

BEFORE THE ORIGINAL POSITION

The Neo-Orthodox Theology of the Young John Rawls

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ABSTRACT

This paper examines a remarkable document that has escaped critical attention within the vast literature on John Rawls, religion, and liberalism: Rawls's undergraduate thesis, "A Brief Inquiry into the Meaning of Sin and Faith: An Interpretation Based on the Concept of Community" (1942). The thesis shows the extent to which a once regnant version of Protestant theology has retreated into seminaries and divinity schools where it now also meets resistance. Ironically, the young Rawls rejected social contract liberalism for reasons that anticipate many of the claims later made against him by secular and religious critics. The thesis and Rawls's late unpublished remarks on religion and World War II offer a new dimension to his intellectual biography. They show the significance of his humanist response to the moral impossibility of political theology. Moreover, they also reveal a kind of Rawlsian piety marginalized by contemporary debates over religion and liberalism.

KEY WORDS: *John Rawls, community, liberalism, religion, political theology, public reason*

PROTESTANT THEOLOGIAN REINHOLD NIEBUHR DIED IN 1971. In that same year, philosopher John Rawls published his groundbreaking work, *A Theory of Justice*. These two events symbolically express transformations in American intellectual and political culture that remain significant today. In the academy, religious defenders of a liberal consensus had been challenged by ascendant secular liberalisms and emergent religious voices critical of liberalism of any kind. Parallel developments in the political culture had begun to see the fracturing of coalitions that transcended diverse religious and secular commitments in order to support democratic institutions and practices.

Niebuhr and Rawls were realist defenders of a liberal tradition that is wary of perfectionism in politics, yet tries to sustain hope in the face of injustice. Both chastened metaphysical pretension and religious enthusiasm. Both sought to avoid historicist and relativist conceptions of justice.

Both criticized appeals to liberty that were not regulated by principles of equality. Both defended the dignity of human persons. Both expressed concern for the least well-off in a society vulnerable to natural contingencies and misfortune. Rawls took his inspiration from Kantian philosophy. Niebuhr turned to Augustinian theology.

Niebuhr's "Christian Realism" reconstructed Augustine's controversial doctrine of original sin and his dramatic narrative about "two cities" in order to deflate utopianism and to support democratic liberalism. Between World War I and the end of the Cold War, his unique blend of Augustinianism and liberal Protestantism was closely allied with a secular realism indebted to Machiavelli and Weber. Many theorists, activists, and statesmen cited Niebuhr as a formative intellectual influence. For example, George Kennan called Niebuhr "the father of us all," and Morton White famously dubbed a group of Niebuhr's readers as "atheists for Niebuhr" (Fox 1985, 238, 246). In Niebuhr's version of politics, the central fact of human nature this side of the eschaton is sin, and it is the purpose of government not to eliminate sin, but to constrain or ameliorate its bad effects by passing laws and using armed force prudently. For Niebuhr, "the highest social obligation is to guide the social struggle in such a way that the most stable and balanced equilibrium of social forces will be achieved and all life will thereby be given equal opportunities of development" (Niebuhr 1956, 175–76). Love is best conceived as a utopian ideal that discloses what life will be like when God brings human history to a close by establishing God's kingdom. Sentimental attempts to derive a social ethic from the gospel commandment of love are dangerous. Niebuhr tends to assume that utopian striving within historical time, whether religious or secular, is the seed of totalitarian oppression. Liberal democracy is the least bad form of government because it recognizes government's limited, sin-constraining role. In defending it, we need a realistic understanding of human nature and a willingness to use force and the threat of force in the interest of maintaining order and approximating justice.

Rawls also defended a political liberalism motivated by what in *The Law of Peoples* he called a "realistic utopia" (Rawls 1999c, 6).¹ Like Niebuhr, he saw his task as constructing a reasonable theory of justice in light of both the empirical limits of politics and the moral possibilities of human freedom. Rawls's mature distinction between political liberalism and comprehensive liberalism tries to take account of this realism by attending to the imperfect conditions of human reasoning and our social

¹ Rawls's "realistic utopia" claims to reject traditional political realism (Rawls 1999c, 46–48). For instructive comparison of Rawls and Niebuhr on this matter, see Santurri 2005. Santurri argues that Rawls "needs some form of political realism to render persuasive the full range of normative claims constituting the argument of that work" (2005, 785).

institutions. Rawls thought this distinction corrected internal problems with his original theory that did not take sufficient heed of the pluralism of modern societies. Even in his early work, however, Rawls's realism is evident: "as far as circumstances permit, we have a natural duty to remove any injustices, beginning with the most grievous as identified by the extent of deviation from perfect justice" (Rawls 1971, 246). Rawls rejects any political perfectionism that tries to *maximize* "the achievement of human excellence in art, science, and culture" (Rawls 1971, 325). Further comparisons of Niebuhr and Rawls are suggestive. Is Rawls's mythical description of the "original position" functionally similar to the constraints imposed by Niebuhr's mythical description of "original sin"? Does the distinction between political and comprehensive liberalism do the same work for Rawls that the Augustinian distinction between an earthly city and a heavenly city does for Niebuhr? Does Rawls's anti-utilitarian appeal to the "separateness of persons" overlap with Niebuhr's antitotalitarian appeal to the "image of God"? Whatever similarities can be found between Rawls and Niebuhr, however, their cultural locations reflect fundamentally different assumptions about how best to think about and to pursue liberal justice.²

Rawls's continuing influence stands in marked contrast to the steady erosion of Niebuhr's prominence in theology and politics. Rawls dramatically changed the landscape of twentieth-century moral and political philosophy. For example, his genealogy of liberal societies and his account of the moral obligations of citizenship in those societies set the course for contemporary debates about the role of religion in public life. Religious defenders of political liberalism still can be found. They sometimes invoke Niebuhr, but they are embattled by a diverse set of antiliberal or postliberal theologies that challenge such efforts by associating political liberalism with the failures of theological liberalism and secular nihilism.

Influential religious critics, such as Stanley Hauerwas and John Milbank, accuse Niebuhr and his followers of surrendering Christian orthodoxy to a morally and politically deficient liberalism that is now represented by the secular philosophy of Rawls (Hauerwas 2001 and Milbank

² For the best overall account of Niebuhr's relation to Rawls, see Lovin 1995, 191–234. Lovin notes two summary points: (1) "though each man was attuned to the nuances of liberal political thought in the mid-twentieth century, changing social problems led to significant changes in the role that an idea of justice was expected to play in public life" (1995, 192), and (2) "Niebuhr's assumption, typical of the public theology of his generation, was that American democracy rested implicitly on important propositions that were drawn from Christian reflections on human nature and human communities. Liberal philosophy of the last two decades, by contrast, has sought to construct a moral consensus on more minimal agreements, independent of any but the most general claims about humanity's present character and ultimate destiny" (1995, 230–31).

1997).³ Despite protests to the contrary, Rawlsian efforts to protect the public square through an “idea of public reason” are taken as signs of a hostile secularism, which is complicit either with bourgeois politics or a quasi-religious nationalism. Niebuhrian calls to defend liberal democracy confirm suspicions that Augustinian liberalism is an ideologically deformed version of cultural Christianity that abandons its theological heritage in order to prop up dehumanizing economic and political practices (Milbank 1997 and 2003).⁴ Both Milbank and Hauerwas charge that Niebuhr (like Kant) reduces theology to ethics, and further reduces ethics to the maintenance of the liberal social order. Shorthand references to “Rawlsianism” and “Niebuhrianism” play significant rhetorical and theoretical roles in these contested debates over religion and liberalism. For antiliberals, Rawls and Niebuhr are cast as villains in their stories about atomistic individualism, American nationalism, and the thin gruel of Enlightenment universalism. For liberals, Rawls and Niebuhr offer distinct ways of justifying liberalism and its relation to religious traditions and theological affirmations.

This paper examines a remarkable, and essentially unknown, document in this heated context: John Rawls’s undergraduate 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 of Princeton University in December 1942.⁵ The thesis analyzes the concepts of sin and faith through an interpretation of Christian scriptures and major figures in modern Protestant theology. Ironically, the young Rawls rejects social-contract liberalism because it fails to recognize that “individuals become persons insofar as they live in community” (3). In

³ Hauerwas argues that Niebuhr offers “a complex humanism disguised in the language of Christian faith” (Hauerwas 2001, 131). He claims that Niebuhr is a “theologian of a domesticated God capable of doing no more than providing comfort to the anxious conscience of the bourgeoisie” (2001, 138) who “now represents the worst of two worlds: most secular people do not find his theological arguments convincing; yet his theology is not sufficient to provide the means for Christians to sustain their lives” (2001, 139).

⁴ For Milbank, “political liberalism itself engenders today an increasingly joyless and puritanical world in which we work harder and harder toward obscure ends, while ‘surplus’ populations of the young, the old, the cultural misfits and the poor are increasingly marginalized, disciplined, put to degrading work, or indeed simply destroyed” (Milbank 2003, 25). Liberal democracy is “a mere virtual circus designed to entertain the middle classes of the privileged world” (2003, 5). Religious critics of liberalism adopt a variety of alternative political commitments. Hauerwas is a pacifist. Milbank is a socialist. For their readings of each other, see Hauerwas 2004, 215–41, Hauerwas 1997, 188–98, and Milbank 2005, 3–44.

⁵ Rawls did not provide pagination for his thesis (Rawls 1942). References appear in my text with my assigned pagination and annotation. To my knowledge, while some have noted the importance of early religious questions for Rawls’s developed conception of justice, this essay is the first analysis of Rawls’s thesis.

contrast to his later work, he also asserts that “there can be no separation between religion and ethics since the problems they deal with are in the same nexus of relations” (5). Rawls develops a Trinitarian model of community, which he terms a “revolutionary” alternative to the inadequate “naturalism” of Greek philosophy, early modern liberalism, Marxism, and National Socialism. He charges Augustine and Aquinas with corrupting authentic Christianity by mediating these pernicious forms of individualism and naturalism. Throughout the thesis, Rawls effectively anticipates many of the claims made by his secular and religious critics alike.

My paper has two objectives. First, I lay out what I take Rawls’s arguments to be. I pursue this primary objective in some detail because this document has gone unnoticed in the voluminous scholarly literature on Rawls and religion.⁶ The relation between this Rawls and the later Rawls, or constructed images of the later Rawls, is certainly remarkable. It adds a new dimension to standard accounts of Rawls’s intellectual migration from an early interest in the impartiality of utilitarianism via Sidgwick, to the central affirmation of Kantianism and justice as fairness, and the late Hegelian turn that historicizes liberalism as a culturally specific phenomenon. Whatever connections might be drawn to Rawls’s later writings, it certainly reveals the once powerful influence of formal Protestant theology in the American undergraduate curriculum. Second, I conclude with some observations about what attention to this thesis might mean for contemporary debates over religion and liberalism. I argue that it raises provocative questions that are marginalized by the terms set by increasingly narrow debates about the ethics of democratic speech. The current renaissance of political theology intersects with many of the claims made by the admittedly young Rawls. However, the diverse advocates of this renaissance must face the challenge of an important liberal political philosopher who can now be seen as rejecting this possibility, rather than simply ignoring or neglecting it.

1. The Senior Thesis

Senior theses, the hallmark of Princeton undergraduate education, recently have been in the national news because of Samuel Alito’s thesis on the Italian Constitutional Court. Readers were eager to find more clues to his jurisprudence. Few people, I suspect, would welcome the thought of being held accountable to claims made in graduate seminar papers, let alone undergraduate theses. Even the best undergraduate writing can be marked by sweeping generalizations, potted histories, citations

⁶ Bibliographical references on Rawls and religion can be found in Freeman 2003, 553–54 (see also Dombrowski 2001; Eberle 2002; Jackson 2002; and Stout 2004).

of canonical figures taken out of context, assertions that masquerade as arguments, and breathless musings of adolescent enthusiasm and theological illiteracy. Teachers, at their best, take undergraduate writing seriously. However, it is usually not the best resource for intellectual history or scholarship.

Given Rawls's influence, however, it is appropriate to consider this early writing in its context: the Protestant culture then dominant at places such as Princeton. The character and function of American higher education in the mid-twentieth century contrast sharply with our own secular, or perhaps posttheistic, intellectual environment (Marsden 1994; Hart 1999; and McCarragher 2000). Many analytic philosophers of Rawls's generation came to philosophy via theology, but few professional philosophers today engage academic theology. Rawls's thesis shows the extent to which a once regnant version of Protestantism, intent on critically defending the virtues of Western liberalism, has retreated into seminary and divinity school circles where it now also meets resistance. Read both within this larger narrative and Rawls's own biography, the thesis offers more than a historical curiosity.

Rawls's thesis has 169 pages of text, divided into a preface and five chapters, and a five-page bibliography.⁷ He acknowledges the Reformation historian, Elmore Harbison (1907–1964), in a footnote (105 n. 16). However, there is no evidence to suggest Harbison was his advisor. Other possible advisors include Robert Scoon, who taught Aquinas until the appointment of Jacques Maritain in 1948, or Norman Malcolm. However, a recommendation letter for graduate school by Walter T. Stace suggests that he and Theodore M. Greene—Rawls's fellow Episcopalians in Presbyterian Princeton—were the readers of the thesis. They marked it 98 out of 100. Stace's letter reads in part, "his bent of mind is religious, but he is equally capable in fields with no particular connection with religion."⁸

In terms of quality and length, it is not your typical undergraduate thesis. Nonetheless, it does reflect the American educational culture of the 1940s. It is steeped in a dated Protestant narrative about intellectual history, but it displays the creativity and critical spirit that characterizes Rawls's contribution to American philosophy. Rawls, a native of Baltimore, attended the Kent School in northwest Connecticut, an Episcopal boarding school with regular chapel attendance, before entering Princeton with thoughts of becoming a chemist or an Episcopal priest. He decided to major in art and archaeology, until the middle of his

⁷ The chapters are entitled: (1) A General Prospectus, (2) A Vindication of the Natural Cosmos, (3) The Extended Natural Cosmos, (4) The Meaning of Sin, and (5) The Meaning of Faith.

⁸ Princeton University Archives, Mudd Manuscript Library, Graduate Record File. Stace advised Rawls's 1950 dissertation on rationality and ethical theory.

junior year when he transferred into an accelerated degree program in the Philosophy Department. He took one course in what was then called the Committee on Religious Instruction—a course with Christian ethicist George F. Thomas, on “Christian Thought to the Reformation.” The most immediate influence for the thesis appears to be Norman Malcolm’s spring 1942 class, “Social Philosophy,” which included a discussion of the problem of evil.

The thesis shows early indications of the clarity and rigor of the later Rawls. There also is an existential dimension—the dramatic invocation of communal solidarity in a world of alienation and “egoistic aloneness”—that is rare, though not altogether absent, in his later works.⁹ The primary classical references are to Plato, Aristotle, Augustine, and Aquinas. There are brief references to Ireneaus, Origen, and Tertullian. Rawls more extensively discusses Luther and Kierkegaard as well as Hobbes, Rousseau, and Nietzsche. There is one reference to Kant. Rawls relies on a number of then standard secondary sources, including biblical commentaries and encyclopedias.¹⁰ By far, the source most frequently cited is the Bible, especially the synoptic Gospels, Acts, Romans, and, to a lesser extent, Philippians and Thessalonians. In his bibliography, Rawls parenthetically remarks that the Bible is “always the last word in matters of religion” (169).¹¹

The thesis demonstrates the influence of Protestant theology on Rawls: Anders Nygren’s *Agape and Eros*; William Temple’s *Nature, Man, and God*; Reinhold Niebuhr’s *The Nature and Destiny of Man*; and Emil Brunner’s *Man in Revolt* and *Theology of Crisis*. Rawls states that he is “very much indebted” to Nygren’s classic Lutheran text that criticizes Augustine for baptizing Platonic *eros* in a way that sacrifices an ethically responsible and unconditional love for neighbor to an otherworldly love for God (77 n. 11). Nygren, who also influenced Martin Luther King, Jr., contrasted the religious ideas of Christianity based on the humility of God in Christ with Platonic mystical aspirations for the soul’s happiness

⁹ See, for example, the neglected discussions of moral psychology in Part III of *A Theory of Justice* (Rawls 1971, 395–587). In the thesis, Rawls declares, “the worlds of Plato, Aristotle, Epicurus, Augustine, Aquinas, Hobbes, Locke, modern evolutionism, and psychological determinism are all worlds of egoistic aloneness” (1942, 118). He reads Nietzsche’s will to power as the consummation of “spiritual nihilism” (1942, 122), and Nazism as “a revolt against the egoistic aloneness of capitalism and socialism” (1942, 119 n. 6).

¹⁰ These texts include Ernest Barker, *Political Thought of Plato and Aristotle*; Brand Blanshard, *The Nature of Thought*; John Burnaby *Amor Dei*; C.H. Dodd, *Epistle of Paul to the Romans*; Etienne Gilson, *Spirit of Medieval Philosophy*; Hugh Macintosh, *Types of Modern Theology*; Arthur McGiffert, *History of Christian Thought*; Benjamin Warfield, *Studies in Tertullian and Augustine*; and J.S. Whale, *Christian Doctrine*.

¹¹ Rawls holds, “the Bible has told us all we need to know about [God], and everyone who tries to learn more is doomed to failure. 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” (2).

based on a theory of rational ascent to the eternal Forms.¹² The dominant theological voice in the thesis, however, belongs neither to Niebuhr nor Nygren. That role is played by the Swiss Reformed theologian, Emil Brunner (1889–1966). In the preface, Rawls states:

Amongst theologians I think Brunner is the person who I have learnt the most from, and I think his work best illustrates what I mean by a theology based on the intimate and personal quality of the universe, together with a clear and unflinching recognition that the universe is a community of Creator and created [ii].

Brunner was a visiting professor of theology at Princeton Theological Seminary in 1938–1939. He briefly considered accepting a joint appointment with the university and the seminary, but decided to return to Switzerland with the onset of World War II. I have found no evidence of a Brunner–Rawls encounter. The spirit of Brunner, however, must have remained at Princeton.

Brunner was a major figure in the “neo-orthodox” theological movement that opposed the liberal Protestantism represented by someone like Schleiermacher. Theological disputes were connected by this movement to political claims that liberal Protestantism had neither the intellectual nor the ecclesiological resources needed to understand, much less combat, the crisis of totalitarianism and fascism. Because of his accessible writing style and the available English translations of his books, Brunner had more influence in American theological circles in the 1930s and 1940s than Karl Barth—though Barth would rapidly eclipse Brunner in terms of influence.

Brunner is best known for his debate with Barth about natural theology. He is seen as the Protestant defender of a natural theology that locates a “point of contact” between reason and revelation. Barth famously pronounced, “Nein!,” to Brunner’s account of nature and grace (Barth 1946). He thought that it demonstrated a lingering Kantianism that privileges human autonomy over and against divine activity, and thereby threatens to render the world secure in its ontological independence from God. Rawls’s Brunner is not the Brunner of the Barth–Brunner debate, at least in terms of theological method. He does not mention their famous confrontation of 1934. Yet elements of Brunner’s “personalism” (influenced by Buber, Husserl, and Kierkegaard) are littered throughout the thesis. In particular, Rawls emphasizes Brunner’s theory of knowledge as “personal encounter” and applauds Brunner’s effort to oppose abstract

¹² Nygren influences King’s personalism, but the decisive influence of Paul Tillich allows King to develop a more positive account of love’s relation to creative justice than Brunner, Niebuhr, Nygren, or the later Rawls (Williams 1990). Love’s relation to justice offers a promising site for dialogue between liberal theory and Christian theology. For the importance of love for Rawls’s theory of justice, see Mendus 1999.

mysticism with a concrete imperative that accents Christian love as responsiveness to the neighbor. This imperative, according to Brunner and Rawls, responds to a distinctively Christian account of freedom grounded in the revelation of God in Jesus Christ.

Rawls's most polemical prose is found in the first page of the preface. He announces two aims for the thesis:

(1) To enter a strong protest against a certain scheme of thought which I have called naturalism . . . Naturalism is the universe in which all relations are natural and in which spiritual life is reduced to the level of desire and appetite. I believe that naturalism leads inevitably to individualism, that it cannot explain community and personality, and that it loses the inner core of the universe. Since this manner of thought has been prevalent in the West since Augustine, we are proposing more or less of a "revolution" by repudiating this traditional line of thought. I do not believe [sic] that the Greek tradition mixes very well with Christianity and the sooner we stop cow-towing to Plato and Aristotle the better. An ounce of the Bible is worth a pound (possibly a ton) of Aristotle. (2) The second aim is to attack a specific Christian problem (like that of sin and faith) using the concepts which are derived from Biblical thought [i].

In arguing these points, Rawls confesses that he will "state nothing new, startling, or original" (1). He justifies the redundancy of his project: "because everybody knows it, we are liable to forget it" (1). It is not clear how Rawls intends his reader to take these remarks. On the one hand, he could mean that everyone "knows" these claims are obviously true. However, that runs counter to his apologetic stance against secular philosophies. On the other hand, he might be adopting a less ambitious claim that everyone knows his claims are what Christians take to be the truth about God and the world. However, that claim runs counter to his apologetic stance against alternative Christian theologies. With this ambiguity in mind, I turn to an account of what his thesis tries to help its readers remember.

Following his two aims, Rawls distinguishes between what he calls natural relations and personal relations in order to defend the latter against the priority of natural relations in Western philosophy.¹³ This distinction between the natural and the personal provides the conceptual framework for his account of sin and faith.

Personality, according to Rawls, does not mean individuality. He likens it to "spirit"—a uniqueness that is "not reducible to the possession of a particular body or the summary of mental states" (2). Human beings

¹³ Rawls actually divides relations into three types: (a) personal or communal—the relations of "I-Thou," (b) natural/individualistic—the relations of a desiring "I" and an object desired, and (c) causal. Causal relations refer to relations between objects, like food to a table. He does not pursue these relations because they involve things not persons (Rawls 1942, 6).

become *persons* in community, which is to be contrasted with notions of community as “an aggregate of individuals” (2–3). Persons are communal beings, and “the universe in its spiritual aspect is a community of persons manifesting the glory of God and being related to Him” (3). Christians claim that there is a being called God who “has revealed Himself in Christ Jesus” (1). As bearers of the image of this God, persons are “capable of entering into community by virtue of the likeness to God, who is Himself community, being the Triune God” (5). The character of the personal and the communal is what sets humanity apart from other creatures of nature.

These beliefs, Rawls asserts, are assumed from the outset because “every theology and every philosophy proceeds to investigate experience with certain fundamental presuppositions” (1). He admits that some presuppositions are more reasonable than others, presumably when examined in light of experience. He states that his presuppositions “have empirical meaning and are derived from experience” (4). He also states that they could be rationally defended, but he does not have “time to show their validity” (4). It is not clear what standards of rationality Rawls imagines would oversee such a procedure.¹⁴ Like the claim about what his readers already know, Rawls’s account of presuppositions is ambiguous. He does not make clear the relation between experience, rationality, and presupposition. Theological presuppositions, he claims, are not arbitrary postulates in a deductive system (4). He also is adamant that Christian faith as a way of life is not to be confused with a set of beliefs because “belief is a cognitive attitude which holds certain propositions as being true or false” (18). Biblical revelation “was not primarily the revelation of some eternal truth (that is a Greek notion) [sic] God’s word is something active” (161). Rawls, then, is “doubtful whether natural theology can tell us very much” about the Christian sort of God (2; see also 18).¹⁵ For Rawls, “revelation tells us that God’s name is Christ, so when we pray we do not mumble empty metaphysical phrases, but we address God as Christ, the Son of God, who is our mediator” (55). On my reading, I take Rawls to be fending off both skeptical challenges and excessively confident statements about the nature of God in order to pursue conceptual analysis of his Christian presuppositions. He wants

¹⁴ Contemporary theories of religious knowledge distinguish epistemic warrant or rational entitlement from incorrigible certitude (see, for example, Wolterstorff 1983). I suspect Rawls is operating with a less permissive and more foundationalist concept of rationality.

¹⁵ Rawls’s thesis reads like the opening of Hauerwas’s Gifford Lectures, which also highlight the Trinitarian nature of the Christian God. Hauerwas writes: (1) “natural theology divorced from a full doctrine of God cannot help but distort the character of God” (2001, 15), and (2) “put in the categories we have learned to use in modernity, I show why ethics cannot be separated from theology” (2001, 17). Hauerwas similarly claims that he is “not trying to think a new thought or to rethink an old one in a new way” (2001, 16). Rawls’s brief account of natural theology parallels revisionist readings of Aquinas, especially Preller 1967.

to articulate the appropriate rules for Christian theological discourse given its basic commitments. His task is to determine the right ways to talk about God, sin, and faith and to undermine what he takes to be the dominant bad ways of talking about them.

Here is the grammar that governs these commitments.¹⁶ Sin is defined as the “destruction and repudiation of community” (5). The result and consequence of sin is “aloneness . . . spiritual cut offness . . . desolating ‘closedness’” (17). Faith is the “integration into and reconstruction of community” (123). Plato, Aristotle, Augustine, and Aquinas all fail to understand community and personality because they “consider ethics a matter of relating persons to proper objects, such as the Form of the Good, Truth or God” (6). Objects, in these philosophies, appear as “brute fact, as something ‘there’ to be desired or grasped or else ignored and avoided” (7). Rawls’s concern seems not to be with eudaimonism as such, but the impersonality and egoism of desire that defines natural relations.

Personal relations require “self-revelatory action” (10), a point to which Rawls returns in his discussion of the incarnation: “to restore man’s faith, God had to come, He had to reveal His own self and He had to call man” (18). The world of natural relations simply does not invite the same kind of moral inquiry as personal relations. Natural relations are not immoral. They preclude morality itself: “there could be no pride in a world of objects” (9).

Natural relations are characterized by desires, appetitions, and bodily wants. These desires can exceed the body to include desires for rational, aesthetic, and religious objects. Naturalism, in Rawls’s specific sense, refers not only to materialism, but any philosophical system that conceives of relations in naturalistic terms. It encompasses those religious systems that include “such objects as God or the One” (12). Rawls proposes that these systems be called “theistic naturalism, and other more positivistic views may be called materialistic naturalism” (12). Natural ethics, which he associates with Greek philosophy and Roman Catholic theology, “consists of a discussion of the proper objects of desire, of the training of character to indulge in the right activity after right development of the correct habits, of the way to seek the ‘good’ which is the proper end of natural desire” (13).¹⁷

¹⁶ My use of “grammar” borrows from Wittgenstein’s philosophy of language as applied to religious traditions (Lindbeck 1984). Lindbeck proposes a “postliberal” account of religious tradition as “a kind of cultural and/or linguistic framework or medium that shapes the entirety of life and thought . . . It comprises a vocabulary of discursive and nondiscursive symbols together with a distinctive logic or grammar in terms of which this vocabulary can be meaningfully employed” (1984, 33). For a helpful primer on Lindbeck’s approach, see Marshall 1989.

¹⁷ Rawls does not distinguish philosophy conceived as inquiry into proper objects of desire from philosophy conceived as a way of life, or therapy, which emphasizes rightly desiring the good. However, that reading of ancient philosophy was not prevalent in the 1940s.

Naturalism fails to see that human beings are distinctive creatures not because they have any particular attribute, such as rational capacity, but because they resemble the excellences of community found in the triune God. There is a dualism in experience between personal relations that “open us to the realm of spirit” and natural relations that belong to the “realm of nature” (11). Echoing Niebuhr, Rawls asserts that because “man participates in both realms he is the peculiar creature that he is” (11). Natural ethics effectively “excludes personality, community, and God, although it may use His name” (13). In a move that resonates with contemporary theology, Rawls insists that “we are mistaken if we think of God as another object of desire . . . we thereby make Him a part of nature” (14).¹⁸ He criticizes Augustine and Aquinas for conceiving of God as a “merely bigger and better object for our enjoyment” (63). In fact, he protests, “to the writer it is sheer impiety to desire God as an object” (86). Augustine and Aquinas represent “a return to paganism in a subtle and even more dangerous form” (86). Rawls writes, “we may ask Augustine and Aquinas on what basis can community be established in their proper-act natural cosmos . . . the commandment to love our neighbor causes both of them considerable difficulty” (95). Placing God within a metaphysical frame of reference is the fundamental problem of theistic naturalism. Rawls imagines a more radical divine transcendence that cannot be captured by the language of a graduated spiritual ascent.

This central claim about how to speak about God’s transcendence best represents his effort to provide a grammar for Christian theology. According to Rawls, to speak of God as an object constitutes the basic form of sin: “to turn a personal relation into a natural relation” (87). The person and the personal must not be “naturalized.” Education and habituation, even when connected to divine grace, offer insufficient strategies for endorsing personality and community because they are essentially acquisitive forms of desire. He does note that Augustine and Aquinas have “a little more pessimistic view of human nature and considerably higher aspiration” than the Greeks (63). However, their differences from Aristotle and Plato are “merely a matter of degree” (63). In fact, Rawls rejects the concept of the will for Christian thought because it is too bound up with Greek naturalism: “Augustine is still Greek” (71).¹⁹ Personality is “not a thing that wills,” like a hunter that preys on its desired object or a machine that performs actions (129).

¹⁸ By refusing to speak of God within an order of being, certain contemporary theologians try to overcome competitive understandings of divine immanence and transcendence. For diverse formulations, see Burrell 1987; Tanner 1988; Marion 1991; and Adams 1999.

¹⁹ Rawls laments, “it is with regret that one turns away from Augustine, for one cannot help but admire the depth of his mind and the profundity of his thought” (82).

Rawls further claims that human beings have the tendency to read “fallen nature into the nature of God” (136). A bad theology that reads sin into divine nature is the sort of conception of God that Rawls finds in Aristotle, “who pictures God as a being who contemplates His own perfection with nary a squint at the rest of world” (137). When incorporated into Christian doctrines of election, this Greek notion, Rawls claims, has led to “many harsh predestinarian conclusions” (160). Drawing on C.H. Dodd, Rawls argues against the view that God is an angry judge—the wrath of God is better seen as “the objective process of sin working its own retribution in the world” (136). God “does not actively condemn in the form of punishment, but He speaks to us in such a way that our own sin judges us” (152).²⁰ Steeped in Nygren and Brunner, Rawls argues that the Christian has faith in God “because His forgiveness and charity exceeds our fullest expectations” (87). False conceptions of God, especially a wrathful God, give rise to what Rawls calls “the bargain basis” of “legalism in religion and in contract theories of politics” (138). The bargain “is a method used by the sinner to bind the ‘other’ and to protect his own self” (138). Bargaining “springs from fear, and fear, is the most self-centering of all emotions” (138). The aloneness and separation of the bargain are most evident in the thought of Hobbes, who tries to establish community by fear, which is “self-defeating” (140). Against the wrathful God that is feared and placated, Rawls insists “we must accept the absolute preveniency of God’s election” (141). Like sin, election also has a “double axis” (159) or “dialectical character” (158)—both to God and to neighbor. Rawls’s notion of radical transcendence, then, is meant to secure personal relations rather than destroy the possibility of meaningful human activity.

The *Imago Dei* renders human beings responsible: “personality with obligations,” capable of answering God’s loving call to be in community (15). In one of many florid passages, Rawls writes:

Rousseau bids us to return to the woods, the Epicureans ask us to retire from society, while the Yoga philosophy urges us to proceed to a state of peaceful “nothing.” Man’s true salvation consists not in escaping community but in being properly integrated to community [16].

In rejecting the dominance of natural relations, Rawls is clear that he does not wish to “repudiate nature as such” (14). The world of personal relations is to be fully embodied: “The man who is elected and restored

²⁰ Rawls’s argument is similar to John Milbank: “real, positive Christological forgiveness is . . . not reactive, since it is only the sustained giving of the original gift” (Milbank 2003, 68).

to sonship before God is not thereby lifted out of the earthly community" (158). Pilgrims of faith are "to help bring the totality of creation" back to God (167). Community is not "a by-product of natural forces or of agreements for mutual advantage, but is that which constitutes the inner essence of man's being and of all those beings to whom he is so intimately related" (124). Rawls repeats the common charge that Hellenism had corrupted Christianity, tempting Christians to adopt various heresies, including gnosticism, docetism, manicheanism, and montanism. Greek thought, according to Rawls, wants to escape the body. The Jew and the Christian, however, know "nothing of the soul as something immersed in and imprisoned in a body" (36). The body makes the signs necessary for communications that in turn make community possible. Rawls speculates, "since the form of our body is no disgrace, we may expect that the heavenly body will not be greatly altered in visible appearance" (54). The body also limits the extent of human sin. It "prevents human sin from being purely satanic" (56). I take Rawls to be arguing (unbeknownst to him and much like Augustine and Aquinas) that angels and demons become radically evil when they fall because they have no bodies to create friction. Angels, it seems, have nothing to bind them to creation or community once they fall. Creatureliness is the "gift" that holds sin in check (100).²¹

Naturalism mistakenly identifies all desires and passions as belonging to the same kind. Ancient philosophers think passions stand in need of reason to control them so that one can become virtuous. However, for Rawls, there is a "qualitative difference" between the passions of nature and the passions of the spirit (46). It is important that the Devil, "the worst of all sinners," is a spiritual being. The Devil "is a creature possessing all the Greek virtues, but nevertheless the most wicked of all souls created by God" (47). As such, the Greeks could never arrive "at an adequate or convincing concept of sin" (52). There is a prison house for the young Rawls, but it is "not the body, but the spirit, locked within itself by its own willful and perverse egotistic self-love" (117).

It is the corruption of the spirit that is the cause of the "willful perversity which abuses or destroys personal relations" (91). The sinner believes what Rawls calls the "egotist lie, namely, that he is a person distinct and superior" (102). In another florid description, Rawls describes the capitalist walking in his estate "inwardly praising himself on his success" (102). Moreover, he is quick to claim that he is "not spreading Marxist propaganda" (101). Capitalism and Marxism are equally vitiated by the fact that "the sin of using people as means only, as Kant would say, can be

²¹ The significance of the body and sign-making are prominent features of contemporary Augustine studies, employing similar arguments to Rawls's case *against* Augustine (see, for example, Williams 1989; Cavadini 1995; and Markus 1996).

found in all regions of experience” (102–3). I note that this single reference to Kant is the one positive reference to a philosopher in the thesis. Rawls’s early anthropology fixes on the notion of sin as something internal to the sinner: “Throughout the centuries, man has exercised his ingenuity in blaming something outside himself” (96). The priority of the inner personal dynamics of sin has been eclipsed by the modern structural emphasis on institutions and methods of progressive reform. Rawls claims (without reference to Kant) that “it was an 18th century idea that bad institutions were one of the great barriers to a fully good mankind” (96). Thus, for this Rawls, “bad institutions are a sure sign of sinful men” (97). Social philosophies that focus on institutions and highlight “economic reform” and the “education of intelligence,” are “superficial” and insufficient (125). These “modern methods fail to see the real difficulty because they are based on superficial anthropologies” that reduce human persons to economic creatures (128).

This reasserted privileging of the personal rather than the institutional can be seen as evangelical pietism by the young Episcopalian. It is bad people who give rise to bad societies, not the other way around. However, Rawls’s doctrine of original sin is nuanced. This nuance is seen in his blunt criticism of Reinhold Niebuhr’s discussion of anxiety as the precondition of sin. Rawls states that Niebuhr’s view is “highly sophisticated and does not accord with the facts” (98). Niebuhr goes too far in identifying an epistemological reason for original sin; namely, the self-deceptions wrought by anxiety.²² Rawls counters, “we have to admit that the spirit simply corrupts itself. . . the beginning of sin must be conceived as taking place in this unfathomable ‘causeless’ way” (98). For Rawls, “the apparent inevitable tendency to do this we may term, if we care to, Original Sin” (98). However, despite Rawls’s emphasis on the mystery of personal iniquity, examination of the group expression of sin is not absent. In fact, I suspect this is one of the most telling features of Rawls’s early theology that coincides with his later work.

Rejecting a classical theological formulation, Rawls claims that sin is not simply “rebellion against God” (110). Because personal relations are interdependent, sin in relation to God implies sin in relation to one’s fellow neighbor (113). The precise character of Rawls’s description is illustrative of the broader political implications of his theology. He associates sin with the tendency of groups to close in upon themselves. The egoistic lie of the sinner becomes writ large in the egoistic lie of the group. Rawls writes:

²² This point has been recently made by Mathewes 2001. Mathewes argues that Niebuhr is not Augustinian *enough*, a claim that would place the young Rawls more fully within Mathewes’s “Augustinian” tradition.

The more closed the group is the more pleasing it is to our pride and vanity. There is no satisfaction in being in a group which anyone can join . . . In short, all without the group are inferior, all within are superior. This phenomena [sic] manifests itself everywhere. In college clubs, in older men's clubs, in athletic organizations, in national groups and in rare groups the basic motive is the egotistic satisfaction of being within a superior group . . . As a result there is no better way to kill pride in belonging to a group than to let everybody into it. This latter technique is precisely what Christianity uses by asserting the universal Fatherhood of God. . . . *The development of the closed group has been a distinctive factor in Western civilization. Closed groups are now tearing that civilization to pieces* [104; my emphasis].

Rawls mentions Nazism as a "closed group" in its most "demonic form," but he also includes the "Roman Church," Italian humanists, Calvinists, and Marxists.²³ The real sinners, according to Rawls, are "those who pride themselves on being otherwise" (109). Drawing from Kierkegaard, he maintains that Christian love "seeks equality with the person to whom its givenness is directed" (115). This equality includes equality with those whom Rawls calls the usual scapegoats of society: "the street-walkers, the beggars, the outcasts, the robbers and the drunkards" (109). Christian love is not "something purely sentimental," but an aggressive other-regarding commitment that "grows out of Christian experience" (166).

Rawls's grammar of Christian faith has important implications for his nascent political theory. I have mentioned some of these implications, but I bring this section to a close by focusing on his most explicit statements that run counter to his later philosophy. His theological grammar only accidentally overlaps with the politics of the open society or the social gospel as evident in these passages. More deeply, however, it belies a stance that is thoroughly opposed to the contractarian and autonomy-based tradition of modern political theory that Rawls espoused in his later philosophy. This stance is rather surprising especially when read in the context of Rawls's critics who charge that his Kantian conception of autonomy and rationality does not take account of human vulnerability and dependency.

Rawls claims that his Christian view "suggests that any contract theory of society is false" (21). Hobbes and Locke must be rejected because they do not recognize that human beings exist in communities of interdependence. Social contract theories "fail to see that a person is not a person apart from community and also that true community does not absorb the individual but rather makes his personality possible" (22). In short, Rawls's early personalism has no room for an "unencumbered

²³ I bracket the relationship between liberal Protestant appeals to the universal fatherhood of God and the legacy of Protestant antisemitism and anti-Catholicism.

self” (Sandel 1982). Western thought has perpetuated a false dichotomy between the individual and society:

The idea of justice in the political theories of Hobbes and Locke, the view of Adam Smith that we serve our fellow-men by enlightened self-interest, are all false views of community. Any society which explains itself in terms of mutual egoism is heading for certain destruction. All “contract” theories of society suffer from this fundamental defect [94–95].

Rawls thinks his anthropology avoids this dichotomy because it does not rely on the assumptions of mutual egoism (23). Rather than imagining the individual in competition with society, politics should address the “various types of sin which seek to destroy community” (23). Indeed, like Niebuhr, Rawls concludes that the “the chief problem of politics is to work out some scheme of social arrangements which can so harness human sin so as to make the natural correlates of community and personality possible” (23).

Before turning to the relevance of Rawls’s thesis for contemporary debates, it is worth speculating about Rawls himself. How did this Christian Rawls, theological opponent of the social-contract tradition, become the great secular defender of this tradition in the twentieth century? In a word, what happened after his thesis?

The short answer is World War II, the Holocaust, and Hiroshima.²⁴ Rawls graduated from Princeton, and served in the Pacific for three years—New Guinea, the Philippines, and Japan. He rode on a train through the ruins of Hiroshima after learning of Auschwitz. He lost many friends during the war. By June of 1945, Rawls abandoned his thoughts of entering seminary (Virginia Theological Seminary) and renounced his early religious faith. The arguments he made in his thesis were no longer convincing.

Rawls was particularly troubled by the very doctrines of original sin and predestination that he sought to reconstruct in his thesis. In remarks made near the end of his life, Rawls claims that these doctrines “depict God as a monster moved solely by God’s own power and glory. As if such miserable and distorted puppets as humans were described could glorify anything.”²⁵ Perhaps more telling, however, is Rawls’s rejection of any theodicy that would make divine activity intelligible:

²⁴ For the significant impact of World War II on American legal and political thought, see Primus 1999.

²⁵ John Rawls, “On My Religion,” quoted in Freeman 2007. Freeman valuably connects Rawls’s early religious interests to his later writings. Historians may be able to provide evidence from that time that illuminates Rawls’s changing religious thoughts. Susan Neiman includes Rawls in her suggestive history of modern philosophy organized by the problem of evil rather than rationalism and empiricism (Neiman 2002). She does not consider Rawls’s thesis.

When Lincoln interprets the Civil War as God's punishment for the sin of slavery, deserved equally by North and South, God is seen as acting justly. But the Holocaust can't be interpreted in that way, and all attempts to do so that I have read are hideous and evil. To interpret history as expressing God's will, God's will must accord with the most basic ideas of justice as we know them. For what else can the most basic justice be? Thus, I soon came to reject the idea of the supremacy of the divine will as also hideous and evil [quoted in Freeman 2007].²⁶

How a benevolent and omnipotent God could create and permit such a world as ours, regardless of Christian beliefs about atonement and salvation, posed an intellectual and existential problem for Rawls. There could be no religious compensation for suffering and radical evil. There could be no rational account of violent history reconciled to belief in divine purpose.

He had wrestled with this problem early in his young life with the death of his two brothers.²⁷ His thesis seemed to offer a way out. It delayed conventional post-Kantian philosophical objections to theodicy. Now, it seems, Rawls had no consolation or refuge. Nothing could theologically justify evil, especially appeals to divine mystery, unmerited grace, or even Christian claims about evil as a groundless privation of the good. These moves are taken as excuses for evil that let both God and humanity off the hook. They represent bad faith. The need for humans themselves to work to mitigate the effects of bad fortune can be seen as a central problematic of Rawls's entire work. Therefore, for the later Rawls, divinity can no longer play a role.

²⁶ According to Margaret Rawls, Rawls's unpublished comments were written in the late 1980s or early 1990s. They are biographically instructive but difficult to interpret. Rawls imagines a nontheism "compatible with religious faith" (Rawls, n.d.). He states, "God's reason, I believe, is the same as ours in that it recognizes the same inferences as valid and the same facts as true that we recognize as valid and true" (ibid). On this view, "reasoning in its most basic forms is invariant with respect to the various kinds of beings that exercise it. Hence, God's being, however great the divine powers, does not determine the essential canons of reason" (ibid). What, then, does Rawls mean by rejecting the "idea" of the supremacy of the divine will? Does he mean only to reject voluntarist strands in Christian theology or certain repugnant types of Christian theodicies? Does he distinguish divine will from divine intellect? To borrow from his thesis, does he reject only those theologies that "naturalize" God? Do his remarks defeat the "causeless" evil he defended in the thesis? Augustinian and Thomist theologies, for example, would also reject ideas of divine will as hideous if they were mapped onto a *rationale* for evil. Would Rawls accept Kant's "authentic theodicy" (at the level of belief) rather than "doctrinal theodicy" (at the level of knowledge)?

²⁷ Rawls submitted this note for his 50th Princeton Reunion: "ever since my two younger brothers died of diseases I had at the same time when I was seven and eight, I have been struck by the arbitrariness of fortune" (Rawls 1993, 179). Thomas Pogge notes the brothers contacted diphtheria and pneumonia from Rawls (Pogge 1999, 3).

Rawls's moral rejection of Christian theism never seems to play the antagonistic role for him that it did for someone such as Bertrand Russell. His judgment about the moral danger of Christianity never reaches the polemical pitch of his Christian critics and their attitude toward the moral poverty of liberal democracy. His pragmatic concerns for political stability and democratic civility, alongside his philosophical commitment to pluralism, always tried to accommodate religious believers as welcome and full citizens of a liberal democracy.²⁸ However, for him, belief in a personal God does appear not simply irrational but immoral given the obscenities of the twentieth century. Much like Ivan Karamazov's famous rage against theodicy, Rawls appears unable to imagine a just God of this kind. Christian piety, even an Easter faith that protests against evil, could never give an explanation that was not self-defeating. At the very least, he seems to think that the indeterminacy of a divine will foreclosed anything like classical political theology. Indeed, given the empirical evidence of the authoritarian and antiliberal tendencies of Christianity, Rawls looks elsewhere for principles of right and justice. His diagnosis of the world after the war drives his philosophical search for an ideally just democratic society: "the wars of this century with their extreme violence and increasing destructiveness, culminating in the manic evil of the Holocaust, raise in an acute way the question whether political relations must be governed by power and coercion alone" (Rawls 1996, lxii). In his thesis, Rawls had argued that "the Word is not an ethical precept" because the Christian gospel cannot be reduced to ethics (162). Christian ethics grows "out of a deeper source, namely, the life of God in us, or His word coming to us" (162). The word "bursts into the aloneness of sin of the world and restores it" (145). In the end, this word of which the young Rawls so eloquently spoke was no longer present to him.

2. Conclusion: Beyond Public Reason?

Recent discussions of Rawls and religion have been preoccupied with the "idea of public reason" that places moral restrictions on reasoning from religious convictions to political commitments. This attention is not surprising given the overarching role this idea plays in his mature account of civic virtue. According to Rawls, "the ideal of citizenship imposes a moral, not a legal, duty—the duty of civility—to be able to explain to one another . . . how the principles and policies they advocate and vote for

²⁸ In a 1998 interview, Rawls stated: "I live in a country where 95 or 90 percent of the people profess to be religious, and maybe they are religious, though my experience of religion suggests that very few people are actually religious in more than a conventional sense" (Rawls 1999a, 616).

can be supported by the political values of public reason” (Rawls 1996, 217). When Christians, for example, argue in certain political forums, they should appeal only to public reasons that are accessible to all human beings regardless of their philosophical or religious backgrounds. Importantly, to his mind, Rawls limits these restrictions to deliberation on constitutional essentials and questions of basic justice (Rawls 1996, 214). To make appeals based on private opinion in these fundamental contexts is somehow unbecoming of a democratic citizen.

For many religious citizens, as we have seen, even these limited restrictions raise doubts about the legitimacy of liberal democracy. They wonder whether committed liberal democrats must be skeptical about religious faith or believe that religious convictions are incapable of rational justification. They further wonder whether being reasonable, on Rawls’s view, simply means accepting his story about contractarianism and its epistemic justification (Rawls 1996, 48–54).²⁹ Given the considerable attention to this issue, one gets the impression that it constitutes the most morally relevant feature of the role of religion in public life.

To put my cards on the table, I agree with those who find these restrictions troubling, whatever praiseworthy moral concerns they try to address in establishing a political conception of justice. They are (1) impractical (rational justifications are always relative to epistemic or cognitive context); (2) historically naïve (religious convictions have inspired some of the most democratic episodes in public life); (3) strategically self-defeating (regulating public speech will not alleviate, and may fuel, the very real political dangers of religious convictions); and (4) antidemocratic (these restrictions impose an unjust political burden on many religious citizens that often betrays an excessive fear of democratic politics itself).³⁰ In the development of his writings, Rawls consistently moved to a less and less restrictive view (Rawls 1999b). His mature statements, with all of their qualifications, might relieve some of his religious critics—especially those sympathetic to his account of the burdens of judgment (Rawls 1996, 54–58). In his discussions of “witnessing” and “conjecture,” Rawls is clear that citizens are free to argue as they wish in what he calls the “background culture.” He also is clear that he intends no favor for “secular” reasons over against “religious” reasons.

²⁹ Jeffrey Stout points out that “someone can count as unreasonable on [Rawls’s] definition even if he or she is epistemically entitled, on the basis of sound or compelling reasons, to consider the quest for a *common* justificatory basis morally unnecessary and epistemologically dubious” (Stout 2004, 67).

³⁰ Versions of these claims are developed extensively by liberal critics of Rawlsian liberalism, especially Nicholas Wolterstorff, Timothy P. Jackson, Christopher Eberle, and Jeffrey Stout.

He even opens the door for religious reasons in the political domain if in due course proper political reasons are provided. However, even this late introduction of “the proviso” presupposes a rather restricted standard of rationality as well as reasonableness. He never abandons the search for a “shareable public basis of justification for all citizens” (Rawls 1999b, 608). In practice, the weight of the entire theory threatens to undermine its political purpose.³¹ Other notable “restrictionists,” such as Richard Rorty, show evidence of expansive moves under the philosophical pressure of recent work in epistemology (Rorty 2003; Wolterstorff 2003). Similar trends can be identified in related debates about “deliberative democracy” that emerge from the influential work of German philosopher Jürgen Habermas. “Communicative action” differs from “public reason” in many respects. However, for my purposes, both unnecessarily rely on strategies of exclusion because of their overly ambitious ideals of linguistic and rational agreement—a point eloquently put by Danielle Allen in her recent book, *Talking to Strangers* (Allen 2004).

Any ethics of citizenship should offer moral constraints on political discourse, but these constraints need not take account of whether or not such speech is “religious” or not. One need not be committed to secularism in order to hold that no religious conviction is to be given *privilege* in a liberal democracy (Stout 2004, 93–100). Rawls, no doubt, would agree that liberalism cannot be committed to a comprehensive doctrine like secularism. Rawlsianism can be pushed in multiple directions on justification. However, at the very least, there have been unintended negative consequences because of the way in which many political theorists write about the inherently disrespectful nature of religious arguments. Christian citizens may have internal theological (as well as moral) reasons for trying their rhetorical best to communicate about human goods with those who do not share their convictions. To fellow theists, the Christian might make one sort of appeal; and, to those who find this appeal absurd, she might make some other sort of appeal without contradiction or duplicity (Eberle 2002).

A more freewheeling ethic of citizenship can be dangerous. Nonetheless, to my mind, that is democratic politics. Democratic deliberation means we should let a thousand flowers bloom in the garden of political discourse. Given the centrality of speech for democratic politics, we will continue to talk about the ethics of political talking. Moreover, this debate will become increasingly stale if it continues to focus narrowly on epistemological issues. This emphasis on epistemology, whether

³¹ Jeffrey Stout writes, “the now rather baroque theory is simply too complicated to serve its intended public purpose as an action guide. If these scruples were to be followed by the masses, we would all need catechetical instruction from the Rawlsians” (Stout 2004, 315 n. 13).

implicit or explicit, tempts theorists to say too much about other people's rationality or irrationality. I hope it will strike theorists and their fellow citizens that this issue is not as central a problem as they now think. Sometimes philosophical and moral progress can be achieved by deciding not to answer certain questions. Even if I am wrong about Rawls on public reason, however, there are other ways to think about the intersection of religion, theology, and democracy. Finding other ways to imagine this intersection is a pressing task, especially given the need to replenish the moral energies that sustain and motivate liberal democracies.

Debates about restricted speech themselves restrict more considered inquiry into the motivational aspects of democratic virtues as well as the serious nonepistemic material challenges that face public life in common. Given my reading of Rawls's thesis, this concern overlaps with a recent criticism of Rawls offered by Sheldon Wolin. Wolin argues that Rawls's central concern with the "political consequences of beliefs marks an important moment in the evolution of liberalism" (Wolin 2004, 540). For Wolin, this preoccupation with doctrinal differences eclipses attention to "class conflicts, economic power structures, and their political proxies" (2004, 541). Rawls's ensuing effort to keep religion private through the "ideological orthodoxy of the 'politically reasonable'" has deepened the "rift between liberalism and democracy, a rift with political consequence" (Wolin 2004, 542). It has alienated potential religious leaders and ideas that once "played a powerful role in promoting democratic advances" (Wolin 2004, 542). I would also connect this rift to the increasing neglect of Rawls's "difference principle" as a possible site of convergence between Rawlsian and Christian ethics. Most relevant to my reading of Rawls's thesis, however, Wolin argues that contemporary liberal theory has been influenced by the secularization of theorists themselves. He writes:

As liberal theorists—many of whom are academics—become secularized, the religious impulse does not vanish but is sublimated into a conception of the political. There politics is purified into an idealized theoretical realm where the outcasts—the disadvantaged, the helpless, the victims of discrimination—are to be vindicated. The political becomes the sign of the lost religious. The repressed religious impulse returns in the form of a political that addresses the politics of conflict as though dealing with doctrinal disputations while excluding the "earthiness" of the economic. [2004, 542]

Reading Rawls's thesis makes explicit the sublimated "lost religious" that Wolin's Marxist suspicion claims to uncover. However, as I argue below, the language of "lost" or "repressed" can be misleading.

Contemporary political theologies adopt similar strategies of unmasking the religious dimensions of secular theory. They are intent on viewing all political theories as relentless secular parodies of theological heresies. Some do emphasize connections between versions of liberalism and normative Christian political thought (O'Donovan 1996; Song 1997). However, attention to Rawls's thesis may encourage those critics of modernity who imagine liberalism as surviving on borrowed capital—"linguistic survivals from the practices of classical theism which have lost the context provided by these practices" (MacIntyre 1981, 60). It may add fuel to the fire of somber narratives of modern liberalism as a fall from grace. It may also encourage those theologians, like Hauerwas and Milbank, who suspect neo-orthodox existentialists of inevitably succumbing to the immanence of secular liberalism because they offer meager accounts of the Christian church as an alternative *polis*.

However, the thesis, as well as the narrative of Rawls's intellectual development over the following two years, challenges his theological critics to reconsider the deep humanity of Rawls's project and the moral commitments of Rawls himself. Bashing Rawls is as fashionable as it is uncharitable. Damning references to the "veil of ignorance" too often replace actually reading Rawls in many Christian circles. These criticisms rarely take account of the circumscribed role that the "original position" plays in Rawls's theory as an artificial device of justification. Rawls's claim that "the good shows the point" of justice as fairness receives scant attention (Rawls 2001, 141). Ethical egoism is not assumed by Rawls, even if self-interest and reciprocity play important conceptual roles in getting Rawls's liberal project off the ground. Rawls does not evacuate the motivations of justice. Rather, he recognizes that the motive to be just—displayed in the willingness to accept the impositions of a "veil of ignorance"—arises in different ways and depends on diverse conceptions of the good. Rawlsianism can be reconstructed as presupposing a rather demanding notion of care for others (Okin 1989). Indeed, Paul Ricoeur offers a provocative reading of Rawls's egalitarian argument against utilitarianism as bearing a "secret kinship with the commandment to love" (Ricoeur 1995, 329). Even the idea of public reason might be reconstructed to reflect an account of the virtues in the context of political disagreement rather than a very restrictive account of rationality. Christians should have their own theological reasons for worrying about what Rawls described as "the zeal to embody the whole truth in politics" (Rawls 1999b, 574). In any case, Christian critics of modernity too often paint with a big brush that does not capture elements of the Christian tradition present within paradigmatic representatives of modern liberalism. Rawls's thesis should encourage both Christian and secular theorists to reconsider the significance of religious thought and

practice for American liberalism.³² That work may require more theological acumen from most political theorists and more charitable readings of liberal political theory from most theologians. It surely will require more attention to the significant role of liberal Protestantism for American democracy.

In a famous footnote to *Political Liberalism* responding to charges that liberal society willy-nilly privileges certain forms of life, Rawls, borrowing from Isaiah Berlin, claims that “there is no social world without loss” (Rawls 1996, 197 n. 32). One of the many losses brought about by the evils of the twentieth century was John Rawls, the philosophical theologian. Of course, one could now read his entire work as a humanist response to the moral impossibility of political theology rather than a pragmatic response to pluralism or the problem of “religion and politics.” However, that strategy, like Rawls, remains linked to a theological pedigree as well.

In the closing passage of *A Theory of Justice*, Rawls argues that “the perspective of eternity is not a perspective from a certain place beyond the world, nor the point of view of a transcendent being; rather it is a certain form of thought and feeling that rational persons can adopt within the world” (Rawls 1971, 587). It is fair to see in this view a kind of Rawlsian piety that is religious but not theistic.³³ Rawls ends his great work with the claim that “purity of heart, if one could attain it, would be to see clearly and to act with grace and self-command from this point of view” (Rawls 1971, 587). It is certainly a different form of piety than the one that inspired the young Rawls. Reinhold Niebuhr would appreciate its desire to connect politics and a life of piety, even if he would think you still need a wider kind of transcendence to imagine (let alone practice) that kind of grace and prophetic self-command. Thus, with his thesis in mind, one wonders whether it may be that Rawls all along has been

³² One of Rawls’s earliest publications was a review of Paul Ramsey’s influential *Basic Christian Ethics*. Rawls criticizes Ramsey for the “vagueness of the criterion which Mr. Ramsey holds as the criterion of Christian ethics” (Rawls 1951, 3). He states: “I fail to see how Christian ethics, on Mr. Ramsey’s interpretation, either transcends what is vaguely called natural law, common sense, and other ordinary ways of reasoning, or how it adds anything to these when we are concerned with how to make (not motive for making) just decisions where, as nearly always, there is more than one neighbor” (1951, 5). In effect, Rawls claims Ramsey lacks a decision procedure for right action—the theme of Rawls’s early work.

³³ See Thomas Nagel on Rawls: “Though his work is entirely secular, he has, I believe, a religious temperament and an understanding of both the power and danger of transcendence, with its capacity to overwhelm worldly constraints” (Nagel 2002, 76). Nagel’s description recalls the closing paragraph of Niebuhr’s *Moral Man and Immoral Society*: “justice cannot be approximated if the hope of its perfect realization does not generate a sublime madness in the soul. Nothing but such madness will do battle with malignant power and ‘spiritual wickedness in high places.’ The illusion is dangerous because it encourages terrible fanaticisms. It must therefore be brought under the control of reason. One can only hope that reason will not destroy it before its work is done” (Niebuhr 1960, 277).

Niebuhr's successor as America's foremost religious thinker about liberal politics.³⁴

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