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Book Review

Three Prehistoric Inventions That Shaped Us

David Martel Johnson

Peter Lang Publishing, Inc. 2011

It isn't often that a professional philosopher takes religion seriously these days, or for that matter, pays it any attention at all, so when philosopher David Johnson writes a book asserting that religion is one of three prehistoric sources of the vast enterprise of human culture, those of us who still feel religion is important should take notice, applaud and, by all means, read the book.

We have lived in an intellectual atmosphere in which it seems all the oxygen has been sucked out by science and the scientific method so that we have been left gasping and feeling we are either dying spiritually, or at best, are on life support. The two choices of becoming either obscurantists touting Creationism on the one hand, or closet agnostics making do with the "god of the gaps" on the other, are less than appealing.

Using the tools of logic and the scientific findings of such disciplines as anthropology, paleontology and linguistics, David Johnson in this his latest book outlines a way of understanding human nature that acknowledges our connection to the natural world as understood by evolutionary science, without being totally dominated by it, and in the process establishes religion (or better, religious consciousness) as one of the foundational sources of human nature and human culture.

After establishing, to his satisfaction, that human nature and human culture are not simply artifacts of our biological evolution (i.e., we became what we are and do what we do simply because this gave us an advantage for biological survival), Johnson then gets to the meat of his argument, that both "human nature" and human culture owe their existence to three prehistoric "inventions" by our ancient forebears: 1. (surprisingly) the domestication of animals, 2.(unsurprisingly) language, and 3. religious consciousness. In other words, human nature and human culture are not biologically determined outcomes of evolution but creations of the human family itself, as the deliberately chosen word "inventions" emphasizes.

Of the three, Johnson says, religious consciousness came first; it is "a conception of oneself as being separated both from God on the one side and the natural world on the other." It is this consciousness of being separate from the world and from God that enabled our forebears, and ourselves, to think objectively about the world and manipulate it to human advantage. Religion is found in all human cultures, Johnson says, because religious consciousness works, it is an advantage in the struggle for evolutionary success.



Admittedly, it is a long way from “religious consciousness” to the Book of Concord or even the Bible. But Johnson’s emphatically positive appreciation for religious consciousness provides us with a fruitful perspective from which to view one’s own tradition, pruning away that which is harmful and merely self-serving and enhancing that which is both helpful and necessary for us and the whole human race.

I found the author’s method to be difficult to follow, at times. His fertile imagination spins out examples, metaphors, and illustrations in such profusion that I tended to get lost, not knowing if an example was about a main point, or was an example of an example of a point, or even an example of an illustration of an example of a point. However, having emerged from the labyrinth, I am satisfied that I have traveled a worthwhile path and am grateful for the encouragement it gives to the religious commitment I still have.

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