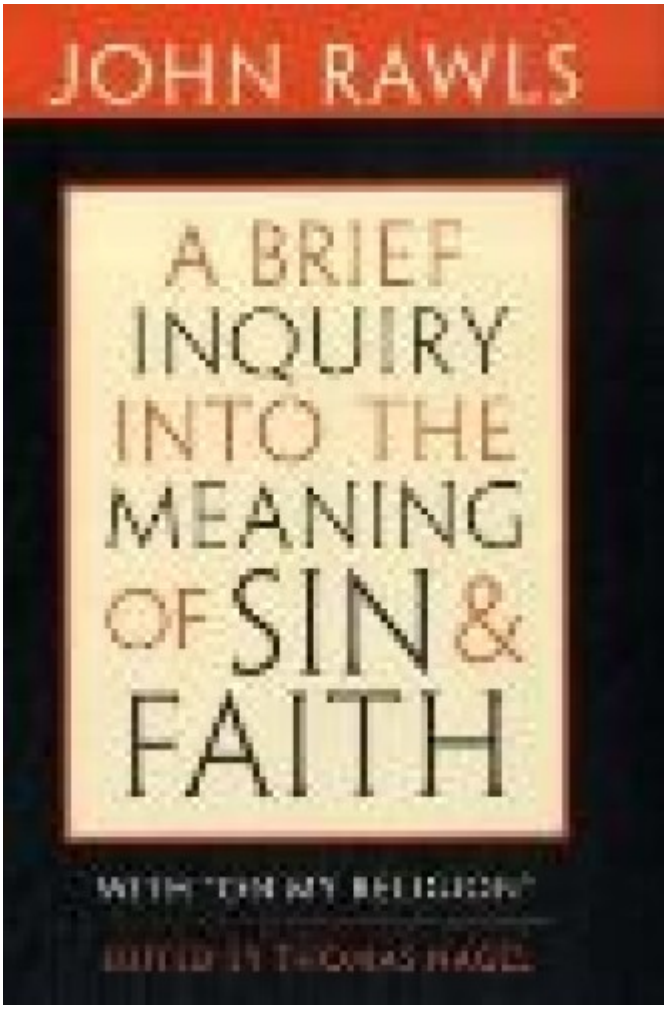
Reasonable God

By R. Bruce Douglass in the November 17, 2009 issue

In Review



A Brief Inquiry into the Meaning of Sin and Faith

John Rawls
Harvard University Press

The principal alternatives to religious belief are commonly thought to be atheism and agnosticism. This has been especially true in recent years, as such figures as

Christopher Hitchens and Richard Dawkins have revived the Enlightenment critique of religion and breathed fresh life into unbelief as a fighting creed. But the reality is considerably more complex—a point illustrated by John Rawls's fascinating account of the evolution of his religious convictions, which the famous Harvard philosopher wrote for private consumption not long before his death in 2002 and which has now been published, along with an undergraduate thesis Rawls wrote at Princeton in the 1940s.

Rawls, probably the most influential political philosopher of our time, tells of a migration away from "conventional religion," which in his case meant the Episcopalianism of his upbringing. But the journey did not end in unbelief. Even though Rawls came to have serious objections to many of the fundamental claims of orthodox Christianity, he apparently was never attracted to atheism—or even to agnosticism, at least not as it's conventionally understood. Rather, he found himself gravitating to a view that can only be described as a form of deism.

Many people reject orthodox religion without any familiarity with the thinking of its more articulate defenders. Rawls was not one of those people. He may not have been as well informed about certain developments in 19th- and 20th-century Christian theology as one might have wished, but his undergraduate thesis shows that in that phase of his life—when he took an active interest in theological issues—he read widely enough in Christian thought to have a more than passing familiarity with the faith's intellectually substantial forms.

It is also clear from the undergraduate thesis that Rawls was at this point an adherent of Christianity. His theological presuppositions may be innovative in places, but they are very much in keeping with the central claims of the historic creeds. Though a budding philosopher, the young Rawls is comfortable using terms such as *sin* and *grace*, and in a manner that reflects a believer's mentality. He even reports that at that point in his life he considered going to seminary.

So what caused Rawls to lose his faith? He does not claim in his 2002 autobiographical statement to understand this fully himself. He is clear that experiences he had as a soldier in World War II set the rethinking in motion. But the single most important influence appears to have been the Holocaust. How was it possible to believe the claims that Christians made about God acting in history, Rawls came to wonder, if God could allow such monstrous things to happen? He allowed that sometimes it is possible to construe the harm that human beings inflict

on one another as just punishments for past sins, citing Abraham Lincoln's statements interpreting the U.S. Civil War in those terms. But the Holocaust did not lend itself to that kind of interpretation: it simply was not possible for Rawls to construe the terrible suffering the Nazis inflicted on the Jews as a just reward. This conclusion led him to reject the whole idea of history as an expression of God's will.

The main doctrines of Christianity became "more and more alien" to Rawls, and he came to believe that it is positively dangerous to accept such ideas as original sin, heaven and hell, and predestination, because they turn God into a "monster moved solely by God's own power and glory" and cause their adherents to fall too easily into the practices that have often made Christianity an oppressive force. Rawls devotes no small part of his statement of faith to a discussion of how the Christian religion has been affected by its ties to political power, an alliance he sees as a moral disaster.

It is not just Christianity's oppressive tendencies that Rawls found objectionable, however. Reading his statement, one gets the sense that his initial movement away from the religion of his youth hardened into something much deeper—and more polemical—as he matured. By the end of his life, Rawls could find nothing good to say about Christianity. He even mounts a moral critique of the idea of salvation itself, on the grounds that it is a recipe for spiritual isolation and self-absorption. "Christianity is a solitary religion," he writes; "each is saved and damned individually, and we naturally focus on our own salvation to the point where nothing else might seem to matter."

This is a harsh and unfair view, in some respects just as one-sided as the critiques of Christianity by Hitchens and Dawkins. But it has a different tone. In reading this essentially private document, one never gets the sense that Rawls believed that Christians are fools. He placed much stock in tolerance and civility, and he exhibits none of the new atheists' sneering condescension.

This trait is related to another difference: as critical of Christianity as Rawls became, he did not turn into an atheist. He obviously respected well-reasoned atheists, and he made it clear that he thought they deserved to be treated with respect. But there is no evidence that he adopted their view—and there are signs that he found it more sensible to retain some belief in a higher power.

It’s not at all clear, however, why he took this position, and his statement is bound to frustrate anyone who would like to make sense of what Rawls positively believed. He suggests that his reasons for continuing to believe in the existence of God had nothing to do with the so-called proofs advanced by Thomas Aquinas and others. But what those reasons were one can only guess.

It’s also unclear what sort of God he believed in, save for two strands of argument he refers to briefly. One concerns the practice of imputing personality to God in anything like the conventional sense. Rawls thought this was a bad idea because it attempts to conceive of God as a distinct person (or set of persons) functioning in a manner analogous to the way human beings do—the foundation of almost everything he disliked about Christianity. Along with this, Rawls sought to avoid the idea of God as a willing agent who pursues his purposes by means of actions in the world inhabited by humans.

But Rawls had no such compunctions about imputing rationality to God. In the book’s final paragraphs, he suggests that this view of God makes it possible to avoid the problems inherent in a more voluntaristic theology. If we get rid of the idea of God as a choosing agent, Rawls indicates, and replace it with the very different image of a God not only capable of but governed by reason, then all the crazy behavior that might otherwise be attributed to a higher power ceases to be possible. So too does the possibility of serious conflict between our faith and the principles of rationality.

Nothing in this argument suggests that Rawls actually believes it is true. It is cast in the form of a thought experiment designed to make a case for religious toleration. Still, the claims he makes here are too closely connected to the logic of the obviously heartfelt things he says in other passages for them to be passed off as merely a way of framing an argument. At the least these claims tell us what sort of beliefs Rawls thought were morally desirable, and they may tell us something more.

In the introduction, Joshua Cohen and Thomas Nagel observe that “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.” That may well have been the case. But the statement shows that Rawls was not religious in any conventional sense.

The book contains none of the sentiments generally expressed in religious practice—not even the reverence for “higher powers” that has often characterized the outlook of deists in the past. It’s possible that Rawls simply does not express himself well on this subject, but I don’t think it is any accident that he is silent about everything—including the question of creation—that might inspire a sense of indebtedness or gratitude. The affective side of religion was just what he wanted to get away from.

Would Rawls have liked his outlook on religion to be shared more widely? Did he think we would be better off if this were the case? Probably, but as an American living in the latter part of the 20th century, he could hardly have been under any illusions about the likelihood of this occurring. Nor does he seek to be a public advocate for the sort of alternative to conventional religion he favored. He kept that to himself, treating it as the private matter I am sure he thought religion should be.

When forced to deal with the subject of religion in his work as a political philosopher, Rawls went out of his way to dis sociate himself from overt opposition to conventional religion. He insisted that it is just as wrong—that is, both unjust and unreasonable—to discriminate against religious views as to discriminate against irreligious ones. The citizens of constitutional democracies have a duty, he said, to treat one another with mutual respect, and that means, among other things, that no one should attempt to use the power of the state to promote (much less enforce adherence to) the particular creed by which he or she lives, regardless of whether the beliefs in question are specifically religious.

This neutrality, however, is arguably more effective at excluding religious influences from public life than secular ones. The clear message to any believer who thinks her faith should be brought to bear on public life is that this is tricky—and even dangerous—business. Rawls thought that, in a democracy, it is appropriate to bring religious convictions openly to bear on public life only if they can be expressed in a form that does not presuppose acceptance of the religion in question. In other words, people of faith should avoid inserting into public life any claim that cannot be translated into the common language of “public reason.”

It is easy to see why this well-intentioned proposal would not appeal to anyone who believes in a robust role for religion in public life, or why it might seem unfair to those who think it imposes special burdens on people of faith. And if one doubts that everything that believers have to contribute can in fact be effectively communicated

in the idiom of public reason, it is difficult to see how this proposal is anything other than a recipe for the de facto secularization of public life.

People of faith aren't the only ones who find this problematic. No less prominent a secular figure than the philosopher Jürgen Habermas has said that it would be hard to do justice to religious sensibilities—which have historically been in tension with secular sensibilities—if believers were required to speak only in terms of "public reason." According to Habermas, the sensibilities in question are likely to have increasing relevance to public debates in our time, as societies contend with the questions posed by modern science and medicine. Excluding religious voices from public life, he explains, would deprive politics of the moral (and even spiritual) substance it badly needs.

Habermas made this critique near the end of Rawls's life, and to my knowledge Rawls never replied to it. Judging from this statement of his own personal religious convictions, it's unlikely that he would have appreciated Habermas's worry about marginalizing religion. On that score, Rawls appears to have been an all too conventional liberal thinker.

Though Rawls did not embrace freedom of expression for believers in the expansive manner Habermas seems to have in mind, he was clearly impressed by the critics who said it was a mistake to treat religion simply as a threat to democratic values. In the last decade of his life he worked to make room in his political philosophy for a more balanced view of the matter. As early as the writing of *Political Liberalism* (1993), he admitted that there were occasions in American history—such as the battle over slavery in the years prior to the Civil War or the struggle for racial equality a century later—when religious views were invoked in public life in ways that served the democratic cause well. This led him to say that in situations in which democratic values had not been fully realized and their meaning and value were still being actively contested, it could be appropriate—even valuable—for believers to appeal openly to their religious convictions in public discourse. In later writings he kept expanding on this point, introducing a series of qualifications to his original prohibition on invoking "comprehensive doctrines" in public life until he reduced it to a very narrow principle.

But Rawls could not bring himself to say that in a well-ordered and truly just society, religion would have a significant role in public life. On this question he appears not to have changed his mind at all. As valuable as it might be at times for religious beliefs to play a role in public life, ultimately it was best, he thought, if we could

agree to exclude them.