

BOOK REVIEW

Luke Timothy Johnson, *Among the Gentiles: Greco-Roman Religion and Christianity* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2009). x + 461 pp. Hbk.

Early Christianity had a complicated relationship with contemporary Greco-Roman religions. Critics of Christianity sometimes attempt to demonstrate that Christianity was no different from other religions. Some Christian apologists have tried to portray pagan religions as evil corruptions of the true religion. In this book, Johnson seeks to avoid both extremes. He allows Christianity to have its unique voice while at the same time showing that Christianity does fit into the basic patterns of being religious found in the Greco-Roman world.

Johnson's purpose is to present four basic ways of being religious for both Christian and non-Christian forms of first-century spirituality. Rather than focusing on generalizations, he sticks to representative authors and texts to illustrate each form of religious activity. The four ways of being religious are: participation in divine benefits, moral transformation, transcending the world and stabilizing the world.

Participation in divine benefits, or what Johnson calls Religiousness A, is a focus on receiving something of benefit either in this world or in the afterlife. In a world that lacked medical care or social programs, there was strong motivation to seek assistance from divine powers. Johnson provides the example of Aelius Aristides, who was an avid worshipper of Asclepius, and who claimed to have experienced healing as a result. This tendency continues into the Christian tradition, both in the New Testament (Paul, Gospels and Acts) and later texts (apocryphal Acts and apocryphal narrative Gospels). Johnson is correct that there are clear examples of this type of spirituality in the ancient world. What Johnson fails to do is to demonstrate how this is just one type of being religious. It could be argued that participation in divine benefits is foundational to all forms of religion and it is much more than just one form of being religious. The idea of religion (as opposed to

philosophy) as a divinely-inspired ethical system may be more a product of modern liberalism than a feature of ancient religiosity.

Moral transformation, or what Johnson calls Religiousness B, is the moral endeavor to live the pious life. Johnson provides as an example the philosopher Epictetus, who presented to his students the way of the ethical life. Of course this is also found in Christian writings, such as Paul, James, Hebrews and a number of the church Fathers. There is no question about the importance of moral transformation in religion. However, there is some question about using Epictetus as an example of religion. It is true that Epictetus did value piety, but his sense of religious duty seems to be subsumed under the intention to live a philosophical life. It must be noted that all three of Johnson's New Testament examples also have a strong emphasis on Religiousness A. It is also important to state that moral transformation is important in almost every book of the New Testament. Even the eschatological Revelation stresses the importance of moral transformation.

Religion as transcending the world, Johnson's Religiousness C, has a strong dualism between body and spirit. Johnson does not see much of this concept in the New Testament, but it quickly appeared in the early church in the various forms of Gnosticism. It is here that Johnson has put his finger on an important form of religious thought. Transcending the world is not just another shade of religion that blends into all the others, it is a distinguishable form of spirituality that can be divided from other forms of religion. Religiousness C is foreign to the earliest Christian traditions and its appearance in Gnosticism demonstrates that Gnosticism was a radical departure from apostolic Christianity.

Finally, Johnson looks at religion that stabilizes the world, or Religiousness D. Johnson calls this the 'supply side' of Religiousness A, as it is operated by the people who perform the rituals and run the temples so that others might derive the benefits they are looking for from the gods. A Greco-Roman example that Johnson provides is the philosopher Plutarch, who was also a priest. Again, Johnson sees little evidence of Religiousness D in the New Testament but a growing trend in early Christianity.

While this is a useful book, there are a number of weaknesses. Johnson explains in his introduction that these developments in his thinking have been made possible only by stepping away from the limiting influence of research within theological schools and moving toward the more open religious studies departments of universities that

are in conversation with other departments. While this narrowness may be true in some of the most conservative or fundamentalist theological schools, many professors at divinity colleges have the same education and attend the same conferences as those who teach within religious studies departments. It is up to every scholar, Christian or otherwise, to remain in dialogue with other areas of research, and those who do so are not found exclusively in religious studies departments.

While the categories that Johnson develops are a strength of the book, they are also a weakness. Any time categories are conceived, there is a certain amount of forcing required to make texts fit, as there is usually much overlap. This is seen, for example, in how Johnson takes Paul as an example of both Religiousness A and B. In fact, it could be argued that the entire New Testament is a blending of Religiousness A and B and that it is impossible to separate them. There is also an uncomfortable combining of texts from differing traditions in Johnson's examination of Christianity in the second and third centuries. While there was undoubtedly diversity within early Christianity, Johnson sometimes neglects to make clear that there is a continuum between the New Testament and what became orthodox Christianity.

Despite the weaknesses, once the reader is aware of the danger and artificiality of categories, the categories actually become useful. It is true that people in the ancient world, pagan and Christian, took different paths to experience the divine. Johnson's research does demonstrate, however, that there are certain commonalities between early Christians and their Greco-Roman contemporaries. Human nature leads to different ways of being religious and these psychological forces were exerted on all religious people from every tradition. The placing of the New Testament and early Christianity in its greater religious context is actually more of a benefit from this book than the creation of categories in which to place various Christian beliefs.

In *Among the Gentiles*, Johnson seeks to get the reader to move beyond seeing the religious context as contrasting righteous Christianity with evil pagan religions to seeing Christianity as having the same forms of being religious as the surrounding philosophies and religions. *Among the Gentiles* is an extremely useful resource for understanding the Greco-Roman context for early Christianity.

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