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Peter Berkowitz on *A Brief Inquiry into the Meaning of Sin and Faith* by John Rawls edited by Thomas Nagel

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John Rawls. *A Brief Inquiry into the Meaning of Sin and Faith*. Thomas Nagel, Editor. Harvard University Press. 288 Pages. \$27.95.

It is commonly supposed that liberalism — the political theory that holds that all human beings are by nature free and equal, that government derives its just powers from the consent of the governed, and that government’s task is to secure the equal rights of all citizens — is rooted in exclusively rational and secular principles. Thomas Jefferson may have proclaimed in the Declaration of Independence that we are free and equal because God created us that way and endowed us with unalienable rights. But that was the 18th century, when Christianity held sway and Deism thrived, and Jefferson, in any event, was given to rhetorical flourishes. Two and a half centuries later, liberalism, it is widely thought, has been purified. Religious people may find religious reasons for embracing individual freedom and human equality, but the theistic notions and religious language that were never essential to liberalism’s core conceptions have long ago fallen away or have been deliberately and decisively discarded. Today, liberalism can stand straight and tall on its own reasonable and nonreligious bottom.

Accordingly, few doubt — certainly few among the professors of philosophy and political theory who are paid to think critically about such matters — that the most influential restatement of liberal political theory over the past four decades, contained in John Rawls’s *A Theory of Justice* (1971) and *Political Liberalism* (1993), operates independently of religious presuppositions. To be sure, Rawls’s liberalism defends religious toleration. And Rawls forcefully argued in *Political Liberalism* that without sacrificing their obligations to God, reasonable adherents of different religious faiths can subscribe to a liberalism confined to common political principles and institutions. Such a liberalism proudly renounces reliance on comprehensive claims about man’s place in the universe. Instead, it is “freestanding”; it claims to restrict itself to elaborating fair rules of social cooperation that citizens, despite inevitable disagreements about first principles and ultimate salvation, can embrace.

To recognize liberalism's capacity to accommodate and even respect religious believers is certainly not to assert that liberalism, particularly a political liberalism, depends on religious assumptions or ways of thinking. To most scholars such an assertion would seem utterly foreign to the intention of Rawls's life's work. And it would also seem to them to fly in the face of the historical achievement of the liberal tradition — securing political justice on rational and secular foundations.

The recent discovery and publication of Rawls's undergraduate senior thesis, "A Brief Inquiry into the Meaning of Sin and Faith: An Interpretation Based on the Concept of Community," submitted to the Department of Philosophy at Princeton University in December 1942, compels a reconsideration of the conventional wisdom. The thesis is published along with an illuminating short introductory essay by Stanford University professor of political science, philosophy, and law Joshua Cohen and New York University professor of philosophy and law Thomas Nagel that examines Rawls's thesis in light of his mature political theory; an instructive extended essay by Yale University professor emeritus of philosophy Robert Merrihew Adams that places the theological ethics of the young Rawls in the context of 20th-century neoorthodox Protestant theology; and an intriguing brief autobiographical essay, "On My Religion," that Rawls wrote in 1997 at age 76 but never published. The publication now of Rawls's undergraduate thesis and post-retirement autobiographical reflections, along with accompanying scholarly commentaries, infuses with new interest old questions about the assumptions concerning man and morals that give life to liberalism.

There had been earlier indications that Rawls's philosophical account of justice as fairness and his elaboration of a political liberalism as fair principles of social cooperation drew sustenance from religious sources. In 2000, former students, by then accomplished professors in their own right, oversaw the publication of *Lectures on the History of Moral Philosophy*. The book contains notes — in fact, lucid, well-wrought analyses — for lectures on a class in moral philosophy that Rawls gave at Harvard University regularly between his arrival in 1962 and his retirement in the early 1990s. Those lectures center on the great 18th-century German Enlightenment philosopher Immanuel Kant. So too did Rawls's interpretation of liberalism: In *A Theory of Justice* he emphasized that his ambition was to refine and extend Kant's view that morality must be understood as those principles that can "be agreed to under conditions that characterize men as free and equal rational beings."

Therefore, it was of great interest to learn from the *Lectures* that in Rawls's view, Kant's moral philosophy, both celebrated and denounced for its rigorous rationalism, was only fully intelligible with a view to its religious dimension:

I conclude by observing that the significance Kant gives to the moral law and our acting from it has an obvious religious aspect, and that his text occasionally has a devotional character.

What gives a view a religious aspect, I think, is that it has a conception of the world as a whole that presents it as in certain respects holy, or else as worthy of devotion and reverence. The everyday values of secular life must take a secondary place. If this is right, then what gives Kant's view a religious aspect is the dominant place he gives to the moral law in conceiving of the world itself. For it is in following the moral law as it applies to us, and in striving to fashion in ourselves a firm good will, and in shaping our social world accordingly that alone qualifies us to be the final purpose of creation. Without this, our life, in the world, and the world itself lose their meaning and point.

Now, perhaps, we see the significance of the mention of the world in the first sentence of Groundwork I: "It is impossible to conceive anything in the world, or even out of it, that can be taken as good without qualification, except a good will."

At first it seems strange that Kant should mention the world here. Why go to such an extreme? we ask. Now perhaps we see why it is there. It comes as no surprise, then, that in the second Critique he should say that the step to religion is taken for the sake of the highest good and to preserve our devotion to the moral law.

These religious, even Pietist, aspects of Kant's moral philosophy seem obvious; any account of it that overlooks them misses much that is essential to it.

Given the deep continuities between the Kantian and Rawlsian conceptions of justice, the Lectures made it reasonable to wonder whether scholars had overlooked the religious aspect of Rawls's liberalism and thereby missed much that is essential to it. The Lectures also made it reasonable to wonder why so few of the many students who heard these lectures over the course of three decades and went into careers as professors of political science, philosophy, and law failed to be moved, or to recognize an obligation, to explore whether and to what extent Rawls's mature philosophy was bound up with religious notions.¹

Rawls's undergraduate thesis does not in itself offer an answer to these fascinating questions, but it does provide an important piece of the puzzle. Revealing an unusually thoughtful and exceedingly ambitious young mind, it also exhibits the imperiousness that was a significant if generally unremarked feature of the mature Rawls's work. The imperiousness consists in the laying down of assumptions and the declaration of definitions that severely circumscribe the legitimate forms of moral, political, and philosophical inquiry.

Notwithstanding the restrained language and gentleness of tone in both his senior thesis and his seminal books, Rawls's elaboration of rules of right method and establishment of the range of permissible ideas in both stigmatized as not merely wrong but unreasonable a diversity of plausible and competing perspectives. Although his senior thesis had no impact on academic philosophy, his books, which had a decisive impact, placed off limits inquiry into some of his own theory's fundamental assumptions and defining ideas. There is certainly reason to doubt that his thesis supplies those assumptions and clarifies those ideas. After all, as Rawls recalls in his autobiographical "On My Religion," he lost his faith as a result of

serving in the Pacific theater in World War II and learning of the horrors of the Holocaust. Nevertheless, fundamental features of Rawls's mature philosophy that on reflection seem in need of further support receive it from the irreducibly religious doctrine developed in the undergraduate thesis.

The young Rawls takes Christian faith as his presupposition — “We assume, then, that God is, and that He is the sort of God that the Bible says He is, and that He revealed His nature in Christ” — and aims to restate its implications for the moral life. To do this, Rawls argues, one must free Christian thought from a tremendously influential but profoundly mistaken doctrine. “Naturalism,” according to Rawls, “is the universe in which all relations are natural and in which spiritual life is reduced to the level of desire and appetite.” Plato and Aristotle are guilty of naturalism, he argues. So, too, are Augustine and Aquinas, Christianity's two greatest philosophers, whose doctrines, the Princeton senior audaciously charges, miss the essence of Christian teaching. And of course the preponderance of modern philosophy is thoroughly naturalistic and therefore gravely wrong about ethical life. The problem, though, is not nature itself, which is “God's gift to man.” Rather, “the error lies . . . in extending natural relations to include all of those in the cosmos.” The challenge, to which Rawls devotes his thesis, “is to limit the sphere of nature to its proper limits, and to make room for the heart of the universe, namely, community and personality.”

Christianity properly understood supplies the correct interpretation of personality and community. The properly Christian and philosophically correct view is that a person is “unique” and “not reducible to the possession of a particular body or to the sum of mental states.” Being part of the natural world, a person certainly has desires and appetites, but is distinguished from other parts of God's creation by possession of personality, or the capacity to enter into a loving relationship with other persons and with God.

Rejecting the impersonal god of the philosophers and the personal but distant and silent God of much traditional faith, the young Rawls, as Robert Merrihew Adams points out in his essay, understands man, human relations, and man's relation to God in much the same manner as did Martin Buber in his great work, *I and Thou* (1923), which exercised considerable influence on neoorthodox Protestant theologians. For Buber, the world is twofold: We usually dwell in the natural realm but are always capable of entering the realm of relations. In the natural realm, we perceive, imagine, and want, and we understand things, including other human beings and ourselves, as “its” or objects. In the realm of relations, each individual confronts another as a Thou. Such relations are unmediated and reciprocal and in them grace and will join to allow each to become fully present to the other. Another description for this is love. At the same time, the relation of an I to a Thou always involves a third term, or a relation also to God, the Eternal Thou. To be capable of I-Thou relations and therefore open to God's revelation defines, from the perspective of the young Rawls, a person.

Persons flourish in community. A community is not an “aggregate of individuals,” but rather the special form of association through which individuals, in and through relations to others and to God, become persons. In becoming a person one recognizes that other human beings are, like oneself, created in God’s image. “The Imago Dei,” Rawls declares, is “that which in man makes him capable of entering into community by virtue of likeness to God, who is in Himself community, being the Triune God.”

Faith, sin, and grace, Rawls maintains, revolve around personality and community. Faith is “the inner state of a person who is properly integrated and related to community.” Sin is the destruction and repudiation of community. It receives expression in egotism, or pride, self-love, and vanity; egoism, or exclusive attention to the satisfaction of natural desire; and despair, or the nihilistic escape from the world. Grace is “the activity on God’s part which seeks to restore the person to community.” It overcomes sin and accomplishes conversion. Since ethics is bound up with community and personality, and community and personality are bound up with God, “there can be no separation between religion and ethics.”

In conclusion, Rawls sketches a few implications of personality and community, sin and faith, grace and conversion properly understood for ethics and political philosophy. Among the most important for understanding the relation between the theological analysis of the young Rawls and the moral and political theory of the mature Rawls is a Socratic point made by the college senior. Modern thinkers go astray, he argues, because their theories tend to be “based on superficial anthropologies”; consequently, they fail to proceed from a correct understanding of “what man is.” This is a crippling defect:

the first problem of ethical theory is to inquire into the nature of man himself. Moral philosophers would do much better if they undertook an anthropological analysis before doing anything else. Unless we understand ourselves, all discussions of the good and the right are left in the air, and hover idly detached from reality. For this reason we have stressed throughout the personality and communality of man, and have repeatedly stated, almost to the point of becoming labored, that such is man’s nature. We stress this point because it is at once so simple and yet so easy to forget. Although Christianity is said by all to be a very simple religion, it is surprising how few people understand it.

One can disagree with the young Rawls about Christian doctrine and human nature’s defining features. However, his conclusion that serious moral and political theory must be grounded in, and constantly informed by, a defensible conception of human nature is as compelling today as it was when Rawls submitted his Princeton senior thesis. Indeed, it as compelling as it was when Plato’s Socrates made the case.

Strangely enough, the mature Rawls’s theory of justice and argument for a political liberalism appear to proceed in the absence of a philosophical anthropology or well-developed account of human nature. One possibility is that on this point the young Rawls and the mature Rawls

diverge, and that the manifest achievement of Rawlsian liberalism refutes the young Rawls's Socratic conviction. Another possibility is that the mature Rawls relied upon but suppressed the religious understanding of human nature that gives life to his liberalism.

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In their introductory essay, Joshua Cohen and Thomas Nagel make an observation about Rawls and religion that they present as routine but, contrary to their assurances, will startle many students of his political theory: "Those who have studied Rawls's work, and even more, those who knew him personally, are aware of a deeply religious temperament that informed his life and writings, whatever may have been his beliefs." Cohen and Nagel argue that for Rawls "political philosophy aims at a defense of reasonable faith"; a reasonable faith seeks a "just constitutional democracy"; such aspirations shape individuals' understanding of the world as a whole; and that a proper theory of justice enables us to view ourselves from the perspective of eternity. But though they recognize elements in his thinking that suggest a religious temperament and note religious themes in his writings, Cohen and Nagel never examine the possibility that the force and coherence of Rawlsian liberalism is indebted to unstated religious presuppositions.

They do identify five "main points of contact," in the sense of parallels between the young Rawls's theology and the mature Rawls's liberalism:

- (1) endorsement of a morality defined by interpersonal relations rather than by pursuit of the highest good; (2) insistence on the importance of the separateness of persons, so that the moral community or community of faith is a relation among distinct individuals; (3) rejection of the concept of society as a contract or bargain among egoistic individuals; (4) condemnation of inequality based on exclusion and hierarchy; (5) rejection of the idea of merit.

It is also worth asking, however, whether there is a point of contact between the thinking of the younger and the mature Rawls in the sense of philosophical support provided by the former for the latter.

Consider, for example, Rawls's refinement of his mature views in *Political Liberalism*. That work advances "a conception of justice that may be shared by citizens as a basis of a reasoned, informed, and willing political agreement." It aims to be a political conception of justice for a constitutional democracy that applies only to basic social, economic, and political institutions. And it seeks to be freestanding by eschewing metaphysical commitments, and renouncing reliance on comprehensive views of man and the world. That way it "can gain the support of an overlapping consensus" which "consists of all the reasonable opposing religious, philosophical, and moral doctrines likely to persist over generations."

Yet to focus on the political dimensions of justice is not to render justice's other dimensions irrelevant, and to eschew metaphysics and renounce reliance on comprehensive views is not to escape them. We are entitled to wonder what conception of man and the world makes it reasonable to respect, rather than level or trample, differences of opinion about God and the greatest good, and to inscribe that respect in social, economic, and political institutions. And, as students of moral and political philosophy, we are obliged to identify standards for distinguishing "all the reasonable opposing religious, philosophical, and moral doctrines" from the unreasonable ones. To do that we must, as the young Rawls would have recognized, acquire an understanding, if tentative and constantly subject to questioning and revision in accordance with the mature Rawls's appreciation of the room for reasonable disagreement, of a fitting and proper life for a human being. Such an understanding involves not only an account of the human desires and passions, intellectual and moral faculties, virtues and vices that make a freestanding conception necessary, workable, and desirable but also some attention to how human nature fits into nature and the wider world.

A start is to recognize that a doctrine will not qualify as reasonable for Rawls unless it embraces in one way or another the principle that Rawls boldly states in Chapter 1 of *A Theory of Justice*, which restates the Declaration of Independence's natural rights teaching: "Each person possesses an inviolability founded on justice that even the welfare of society as a whole cannot override." It is certainly true that for the purposes of politics what counts is that people, for whatever reason, respect each others rights. But for the purposes of philosophy, including philosophical defenses of the priority of politics to philosophy, we want to know: What makes belief in inviolable or natural rights reasonable? It is not enough to argue that each individual possesses an inalienable inviolability because all are, as Rawls holds in both *A Theory of Justice* and *Political Liberalism*, free and equal persons. Or that our inalienable inviolability flows from our moral capacity to form and act on rational life plans. Neither our natural freedom and equality nor our capacity to form, choose, and act on rational life plans rules out that conquest and dominion over others represents the best use of our freedom.

When all is said and done, the mature Rawls's epic intellectual labors do not illuminate this fundamental perplexity. Indeed, those labors obscure the perplexity, even as the difficulties are diminished — though they are far from overcome — by the young Rawls's theological doctrine. Inasmuch as it conceives of man as in but not entirely of the natural world, and possessing a spiritual dimension or soul for which he is not responsible but which is of ultimate worth and allows him to transcend determination by nature, the young Rawls's doctrine fortifies a liberalism whose guiding thought is that of an inalienable inviolability possessed by all individuals.

Such considerations provide more than ample reason for scholars to vigorously open or reopen the question of Rawlsian liberalism's — and the larger liberal tradition's — religious roots.

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¹ See my essay, "[The Ambiguities of Rawls's Influence](#)," in Perspectives on Politics 4:1 (March 2006).

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