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RELIGION

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Review - Brief Inquiry into the Meaning of Sin and Faith

With 'On my Religion'
by John Rawls
Harvard University Press,
2008
Review by Stan van Hooft,
Ph.D.
Aug 25th 2009 (Volume
13, Issue 35)

Any new and posthumous publication from one of the most significant political philosophers of recent time would have to be of interest -- even if its subject matter seems far removed from that for which the author is famous. What we have here is a piece of juvenilia. Before joining the army in 1945, Rawls had written a "senior thesis" to complete his undergraduate course at Princeton University. The present volume's most substantial essay is that thesis. It is preceded by an introduction written by Thomas Nagel and Joshua Cohen and by an interpretative essay by Robert Merrihew Adams, and it is succeeded by a brief statement, dating from 1997, in which Rawls gives an account of the way in which his religious beliefs waned as a result of his military experiences in the war against Japan.

Nagel and Cohen, in their introduction, raise the question of whether essays such as this, never intended for publication, should have been published, especially as the central essay expresses religious beliefs which the author himself had subsequently repudiated. However, I think they are right to suggest that it is valid to publish these writings, not only because of the light they might throw on Rawls's intellectual development, but also because they contain ideas of inherent interest.

The essay by Adams serves to situate the youthful Rawls's thought in the theological traditions current in his day. Reference is made to the work of Emil Brunner, Søren Kierkegaard, Reinhold Niebuhr, and Anders Nygren, and the reader is given a glimpse of a scholarly environment very different from that which would obtain in most university philosophy departments today. Not only did the divisions between analytic and continental philosophy not hold sway, but the distinction between philosophy and theology was not clearly marked either. Adams also points to some glimpses of Rawls's later thought that can be cleaned from his senior thesis.

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But the best way to approach this book, I suggest, is to read Rawls's own substantial piece first. It is written in a direct and vigorous style and clearly displays a precocious talent for philosophical inquiry and a prodigious depth of scholarship centered on the philosophical and theological classics, ranging from Plato and Aristotle to Augustine and Aquinas. Rawls does not shy away from bold claims such as that these four thinkers had all fundamentally misunderstood the relations between human beings amongst themselves and with God. The basic structure of Rawls's argument relies on a distinction between natural relations and personal relations. Natural relations are typified by hunger. This is a relation between a natural being such as a human being and a natural object such as food: a relation which, for self-conscious beings, can be experienced as desire. A great many of the relations that human beings enter into are "naturalistic" in this way. The ethical and theological problems that this perspective introduces is that of finding an appropriate object for our desires or, more generally, for our natural emotions. So, gluttony is ethically bad because it posits an excessive object for our desire or because it pursues that object excessively. For his part, Plato posited the Form of the Good as the highest object for our longing (theorized as *eros*) and set forth the ethical requirement that our baser desires and passions should be suppressed so that our souls could be left undistracted in our pursuit of this highest good. Christianity simply adopted this philosophical anthropology and posited God, disclosed through Jesus, as the highest object of our longing.

Rawls rejects this whole way of thinking. In its place, he proposes a personal set of relations between people and between God and humanity. A personal relation acknowledges the personal or spiritual reality of others and refuses to see them as objects. Such relations constitute a community in which no member is objectified as a means to another's purposes. While Rawls makes only brief mention of Kant, this idea might be akin to that of his "kingdom of ends". It is also akin to Martin Buber's distinction between "I-it" relations and "I-Thou" relations, and Nygren's distinction between relations created by *Eros* and relations created by *Agape*. This notion of personal relations is very fruitful for ethics and political philosophy. It forbids the exploitation of others and also leads Rawls to reject contract models of society such as proposed by Thomas Hobbes. We do not enter into society because we want to pursue our own wants and needs by setting up systems of mutual advantage: we enter into society because we want to enter into community with others.

But it is in theology that Rawls draws out the implications of his thesis most fully. A personal relationship with God is not one in which one bargains with God to secure salvation by gaining merit. One is simply elected by God's merciful love and invited to enter into a relationship with Him. Sin consists not in violating the divine law, but in rejecting community, whether on the human level or on the divine. Conversion into faith is not adopting a set of theological beliefs, but entering into a personal relationship with God. Faith is the experience of religious community and of one's own unworthiness of election into that community.

The brief autobiographical essay on his religion with which the book concludes might lead one to suppose that the predominantly theological tenor of the larger essay would not give us any insights into Rawls's mature thought. But this would be a mistake. I think it is possible to glean interesting ideas from the senior thesis without accepting the theology. There are interesting parallels with the thought of Emmanuel Levinas. Levinas posits a similar model for human relationships -- one in which the other is not to be grasped as an object but draws us into ethical responsibility. However, although Levinas is inspired towards this view by his Jewish faith, he does not substantiate his thesis by crossing that subtle line that should distinguish philosophy from theology. Although the young Rawls crosses this line without embarrassment, I think the reader can extract interesting humanitarian ideas from the essay without following him in doing so. The reader can also see, albeit in a cryptic way, the beginnings of Rawls's important views on fairness as a quality of interpersonal and civic relationships amongst reasonable people rather than as the product of utilitarian bargaining.

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Stan van Hoof, Deakin University, is the author of *Caring: An Essay in the Philosophy of Ethics*, (Niwot, University Press of Colorado, 1995) and numerous journal articles on moral philosophy, bioethics, business ethics, and on the nature of health and disease. His *Life, Death, and Subjectivity: Moral Sources for Bioethics*, was published by Rodopi (Amsterdam and New

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York) in 2004. Stan published two further books in 2006: *Caring about Health*, (Aldershot: Ashgate), and *Understanding Virtue Ethics*, (Chesham: Acumen Publishers).

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