Review of: Mark Johnston, *Saving God: Religion after Idolatry*, Princeton University Press, 2009*

Daniel von Wachter**

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The content of the book

The thesis of this book is that religions, such as Christianity, which assume that there is a God who sometimes intervenes in the universe and who wants to give man a meaningful life and and afterlife, is idolatrous, childish, and naive, and that instead panentheism is true, 'God in all, and all in God' (119). In the preface, Johnston writes that the book 'contains some philosophy but is not a work of philosophy'. That means that he often declines 'the philosophically interesting pathways that branch off from what' he says, and that he does not interact much with the philosophical literature.

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**International Academy of Philosophy, Santiago de Chile, http://von-wachter.de, epost@ABC.de – replace 'ABC' by 'von-wachter'.

The book starts with the question 'Is your God really God?' (1) That means: is your faith and trust directed 'to the one who is in fact the Highest One' (9)? 'The achievement of believing in God can come about only in the wake of God's self-revelation.' (9) 'What we need, in order to clarify the meaning of "God" thought of as a descriptive name, is a conjunction of descriptions, call it *D*, such that it no longer seems a substantial question whether D is God.' The reader might expect after reading this that Johnston will develop a clear description of the nature of God or analyse alleged revelations. But in fact Johnston develops a revisionary conception of God based on metaphorical descriptions of God.

The reason Johnston gives for rejecting traditional monotheism is that it is 'idolatrous'. The basic form of idolatry is 'worship of lifeless idols'. (20) The idol worshipper assumes that 'the god is HERE, somehow contained where the idol is', embodied in the idol. Another aspect of idolatry is that the wrong gods are worshipped, but Johnston dismisses this understanding of idolatry as 'narrow ethnocentrism' because it means that it is always the others who are idolaters. (28) He suggests that the mistake of idolatry is the 'attempt to domesticate the experience of Divinity, to put it to some advantage in a still unredeemed life. And then the true God slips away.' In the end, of course, Johnston's view also amounts to saying that it is the others who are idolaters, namely those who believe that God intervenes in the course of events or gives a man an afterlife. Johnston does not argue much for this claim. It is based on the tacit assumption that there is no such God, because on the assumption that there is such a God one would not call belief in such a God 'idolatrous'.

Although the subtitle of the book, 'Religion after Idolatry', may be taken to suggest that the charge of idolatry is the key argument against traditional monotheism, Johnston's claim depends more on his rejection of supernaturalism. Supernaturalism Johnston defines as 'belief in invisible spiritual agencies whose putative interventions would violate the laws of nature, at least as those laws are presently

understood.' (40) He calls this a 'mantic worldview'. (41) The claim that interventions in the course of events, such as the resurrection of Jesus, would be 'violations of the laws of nature' Johnston does not defend. He simply assumes that science has shown that there are no, or cannot be, interventions. This, like many aspects of Johnston's book, reminds the reader of German liberal theology. For example, Rudolf Bultmann famously claimed in the same vain: 'It is impossible to use electric light and the wireless and to avail ourselves of modern medical and surgical discoveries, and at the same time to believe in the New Testament world of daemons and spirits.' (Bultmann 1961, p. 5)

And like Bultmann, instead of rejecting Christianity, Johnston reinterprets religion to fit naturalism, or replaces it by something which he does not call 'atheism' although it entails that there is no God as usually understood. Johnston assumes that every event 'flows with a certain probability from previous events, as a matter of natural law'. (48) 'Our world is closed under purely natural causation.' Johnston also assumes that there are no immaterial things, such as souls. (184 and 127) So Johnston presupposes naturalism. He also says, as German liberal theologians typically said, that God 'is not another efficient cause alongside the physical causes' (118), although of course theism claims that God sustains all things in being and is thus not just another efficient cause alongside the physical causes.

Johnston defends his position with an argument for naturalism from 'true religion'. True religion entails that 'we should hope that ontological naturalism is true. For ontological naturalism would be a complete defense against the supernatural powers and principalities that could otherwise exploit our tendency to servile idolatry and spiritual materialism.' (51) He must mean by this that belief in divine interventions is idolatrous and that belief in naturalism is incompatible with this belief.

Another argument which Johnston gives against supernaturalism is that it leads to *violence*. He suggests that there is 'religiously

required' (160) violence. Christianity, he claims, 'allegedly born from the gospel of love, has fallen into the violence of crusades and inquisitions, and the vengeful threats of apocalypse and hell'. 'Sacrifice, atonement, apocalypse, crusade, jihad (in the baser sense), all this followed by the exquisite tortures of hell' are natural outcomes of supernaturalist theism. By mentioning atonement and hell here, he seems to suggest that *saying* that Christ atoned for our sins or that some will be punished in hell is an act of violence, as if the punishing were done not by God but by the preacher who *says* that there is a hell. In another chapter Johnston offers an explanation for religious violence: If someone believes that he has been told by God how to live, then he will naturally also believe that God legitimates and cooperates in his 'violence against the infidels' (169). No further defense of these claims is given. Why should a theist not believe that he has no right to kill infidels? While it is possible that some religions teach us to kill infidels, this does not seem to follow in any way from classical theism. To the contrary, theistic belief induces a desire to live a good life because God is believed to be good, and that excludes killing other men. And Johnston's reference to crusades and inquisitions is not backed up by any historical evidence nor by any discussion of the question whether possible wrong actions in the name of Christianity were really carried out by Christians and whether they were done despite rather than because of the Christan faith.

A central claim of classical theism, which Johnston rejects, is that God is the first cause of the universe and that hence the universe is distinct from God. Johnston argues against the existence of such a 'separate creation'. (95)

> Suppose that there is something created by the Highest One, but nonetheless *distinct* from the Highest One, in that it is not some part, aspect, principle, or mode of the Highest One. Call this other thing 'the separate creation'. If there is such a separate creation, then we

> would expect the perfections of the Highest One to be to some extent reflected in that separate creation. Consider, then, the joint reality made up of the Highest One and the separate creation. It would seem that this joint reality might be a more appropriate object of worship than the subpart of the reality that is the Highest One. [...] But only the Highest One deserves worship. So there is no separate creation. What is called creation is some part or aspect or principle of mode of the Highest One. That is why a worshipful attitude to the whole of reality is not idolatrous. (95)

So if God creates something, then that thing deserves to be worshipped too. Johnston's 'worshipful attitude' towards creation reminds the reader of Friedrich Schleiermacher's (1799, p. 38) 'contemplating and feeling the universe'. As everything that deserves worship must be a part of God, there cannot be a separate creation. The objectionable premise in this argument is of course that what is created by God deserves to be worshipped. God can perhaps create a being that deserves worship (as Christianity claims that the Father brought into being the Son and the Spirit, who also deserve worship), but why should everything that God creates deserve worship? God could create a rabbit, a golden mountain, or a sun, which would not deserve worship because, although they are made by God, they are not God. But Johnston is content with the argument as it stands.

This leads Johnston to *panentheism*, the view with the motto 'God in all, and all in God'. (119) He wants to distinguish this from pantheism, defined as the view that God and 'the natural realm' are identical.

> Against such pantheistic identification of God and the natural realm, the panentheist will assert that God is partly *constituted* by the natural realm, in the sense

> that his activity is manifest in and through natural processes *alone.* But this reality goes beyond what is captured by the purely scientific description of all the events that make up the natural realm. (119)

How is God more than the natural realm, 'a causal realm closed under natural law' (120)? The answer must lie in the following identification:

> The Highest one = the outpouring of Existence Itself by way of its exemplification in ordinary existents for the purpose of the self-disclosure of Existence itself. (120)

As everything exemplifies Existence or God, understanding something amounts to understanding the Divine Mind:

> At the idealized limit of this process of deepening understanding, we would come to grasp those modes of presentation of reality that are fully adequate and complete, and so reveal the nature of what they present. In this sense, we would be conforming our minds to the Divine Mind, which may be construed as the totality of fully adequate and complete modes of presentation of reality. (155)

So the Mind of God is 'the totality of fully adequate modes of presentation'. Somehow, God is more than the natural realm as captured by the purely scientific description because that description fails to capture the presentational aspect. However, presentation is not another realm:

> Reality is Being-making-itself-present-to-beings, not a sort of conjunction or fusion of two realms, the realm of sense and the realm of nature. [...] The beings, that is, each and every creaturely thing that exists, are themselves exemplifications of Being. (156)

In order to justify saying that there is a God while at the same time ruling out interventions and denying that there is a separate creation, Johnston says that speaking about God is 'analogical', i. e. non-literal.

> The Love of the Highest one was analogized as its outpouring in ordinary existents, its Will as self-disclosure, its Mind as the most revealing presentations found in the realm of sense, and its Power as the totality of the laws of nature. In these respects, the Highest One has by analogy the characteristics of a person, but a person far removed from ordinary personality. [. . .] These analogical ways of speaking are] chosen here because they explicitly discourage the idolatrous hope for a Cosmic Intervener who might confer special worldly advantage on his favorites. (158f)

The last chapter of the book, 'Christianity without Spiritual Materialism', seeks to offer a reinterpretation of, or alternative to, Christianity. Throughout the book there are several criticisms of Christianity: supernaturalism is childish and naive and incompatible with the results of science; Christianity requires violence, such as the 'crusades and inquisitions' (160); the Christian doctrine of penal substitution is 'morally incoherent' (161); the belief in Jesus' resurrection is 'mystical theology' (43); belief in 'the afterlife, the other worlds, and so forth' is an 'idolatrous substitute for genuine faith in the importance of goodness' (124); and Judaism is 'a higher religion' because it is relatively indifferent 'to the very idea of an afterlife' (176). But nevertheless Johnston does not want to say just that Christianity is wrong but wants to reinterpret it. While original Christianity teaches that salvation consists in the forgiveness of sin (Col. 1:14) and leads to a desirable life after death, Johnston says that salvation 'is the grace of finding a way to live that keeps faith with the importance of goodness and love even in the face of

everything that can happen to you' (180). Our original sin 'consists in self-will combined with the aspiration to possess the knowledge of how to live' (168). Eve's mistake was her hope that knowledge about how to live could be possessed by human beings. Although Christ did not really rise from the dead, Christ was resurrected in the sense that 'those who are truly good' win a 'collective victory over death' (186).

Evaluation

Let me indicate three areas where Johnston's book invites objections. First, Johnston's rejection of supernaturalism is defended only by affirmation, not by argument. Johnston wants to reject supernaturalism not by discussing the usual arguments for the existence of God but by taking the shortcut of claiming that interventions are impossible or incompatible with science. He just relies on calling an intervention a 'violation of the laws of nature' and then assumes that science has shown that there are and cannot be interventions. This approach has been thoroughly criticised again and again ever since David Hume made it popular, for example by George Campbell (1762) and recently by Robert Larmer (1988) and by John Earman's book with the telling title *Hume's Abject Failure: The Argument against Miracles* (2000).

It is certainly not obvious that miracles are ruled out by the laws of nature or by science. Suppose that God moved a stone from position A to position B. Even if we assume that the deterministic Newtonian laws of motion are the ultimate ones, this does not contradict these laws. They say what forces there are acting on the stone. In particular, the law of gravity says that there is a certain force between the stone and the ground. Is that law violated if God moves the stone from A to B? It would be violated if God thereby abolished the force, but there is no reason to assume this. Which law then would be violated? Johnston should

tell us. He has given no reason for rejecting supernaturalism and hence no reason for preferring panentheism to theism. So Johnston calls supernaturalism childish and naive, although he gives no arguments against it and does not discuss even a single text from the enormous contemporary literature defending the coherence of theism.

Secondly, Johnston needs for his defense of panentheism the thesis that speaking about God is analogical. Without this, he should simply say 'There is no God'. Discussing the doctrine of analogy he mentions Thomas Aquinas. Aquinas' reason for saying that predications about God are analogical is this: To say of a man that he is just is to say that being just is amongst his properties. By contrast, being just is not amongst the properties of God but, according to Aquinas' doctrine of simplicity, God is identical with his being just, as well as with his being omnipotent, etc. Therefore Aquinas says that speaking about God is very different from speaking about a man. Johnston has no reason like this for saying that speaking about God is analogical. He only says that this thesis 'discourages the hope for a Cosmic Intervener'. (158) But not every view can be expressed analogically or metaphorically with the words 'There is a God'. It is wrong simply to take one's view about ultimate things and say that it is the analogical meaning of 'There is a God'. Whether a sentence has an analogical or metaphorical meaning and what this might be is not something the speaker can decide, but it is determined by the context. Johnston does not show that 'God' actually has the meaning which he wishes it to have. And who means by 'God' something remotely similar to what Johnston means by it? Nobody except a few theologians. It is therefore wrong to express Johnson's view by saying 'There is a God'. Doing so is at best poetical and at worst just confusing.

Thirdly, Johnston's panentheism seems to be incoherent or meaningless. Johnston calls God 'almighty' (49), but also excludes the possibility that God can intervene in the course of events. That seems incoherent because being almighty entails being able to in-

tervene. Further, Johnston writes that God reveals himself, but also says that God does not do anything for us (20). Further, Johnston's description of God as 'the outpouring of Being by way of its exemplification in ordinary existents for the sake of the self-disclosure of Being' (158) and of God's mind as 'the totality of fully adequate modes of presentation' (156) seems to be incompatible with his claim that God is a person who has love, will, mind, and power (158). Further, Johnston's thesis that 'God is partly constituted by the natural realm' (117) is incompatible with his thesis that there is no separate creation, because the latter, as Johnston seems to understand it, implies that neither God nor a part of God is distinct from nature. Johnston's reply is that all speaking about God is analogical. But has he succeed in giving meaning to sentences about God which is clear and coherent? Is there a possible belief that one could express by saying that there is 'the outpouring of Being by way of its exemplification in ordinary existents for the sake of the self-disclosure of Being' (158)? If not, then Johnston's description of what he wants to call 'God' or 'the Highest One' is meaningless. The belief which comes closest to what Johnston is getting at can be expressed clearly by saying 'There is no God', but Johnston does not want to say that.

I cannot say that this is a book that deserves our attention. It is a rant against supernaturalism and Christianity, puts forward a meaningless view, and gives no reasons for preferring this view to either theism or atheism.

References

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