



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

By John Rawls

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John Rawls never published anything about his own religious beliefs, but after his death two texts were discovered which shed extraordinary light on the subject. *A Brief Inquiry into the Meaning of Sin and Faith* is Rawls's undergraduate senior thesis, submitted in December 1942, just before he entered the army. At that time Rawls was deeply religious; the thesis is a significant work of theological ethics, of interest both in itself and because of its relation to his mature writings. "On My Religion," a short statement drafted in 1997, describes the history of his religious beliefs and attitudes toward religion, including his abandonment of orthodoxy during World War II.

The present volume includes these two texts, together with an Introduction by Joshua Cohen and Thomas Nagel, which discusses their relation to Rawls's published work, and an essay by Robert Merrihew Adams, which places the thesis in its theological context.

The texts display the profound engagement with religion that forms the background of Rawls's later views on the importance of separating religion and politics. Moreover, the moral and social convictions that the thesis expresses in religious form are related in illuminating ways to the central ideas of Rawls's later writings. His notions of sin, faith, and community are simultaneously moral and theological, and prefigure the moral outlook found in *Theory of Justice*.

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Editorial Review

Review

No recent secular moralist has been more influential than John Rawls...[*A Brief Inquiry into the Meaning of Sin and Faith*] undoubtedly reveals an interesting stage in the development of a highly significant philosopher. (Anthony Kenny *Times Literary Supplement* 2009-06-12)

Allows us to see how a very intelligent believer, who once considered the priesthood, lost his Christian faith as a young man. (James Wood *New Yorker* 2009-08-31)

[A] fascinating account of the evolution of his religious convictions. (R. Bruce Douglass *Christian Century* 2009-11-17)

What a pleasure to read John Rawls's senior thesis at Princeton, which he submitted in 1942, long before his book *A Theory of Justice* (1971) established him as America's most respected liberal philosopher of law. Rawls's later writings are as *pareve* (neutral) as could be--they have no hint of the religious passion and wisdom that permeates his senior thesis. Robert Merrihew Adams has a long accompanying essay reviewing what is the most exciting in Rawls's thesis. (*Tikkun* 2009-05-01)

About the Author

John Rawls was James Bryant Conant University Professor at Harvard University. He was recipient of the 1999 National Humanities Medal.

Thomas Nagel is University Professor, Professor of Law, and Professor of Philosophy at New York University.

Joshua Cohen is Marta Sutton Weeks Professor of Ethics in Society at Stanford University and editor of *Boston Review*.

Robert Merrihew Adams is Clark Professor of Philosophy, Emeritus, Yale University.

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