemns nonbelievers to an eternity of torture. Johnson worships a God so fickle that you put your salvation on the line by accepting a particular scientific theory. The above quotations demonstrate Johnson’s willingness to promote the most absurd caricatures and vile stereotypes of anyone who disagrees with him.

Very little of this book deals with scientific topics, but Johnson does make one suggestion for an explicitly Christian scientific research program. The problem is to explain the incredibly long life spans, at times reaching more than nine hundred years, of the Biblical patriarchs described in Genesis. Johnson believes the answers lie in an investigation of the fundamental constants of the universe:

All that is necessary to research the life spans in Genesis 5 is to put aside the philosophical dogma of uniformitarianism and proceed instead on the assumption that the basic “constants” of physics have changed over time. When I raise questions of this sort with scientists, their usual response is to dismiss the irritating questions with ridicule or to deny that there is any proof that changes in the physical constants have occurred. This is a classic example of getting the answer ahead of the question. There rarely is proof of anything interesting until people have a reason to look for it. The right place to begin a research program is with a hypothesis. What changes would need to have occurred to make it possible for the early patriarchs to live as long as Genesis 5 says they did? If theory suggests that there is a hypothetical set of constraints that *would* permit very long lives if it had once existed, then there will be a sufficient motive to look for evidence that the constraints actually *have* changed over time. (Emphasis in original; p. 147)

By this point the reader would probably feel cheated if Johnson interrupted his sermonizing to provide a few details, but perhaps we could be forgiven for asking a few good questions of our own. Who, exactly, are these scientists with whom Johnson has discussed this subject? Even hypothetically, how would fiddling with the fundamental constants of the universe allow us to explain the long life spans in Genesis? What would constitute evidence that the basic constants of

physics have changed over time? And since the history of science is replete with examples of intellectual revolutions being sparked by accidental discoveries, does Johnson have the slightest idea what he is talking about?

Johnson does not bother with such details because in reality he is not proposing a serious research program. His goal is to imply to his scientifically naive readers that great discoveries are waiting to be made the moment scientists shake off their irrational bias against Christianity.

No Johnson book would be complete without healthy doses of arrogance and hypocrisy. For all of Johnson's contempt for modern academe, he frequently reminds his readers of his own academic pedigree; Harvard undergraduate, Chicago law, Berkeley professor. Of modern biology he writes: "The biological sciences in particular are currently rulers of the academic roost, with ample funding generated by their (mainly unfulfilled) promises of prodigious advances in the conquest of disease. (p. 131)" This passage appears only a few pages after he describes how recently developed therapies enabled him to regain much of his freedom of movement after suffering a stroke (a recovery he attributes not to the research and hard work of the biologists he despises, but rather to a miracle from God (p. 103)). Christian academics who dissent from his view of the world are dismissed as "half-believers (p. 78)", of evading the difficult questions regarding science and religion (p. 58), and of cravenly seeking the approval of secular academics (p. 53).

What we get from this book is neither the right questions to ask about difficult cultural issues nor the answers to any problems facing society. Instead we get only a catalog of the sort of people of whom Johnson disapproves. Naive academics who view ID theory as a sort of intellectual abstraction, or who think ID constitutes a serious and well-considered scientific argument should read this book. And the Christian community needs to decide if they want to embrace this dishonest charlatan as their spokesman.

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