

BOOK REVIEW

of

Phillip E. Johnson,

Reason in the Balance: The Case Against Naturalism in Science, Law & Education,
InterVarsity Press, 1995.

This book is in the Evangel Library,
and this review is presented by Larry D. Paarmann.

Phillip E. Johnson is a graduate of Harvard and the University of Chicago. He was a law clerk for Chief Justice Earl Warren of the United States Supreme Court and has taught law for more than thirty years at the University of California at Berkeley. Johnson was an agnostic for much of his life, and was not called to faith in Christ until after he was a law professor at Berkeley. In recent years he has been speaking and writing against the prevailing naturalism in our society. He has spoken on many college campuses, including Princeton and Stanford. His writings include *Darwin on Trial*, 1991 (2nd edition, 1993), *Defeating Darwinism by Opening Minds*, 1997, *Objections Sustained: Subversive Essays on Evolution, Law & Culture*, 1998, and *The Wedge of Truth*, 2000.

This book starts out with a bang, with no punches held, and challenges all who will read it. On the very first page, he asks the reader “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?” He continues: “This book is about how people answer that question, and the consequences of answering it one way or another. . . . If God really does exist, 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. . . . The most influential intellectuals in America and around the world are mostly *naturalists*, who assume that God exists only as an idea in the minds of religious believers.” The implication is that most intellectuals are irrational! All of that is on the first page – and it gets better! It appears to be Johnson’s mission to bring such ideas as expressed above to the conscious attention of those who will listen, and to challenge them to not only make important decisions in their own lives, but to also realize the prevailing philosophical naturalism in our society, and that this philosophical naturalism is without intellectual merit and is destructive to the proper pursuits of science, law, and education. If Johnson fulfills his mission even to a small degree it will have a profoundly positive impact on our society. His approach is not defensive but offensive and positive; in his view it is nothing less than *Reason in the Balance*. J.P. Moreland, Christian philosopher, says of this book: “No one who cares to understand the contemporary culture wars and be involved in their resolution can afford to neglect this book.”

The book has ten chapters: Is God Constitutional?, The Established Religious Philosophy in America, The Grand Metaphysical Story of Science, Is There a Blind Watchmaker?, Theistic Naturalism & Theistic Realism, Realism & Rationality, Natural Law, Education, The Subtext of Contemp, and The Beginning of Reason. In Chapter 1, Johnson says that “The technique of marginalizing a viewpoint by labeling it ‘religion’ is particularly effective in late-twentieth-century America, because there is a general impression, reinforced by Supreme Court decisions, that religion does not belong in public institutions.” Let me restate a line from above: “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.” In the light of the stance of our public institutions, does Johnson’s comments have a little more bite to them?

In Chapter 2, Johnson states “If God is more than a myth or a figure of speech, then modernist culture is ignoring something really important . . . The best defense for modernist naturalism is to make sure the debate does not occur . . . Modernism is not a conspiracy, but a way of thinking that is taken for granted not only by agnostics but by millions of people who consider themselves theists but have to some extent adopted modernist ways of thinking about theism. In fact, the authority of modernism rests largely on theists’ acceptance of modernist premises. . . . It may be rational to argue about whether God is real or unreal, but it is clearly irrational to assume that a God who is real can safely be ignored.”

Jumping to the last chapter, Johnson clearly does not have a high opinion of professing Christians who have not held to Christian teachings. He says, “Better to accept the existing state of affairs, some argue, than to fight a hopeless war against advancing scientific knowledge. That is the thinking of theistic naturalists (odd phrase, but defined elsewhere) who argue that to challenge naturalism is to invoke a “God of the gaps,” who will gradually disappear from reality like a Cheshire cat as science steadily advances. . . . A religion that no longer believes it is founded on objective truth is thus condemned to a lingering death, and the death sentence is just.”

Hopefully, the above brief review and quotations will whet your appetite for the feast that Johnson provides.