

dov peer over this conceptual abyss, they quickly scurry backward into the language of quasi-objective certitude. Unfortunately, *Secular Cycles*' disavowals make it excep-

tionally difficult for the reader to share this certitude with them.

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## A Brief Inquiry into the Meaning of Sin and Faith: With "On My Religion"

By *John Rawls*, edited by *Thomas Nagel*

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American political philosopher John Rawls (1921-2002) became world-famous when his *A Theory of Justice* (1971) was published and soon translated into several languages. His other main treatises, *Political Liberalism* (1993) and *The Law of Peoples* (1999), have also inspired plenty of discussion. To put it briefly, the mature Rawls's chief goal was to construct fair terms for peaceful coexistence among the citizens of a liberal democratic society, religious and non-religious alike, as well as among liberal and decent peoples.

Rawls was able to analyze theological ideas skillfully—as can be seen for example in his *Lectures on the History of Moral Philosophy* (2000) and *Lectures on the History of Political Philosophy* (2007). Nevertheless, this James Bryant Conant Professor of Philosophy at Harvard University since 1979 was reluctant to unveil much of his own religious beliefs to the public. Now, the posthumous publication of *A Brief Inquiry into the Meaning of Sin and Faith*, Rawls's master's thesis submitted to Princeton University in 1942, sheds light on an intensively religious period in Rawls's youth. His brief work "On My Religion" from the year 1997 complements our picture.

There probably existed only two copies of *A Brief Inquiry*—the originals from December 1942—until Princeton professor Eric Gregory turned his attention to it some time after Rawls's death. In their introduction to *A Brief Inquiry*, Joshua Cohen and Thomas Nagel (2009) explain that it was a delicate decision to publish this thesis because most likely Rawls would not have encouraged such an enterprise. Many of Rawls's former students, however, had already started to circulate the thesis, which made the decision a bit easier.

John Bordley Rawls was born in Baltimore into a wealthy and politically active family (his mother defended voting rights for women). He was educated at an Episcopal school, but he did not become deeply concerned with religious issues until he approached his twenties.

Neo-orthodox Christianity, inspired by Karl Barth, was making progress at that time. Robert Merrihew Adams, in his discussion of Rawls's *A Brief Inquiry* in the volume at hand (p. 29), reports that Emil Brunner's term at Princeton as a celebrity visiting professor during the academic year 1938-39 also had its impact. Indeed, Rawls expresses particular appreciation

for Brunner's theology in the preface of his thesis.

Rawls announces that his master's thesis aims to "enter a strong protest against... naturalism" (p. 107) and to "attack a specific Christian problem... of sin and faith" (p. 108). Rawls is particularly concerned with naturalism in the sense that it reduces spiritual life to the level of desire and appetite. However, he proceeds by assuming that God exists and that persons exist as spiritual and communal beings. Rawls emphasizes that the realm of persons and community is qualitatively different from the realm of nature—and it is precisely the realm of persons and community that is central to ethics. From the religious perspective, this claim coheres with the idea of a community as the very purpose of God's creation (pp. 107-114).

Rawls regards Plato, Aristotle, Augustine, and Aquinas all as basically naturalists. Here he is inspired by Anders Nygren's distinction between *eros* and *agape*. Rawls interprets the above classical authors as representatives of an *eros*-type of love—of self-love rather than an *agape*-type of altruistic love. (Adams (pp. 42-43) notes that Rawls misinterprets Augustine here. Augustine did not depict God merely as an "object" of our love.)

Rawls does not regard self-love, or *egoism*, as evil in its moderate forms. Relying on Philip Leon's philosophy, Rawls particularly identifies evil as *egotism*. While egoists can usually live ethically in a community, egotists are inherently destructive to it. The latter seek after honor, distinction, and glory, and they tend to go to all sorts of extremes. The consequence of sin, that is, egotism, exaggerated egoism, and despair, is aloneness (pp. 122-123, 206).

Faith, finally, means to young Rawls "the integration into and the reconstruction of community" (p. 214). God established his community by election. Man's merits here are beside the point; they are not counted in a true community (pp. 230, 241-246).

The Second World War shook humanity to its core. After completing his thesis, Rawls joined up: he served as an infantryman in the Pacific from 1943 to 1945. There, among other things, he had to deeply rethink his view on evil, one of the major themes of his thesis. By June 1945, he had abandoned his orthodox Episcopal Christianity (p. 261).

In his late work "On My Religion," Rawls recalls certain experiences that occurred during his military service that led him to reject the kind of orthodoxy represented in his master's thesis. They culminate in hearing the Army information service reports from the concentration camps and watching the first film footages from the Holocaust. Rawls had faced an impasse with theodicy: how could God allow such terrible evil and suffering to occur? (p. 263)

Henceforth, Rawls turned his main attention to the ethics of peace and justice in terms of human reason. He did not reject his faith in God entirely: perhaps there is a God whose reason greatly surpasses our own. Nevertheless, Rawls highlighted that—in the sphere of theory and practice alike—"the basic judgments of reasonableness must be the same, whether made by God's reason or ours" (p. 268). This view does not resolve theodicy, but it allows reasonable political theology.

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