

Anglicans honor our Benedictine roots by praying daily offices built on the Psalter. Sometimes we “trip over” Psalm 119 because it takes *three whole days* to pray. This lovely little book reintroduces the beauty of the psalm and its foundational character in Judeo-Christian thought. The book completely fulfills its author’s intention that “it will evoke anew a sense of wonder and awe, in the power of language as building blocks not only of creation but also of praise, and of the holiness of God’s alphabet, which to this day God uses to speak afresh to Jew and Christian alike” (p. xxv).

BONNIE BOWMAN THURSTON

*The Anchorage  
Wheeling, West Virginia*

*Saving God: Religion after Idolatry.* By Mark Johnston. Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 2009. 187 pp. \$24.95 (cloth).

Do you believe in God? Are you sure? Mark Johnston—religious naturalist, philosopher, and slayer of idols—advises you to think carefully before you answer. In the practices, and much of the traditions, of the three monotheistic religions, Johnston finds pervasive idol-worship. At its essence, the kind of idolatry about which Johnston writes is an attempt to manipulate the Divine. This manifests itself in various instrumentalist ways, involving placation and supplication in order to achieve the desired outcome. As a result, believing in God is less a belief state, Johnston says, than an accomplishment, and one that only happens by God’s own self-revelation. The correct response to the query about whether one believes in God, Johnston says, is “I hope so.”

Anthropomorphism, total human depravity, a pervasive idolatry—what is a Christian to do? Johnston finds that panentheism, based in process metaphysics, successfully removes the accretions of superstition, supernaturalism, and the idolatry of instrumentalism. With “God in all, and all in God,” Johnston gives us the “defining motto” of panentheism. In this view, God is partially constituted by nature, and all of God’s actions occur within and by means of natural (not supernatural) processes. Johnston’s version of process theology removes the risk of treating God as a means to an end, by removing the concept of relational divinity.

In a clever rhetorical move, Johnston finds an ally in Pope Benedict XVI, whose Regensburg address in 2006 acclaimed the power, universality,

and divine origin of reason. Reason, as a revelation of God, gets a kind of “veto power” over other unreasonable doctrinal assertions; reasoning ability can modulate what is, in the Pope’s words, the “often tortuous and tortuous threads of biblical faith.” Johnston concludes from this that “the Regensburg lecture thus presents a religion of *Logos* or reason.” Well, yes and no. Yes: in the Regensburg address, Benedict finds as early as the revelation of the divine name to Moses an “inner rapprochement between biblical faith and Greek philosophical inquiry,” based in revelation. But no: it is impossible to separate the revelation of the Tetragrammaton (or divine name) from the relationship it established with a particular people. It is a bit of sleight of hand to imply support for this tactic from the Bishop of Rome.

Nonetheless, even the most skeptical reader must admire the ingenious way that Johnston has gone about his project. By assuming idolatry as the primary risk of monotheism—an assumption he bases on a fair reading of the Judeo-Christian-Islamic tradition—he proceeds to trim the parts of traditional theism that could lead to that kind of idolatry, while maintaining the radical critique of the cross of Christ. To be sure, the picture of God that results shows that Johnston has not only privileged Athens over Jerusalem, he has loaded up the moving van and relocated the family. For readers whose religious convictions preclude that option, it won’t be possible to travel with him all the way to his destination; Jerusalem may have its problems, but it’s home. Nonetheless, making the time to visit him in his new neighborhood is well worth the cost. The religious austerity that results may feel dry to the heirs of William Byrd and Thomas Cranmer; it’s a nice place to visit, in other words, but I wouldn’t want to live there. For Christians who maintain the primacy of liturgy, however, it’s valuable to be reminded that even worship is tainted by sinfulness, attempts to manipulate and domesticate God, and, yes, idolatry. It is an erudite, knowledgeable, and innovative book, and Johnston’s voice is a voice of conscience reminding believers that a prohibition against idols, the first commandment to be given, remains the hardest one to obey.

JOEL DANIELS

*Boston University  
Chestnut Hill, Massachusetts*