

## **Latent Religiosity: Linking the Liberal and Christian John Rawls**

Few thinkers would be comfortable with the publication of their senior thesis. It is safe to assume that John Rawls would have harbored similar uneasiness about such an idea. Regardless of what his wishes may have been, Rawls' thesis, *A Brief Inquiry into the Meaning of Sin and Faith: An Interpretation Based on the Concept of Community*, was published posthumously in early 2009 along with a private reflection on his religious journey written in 1997 entitled "On My Religion." What is most unique about Rawls' thesis is that, rather than provide a basis for his more mature work, it deals explicitly with a religious aspect that is entirely foreign to his later writings. As is often the case with great thinkers, there is much more beneath the surface of this apparent inconsistency. Any conclusions drawn from the work must be accepted with the caveat that it was written by a very young man under the time constraints of the semester.<sup>1</sup> Caveats aside, it appears as though this exegesis offers much fruitful background as to why Rawls harbored many of the ideas he did in his later life. To claim total continuity throughout his thought would be both foolish and untenable. Few thinkers are able to remain totally consistent from one work to the next. Yet there are common threads of the inviolability of the person and community that are woven throughout the narrative of Rawls' career. Even some of the most glaring disparities that seem revealing at first glance may be reconciled with Rawls' later notions of justice as fairness and political liberalism. When taken in conjunction with the ideas revealed in his personal religious memoir, "On My Religion," the landscape of Rawls' understanding of religion and its place in founding community becomes

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<sup>1</sup> Cohen, Joshua and Nagel, Thomas. "Introduction" in *A Brief Inquiry into the Meaning of Sin and Faith*. (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2009). pp. 1-23. p. 3

much clearer. His subsequent “rejection” of Christianity falls into the background as his consistent affirmation of the need for a personalized community that respects all individuals as ends in themselves shines through and establishes a type of political *agape*.<sup>2</sup>

It is far beyond the scope of this project to attempt to deal with the specific characteristics of Rawls’ neo-orthodox Christian thought as expounded in his thesis. What is at issue is the need to establish a logical bridge to link Rawls’ religious writings to his mature works, which appear to be antagonistic towards faith. Undertaking such an exegesis must be done with care since Rawls’ thought shifts from a comprehensive liberal doctrine in *A Theory of Justice*, (hereafter *TJ*) to a much more restrained version of political liberalism in his later work; though the principles of justice expounded in *TJ* apply throughout.<sup>3</sup> Furthermore, Rawls never explicitly mentions any political notions in his thesis. *Prima facie*, this appears to be a serious impediment to discovering any continuity, but in reality, it is negligible. Constant affirmations of what it is to be human, what constitute proper relationships between individuals, and what type of actions and behaviors are acceptable when trying to build true community are all present throughout his body of work. Rawls’ later disparity stems from the fact that the ground is shifted from one in which God’s will dictates human action, to one in which:

...public reason specifies at the deepest level the basic moral and political values that are to determine a constitutional democratic government’s relation to its citizens and their relation to one another.”<sup>4</sup>

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<sup>2</sup> Dombroski, Daniel A. *Rawls and Religion: The Case for Political Liberalism*. (Albany: SUNY Press, 2001). p. 18-21

<sup>3</sup> Rawls, John. “Idea of Public Reason Revisited” in *Collected Papers*. Ed. Samuel Freeman. (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1999) pp. 573-615. p. 614 (hereafter *Idea of Public Reason*)

<sup>4</sup> Ibid. p. 574

Eschatological notions of community in his thesis lose their Christian dogmatism in his later works and reestablish themselves in the political while maintaining the same bases.

The revolutionary nature of the thesis can only truly be seen in light of Rawls' assessment of religion and other comprehensive ideas of the good that appear in his later work. *TJ* does not explicitly deal with the problems that present themselves when comprehensive theories are ascribed to. In contradistinction, these issues become the cornerstone of Rawls' later work on liberal democratic theory. What plagued Rawls after publishing *TJ* was his attempt to ground his notion of moral agency on metaphysical notions of individual autonomy derived from the work of Immanuel Kant.<sup>5</sup> Such an understanding allowed citizens to look beyond the empirical for the bases of human action in the political realm. This method could become especially problematic if individuals chose to ground their understanding of what it is to be citizens strictly on their religious sentiments. Though religious beliefs may be employed in forming the bases of personal morality, such views are unwavering, and would lead to irreconcilable social differences. Since, often times, people see themselves primarily in terms of their faith rather than as citizens of a well-ordered society, the political ramifications of Rawls' view had the potential to lead to catastrophic results for a liberal polity if actualized. Upon realizing the untenable nature of his constructs in a liberal framework, Rawls attempted to revise his exposition in *TJ* in his Dewey Lectures, which became known as "Kantian Constructivism in Moral Theory."<sup>6</sup> Here, Rawls inverted his previous conclusion and argued

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<sup>5</sup> Freeman, Samuel. "Introduction: John Rawls- An Overview" in *The Cambridge Companion to Rawls*. (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2003), pp. 1-61. p. 28-29

<sup>6</sup> Ibid. p. 28-29

that moral powers were actually subordinate to the dictates of society and must be understood as secondary to political rights. He argued that:

This conception of justice has a natural preeminence. It is essential to see, however, that not even this conception is accepted on the basis of the whole truth, if the whole truth is to include the truths of religion and philosophy and of moral and political doctrine...There is no alternative, then to founding a conception of justice suitable for a well-ordered democratic society on but a part of the truth, and not the whole, or, more specifically, on our present commonly based and shared beliefs, as above defined.

It is important to observe that this practical answer does not imply either skepticism or indifference about religious, philosophical, or moral doctrines. We do not say that they are all doubtful or false, or address questions to which truth and falsehood do not apply. Instead, long historical experience suggests, and many plausible reflections confirm, that on such doctrines reasoned and uncoerced agreement is not to be expected. Religious and philosophical views express outlooks toward the world and our life with one another, severally and collectively, as a whole. Our individual and associative points of view, intellectual affinities and affective attachments, are too diverse, especially in a free democratic society, to allow of lasting and reasoned agreement.<sup>7</sup>

Awareness of the need to better address this issue subtly admits the insufficiency of his earlier theory based on “the full-fledged Kantian liberalism Rawls had defended in *A Theory of Justice*.”<sup>8</sup> Stability in a democratic society would be nearly impossible to maintain if comprehensive moral concepts remained acceptable in the public realm. The main concern emerged as trying to depict: “How it is possible for there to exist over time a just and stable society of free and equal citizens who remain profoundly divided by reasonable religious, philosophical, and moral doctrines?”<sup>9</sup> In order to begin to address this conundrum, a distinction is drawn between a comprehensive notion of the good, and what Rawls calls a “thin” conception. This clarification leads to the exposition of his idea of public reason, which shifts

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<sup>7</sup> Rawls, John. “Kantian Constructivism in Moral Theory” in *Collected Papers*. Ed. Samuel Freeman. (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1999). pp. 303-358. p. 328-329

<sup>8</sup> Stout, Jeffery. *Democracy and Tradition*. (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2004). p. 66

<sup>9</sup> Rawls, John. *Political Liberalism*. (New York: Colombia University Press, 1996). p. xxxix (hereafter *PL*)

the emphasis to a refined political liberalism.<sup>10</sup> Rawls emphasized his revised goal when wrote that:

To find a shared idea of citizens' good appropriate for political purposes, political liberalism looks for an idea of rational advantage within a political conception that is independent of any particular comprehensive doctrine and hence may be the focus of an overlapping consensus.<sup>11</sup>

The introduction of the notion of an overlapping consensus drastically reduces the amount of discourse that can enter the public realm; effectively relegating the religious element to a backseat role. Rawls defines overlapping consensus as a political conception that: "is supported by the reasonable through opposing religious, philosophical, and moral doctrines that gain a significant body of adherents and endure over time from one generation to the next."<sup>12</sup> Religious elements may enter the consensus, but those that do would not be viewed as offensive by members of a well-ordered society because of their ubiquity in public sentiment. Beliefs that are outside of this overlapping consensus must remain so since respect for justice entails a duty of civility that is contained in the concept of political liberalism. Civility prevents citizens from advocating ideas which could lead to the use of the coercion to force individuals into a comprehensive doctrine.<sup>13</sup> Rawls' notion of basic primary goods defines the essential liberties that are encompassed by the principles of justice and includes the tolerance

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<sup>10</sup> Stout. p. 66

<sup>11</sup> *PL*. p. 180

<sup>12</sup> Rawls, John. *Justice as Fairness: A Restatement*. Ed. Erin Kelly. (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2001). p. 32 (hereafter *JAF*)

<sup>13</sup> *PL*. p. 216-217

of differing religious views. Therefore, whatever remains outside of the consensus falls into the “background culture’ of civil society,” and is properly left outside the realm of public reason.<sup>14</sup>

Rawls employs the notion of public reason in an attempt to shift the terms of the debate so that notions of the political based on first principles are “replaced by an idea of the politically reasonable addressed to citizens as citizens.”<sup>15</sup> In essence, public reason applies to the issues held by a society’s overlapping consensus that may be legitimately discussed in political debate. What it is to be a person in the metaphysical sense is no longer relevant for Rawls when individuals have entered the collective public realm. As their natures in the state shift from their more comprehensive self-understanding as fully developed persons into their lesser role as citizens, so too must the arguments they employ in political discourse. Rawls remained aware that: “The exercise of public reason will not as a rule mobilize their full thinking about problems before them since their comprehensive conceptions of the good and the right are bound to entail distinctive views about other aspects than those having to do with justice.”<sup>16</sup> In order to deal with these conflicts, Rawls confined the realm of public reason to that which deals with larger issues of justice. This distinction does not imply that individuals are to radically divide their faith from what they hope to achieve in society. It is to be expected that when they vote on issues, their conscience will be their guide. Restraint is only to be maintained when the discourse on those beliefs is expressed publicly.

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<sup>14</sup> *PL*. p. 14

<sup>15</sup> *Idea of Public Reason*. p. 574

<sup>16</sup> Lenmore, Charles. “Public Reason” in *The Cambridge Companion to Rawls*. (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2003). pp.368-394. p. 380

In order to remain sensitive to the strength of religious beliefs in the lives of individuals, Rawls added the notion of the “proviso,” which assumes that any reasonable comprehensive doctrine, if it is in accordance with the principles of justice, may be introduced into public reason. Rawls’ criteria for the introduction of religious discourse demands that: “proper political reasons- and not reasons given solely by comprehensive doctrines- are presented that are sufficient to support whatever the comprehensive doctrines are said to support.”<sup>17</sup> Though it is unacceptable to attempt to undermine the settled principles of justice, all issues that arise from the application of justice to society may be debated politically on the basis of religion. If the “proviso” is employed properly, Rawls assumed that: “citizens [would be] more willing to honor the duty of civility, and their following the ideal of public reason [would help] foster the kind of society that the ideal exemplifies.”<sup>18</sup>

Properly understood, public reason does not devalue religion by taking it out of the political discourse, but relegates it to a more confined role which allows it to flourish in individual communities rather than thrusting it into too deeply into public debates. At first glance, Rawls’ understanding of public reason appears anathema to true freedom of speech. Some have argued that Rawls’ assessment “seems so contrary to the spirit of free expression that breathes life into democratic culture.”<sup>19</sup> Had Rawls left his notion of public reason as a radical prohibition of any religious element from political discourse, the harsh assessment of him as one who rejected religion and its contributions to society would be sustainable. Instead, Rawls must be seen as one who attempted to maintain the integrity of both political and

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<sup>17</sup> *Idea of Public Reason*. p. 591

<sup>18</sup> *Ibid.* p. 593

<sup>19</sup> Stout. p. 68

religious communities by separating the two. In "On My Religion," Rawls cites the examples of the Greeks and Romans who demanded loyalty to the state, "but beyond that, civil society could be largely free and many different religions flourished in the *polis* and the Empire."<sup>20</sup> The ability of human beings to realize a deeper sense of community necessitates that they choose the form of their relationships while taking precautions to maintain the uniqueness of each human being. This is best accomplished when those involved are in agreement over the most fundamental issues. Religious communities achieve this through consistent doctrine, while political institutions focus on overlapping consensus by reasonable people on basic constitutional provisions. As Charles Larmore points out:

The conception of justice by which we live is then a conception which we endorse, not for the different reasons we may each discover, and not simply for the reasons we happen to share, but instead for reasons that count for us because we can affirm them together.<sup>21</sup>

While remaining sensitive to the fact that people should concern themselves with their relationship to a higher power, Rawls insists that in the political: "our own individual soul and its salvation are hardly important for the larger picture of civilized life, and often we have to recognize this."<sup>22</sup>

With this more complete picture of Rawls' aim, the precautions taken in his exposition of public reason cannot simply be viewed as an attempt to skirt criticism of the lack of stability in justice as fairness, but as a way to define the balance that allows the realization of

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<sup>20</sup> Rawls, John. "On My Religion" in *A Brief Inquiry into the Meaning of Sin and Faith*. pp.259-269. p. 264 (hereafter "On My Religion")

<sup>21</sup> Larmore. P. 368

<sup>22</sup> "On My Religion". p. 265



community in both churches, and the state. Community is a concept that permeates Rawls' thought, but sadly, has not been fully understood. Some of Rawls' biggest critics have been those that claimed that he failed to take notion of community seriously.<sup>23</sup> What has been unavailable to them is Rawls' thesis, which establishes an understanding of community in a religious sense, and whose chief concept of personal relations remains the basis for political community in his later works. Oddly enough, it is through Rawls's earlier religious beliefs, which he abandoned, that his greater project is more fully understood.

Until recently, the issue of most concern when assessing Rawls's religious views was whether or not his conceptions of political liberalism and justice as fairness took religion seriously. Although reading Rawls closely discloses "a deep religious temperament," many have neglected it in their analyses.<sup>24</sup> *A Brief Inquiry into the Meaning of Sin and Faith* forces Rawls' readers to accept the fact that he began with a strong Christian background that almost led him to the priesthood. Its publication makes it impossible for critics to argue that Rawls was unable to assess the importance religious beliefs play in political life. Once the preliminary shock of perceiving Rawls as a religious thinker dissipates, it becomes possible to fully understand his unique notion of personal relations, which remained the basis for his understanding of community throughout the rest of his life.

As is often the case, the title of a work is meant to entice the reader, while the subtitle expresses the essence of the thinker's exegesis. Rawls' thesis proves no exception to the rule.

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<sup>23</sup> Mulhall, Stephen and Swift, Adam. "Rawls and Communitarianism" in *The Cambridge Companion to Rawls*. (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2003). pp. 460-487.

<sup>24</sup> Cohen and Nagel. p. 5

From the outset it is clear that his goal is to understand faith in a manner that he describes as *An Interpretation Based on the Concept of Community*. Contrary to the manner in which he presents it, as an absolute truth, Christianity is valid for Rawls because it accords with his underlying assumptions about the need for community and its ability to properly foster human relationships.<sup>25</sup> Rawls' choice to posit such an assumption proves that community was the main issue for him even before he justified it through his faith. Over fifty years later, Rawls still adhered to these assumptions. His later rejection of Christianity did not result from a revolutionary change in his thought, but from his later assessment that Christian dogmatism "could have deleterious effects on one's character."<sup>26</sup> Focusing on Christian failures such as the Inquisition, Rawls later concluded that: "Christianity is a solitary religion: each is saved or damned individually, and we naturally focus on our own salvation to the point where nothing else may seem to matter."<sup>27</sup> Though Rawls fundamentally misinterprets Christianity in his later years, his assessment of it makes its introduction into the public sphere incompatible because its focus on individual salvation would lead to unwillingness to engender community. It becomes clear through Rawls' personal religious writings that, in his view, a concept's legitimacy in the religious or public realm was derived from whether or not it helped foster community.

The core of Rawls' thesis rests on the distinction he draws between natural relations, or naturalism, and personal relations. By naturalism, he did not mean the belief that "all of reality can be completely described in terms of natural science," as it has come to be understood

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<sup>25</sup> John Rawls. *A Brief Inquiry into the Meaning of Sin and Faith*. p. 113-114 (hereafter *A Brief Inquiry*)

<sup>26</sup> "On My Religion". p. 265

<sup>27</sup> Ibid. p. 265

today.<sup>28</sup> Instead, he referred to it as the proper relationship between a person and an object.

For Rawls, naturalism is: “the universe in which spiritual life is reduced to the level of desire and appetite.”<sup>29</sup> Though naturalism has its proper role when relegated to the relationship between people and things, its transcendence into the realm of human relations becomes terribly destructive. It is based on an egotistic understanding of relationships that engenders individual pride to the detriment of community, and refers to other entities, whether God or people, as means for a greater fulfillment. Many great thinkers such as Plato, Aristotle, and surprisingly, Augustine and Aquinas, are indicted as naturalists by Rawls. His understanding of naturalism is defined by the “I-It” relationship expounded in Martin Buber’s *I and Thou*.<sup>30</sup> Rawls drew from the idea that: “the primitive man speaks the basic word I-you in a natural, as it were, still unformed manner, not yet having recognized himself as an I; but the basic word I-It is made possible only by this recognition, by the detachment of the I.”<sup>31</sup> The emergence of the ego, and its subsequent preeminence, forms the basis of such perverted interactions between individuals. Natural relations, when sinfully applied to other persons, are based on an undeveloped understanding of the self as a communal being. Rawls believed that structuring relationships in a natural manner is destructive to the greater community that God created man to realize; thereby thrusting individuals into a state of detachment from others, and engendering feelings of anxiety which Rawls referred to as “aloneness.”<sup>32</sup>

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<sup>28</sup> Cohen and Nagel. p. 8

<sup>29</sup> *A Brief Inquiry*. p. 107

<sup>30</sup> Adams, Robert Merrihew. “The Theological Ethics of the Young Rawls and Its Background” in *A Brief Inquiry into the Meaning of Sin and Faith*. pp. 24-102. p. 96- 98

<sup>31</sup> Buber, Martin. *I and Thou*. Trans. Walter Kaufmann. (New York: Charles Scribner’s Sons, 1970). p. 73

<sup>32</sup> *A Brief Inquiry*. p. 112

After his scathing critique of naturalism, Rawls presented what he perceived to be the proper type of relationship between individuals, which he referred to as personal. Essentially, the “I-It” dynamic of naturalism becomes transformed into an “I-Thou” relationship.<sup>33</sup> At the outset, Rawls states: “We believe that personality is something unique and is not reducible to the possession of a particular body or the sum of mental states.”<sup>34</sup> Personality is a type of individual essence that composes the inviolability of each person. This establishes the individual as something that cannot be disregarded or viewed as a means to an end. Proper relationships demand that this is taken into account and values each person as person, not as an object. “In personal relations, we are conscious that we are related to ‘others’ who resemble ourselves.”<sup>35</sup> All persons are intimately united to one another through God their creator, and, as a result, must realize that harm done to individuals has far reaching consequences in the community. Throughout the thesis it becomes clear that Rawls’ notion of personal relations embodies a “do unto others” quality that allows individuals to take their own needs seriously while understanding that those of others must be respected as well.

Rawls continually intimates that human beings may only come to discover their true essence through personal relationships. Interaction with one another requires active involvement from all parties that strengthens communal bonds. Since, “Man is a communal being by nature,” our relations allow us to flourish as individuals through our participation with

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<sup>33</sup> For Buber, this relationship refers to the relationship between man and God, but Rawls sees the need for a similar deference and respect between individuals.

<sup>34</sup> *A Brief Inquiry*. p. 111

<sup>35</sup> *Ibid.* p. 115

one another.<sup>36</sup> Rawls arrived at a somewhat Hegelian conclusion that persons cannot exist individually, but are only defined as people through their relation to others. He explicitly states that: "Individuals become persons insofar as they live in community."<sup>37</sup> This conclusion echoes that of Søren Kierkegaard, who wrote that: "the measure for the self is always that in the face of which it is a self."<sup>38</sup> Engaging in personal relationships allows individuals to expose themselves to spirit, which instills them with "the ability to enter into community, that ability to respond to love..."<sup>39</sup> Classical notions of individual morality are dispelled in favor of an understanding that, "salvation must consist in the fulfillment of man's nature by re-integrating him into community."<sup>40</sup> It soon becomes evident that Rawls' understanding of personal relations necessitates an ethics that views community based on personal relations as its highest end.

Having established personal relations as the basis of community, Rawls attempted to define what this all-encompassing notion of community would entail, and why it was necessary to humanity. Rawls readily admits that the concept is somewhat vague and difficult to grasp thoroughly. Taking the notion of God's triune nature to its furthest logical extension, Rawls argues that since man was made in the *Imago Dei*, which is a perfect unity of three distinct persons, man too must find a way to live in community while retaining individuality.

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<sup>36</sup> Ibid. p. 122

<sup>37</sup> Ibid. p. 112

<sup>38</sup> Kierkegaard, Søren. *The Sickness unto Death*. Trans. Walter Lowrie. (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1954). p. 210. Quoted in Adams. p. 69

<sup>39</sup> *A Brief Inquiry*. p. 148

<sup>40</sup> Ibid. p. 122

Attempting to quell criticism that his conception would lead to an undifferentiated mass, Rawls argued that:

It is also false to hold that dependence of the person upon the community implies his subjection to some "general will: or to some "group soul" of the community. The existence of such a general will is a fiction. A community is always a group of persons integrated together by faith, and there is no mysterious principle which subsumes all persons into one person. Likewise mistaken are the fears of those who, in wanting to preserve the independence of the person apart from the community, repudiate the person's necessary dependence on community. They 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. True community, meaning one integrated in faith under God, does not dissolve the person but sustains him. Likewise, true community contains only the possibility of personality. What does destroy the human person in community is not society itself but the *sin* which infects all earthly society. It is the sin of one group which seeks to dominate another group that gives rise to the fear of communal dependence; but in community as such, and in the heavenly community, we have no such fear.<sup>41</sup>

This passage clearly expounds Rawls' understanding of community, which compels Christians out of their solitary existence, and "imagines a more radical divine transcendence that cannot be captured by the language of a graduated spiritual ascent."<sup>42</sup> Christianity in community moves from an isolated faith that longs for God in a naturalistic manner, to one in which the essence of the divine expresses itself experientially in human interaction. Rawls is trying to grasp an experiential faith which he distinguishes from mere belief. Such an understanding is revolutionary in the sense that it is able to integrate the philosophical advances of German Idealism into Christianity. In many ways, Rawls is reestablishing Christianity to its proper form as a religion that may not be capable of total clarity, but becomes comprehensible through living the Sermon on the Mount. Throughout the thesis he remains "adamant that Christian faith as a way of life is not to be confused with a set of beliefs because 'belief is a cognitive

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<sup>41</sup> Ibid. p. 127

<sup>42</sup> Gregory, Eric. "Before the Original Position: The Neo-Orthodox Theology of the Young John Rawls" in *The Journal of Religious Ethics*. Vol. 35, No. 2 (2007). pp. 179-206. p. 190

attitude which holds certain propositions true or false.”<sup>43</sup> Such an assessment of the problems of dogmatic religious assertions which claim validity apart from the experiential reality of the event is stunningly similar to the essence of Eric Voegelin’s much richer account of the issue in *The Ecumenic Age*.<sup>44</sup> Personal relationships in community validate the truth of our interaction with God and actualize the potential to realize our unique personality in relation to others. Correspondingly, this forces believers to comprehend that: “Christian morality is morality in community, whether it be in the earthly community or the heavenly community.”<sup>45</sup>

Such an understanding of morality and ethics leads Rawls to a unique definition of the Christian conception of sin.<sup>46</sup> Rather than accepting the notion that sin is a rebellion against God, Rawls defines it as: “the destruction, annihilation, and repudiation of community.”<sup>47</sup> Any willful attempt to destroy personal relations becomes sinful, though sin itself is derived from one of two conditions, egoism or egotism. Egoism is derived from human wants and needs. It entails injuring personality in order to gain objects of appetite. In essence, egoism may be viewed as the perversion of the proper naturalistic “I-It” relationship between man and object, which improperly defines individuals as objects. While egoism may refer to the pursuit of inanimate objects such as wealth, it could also extend to the use of human beings in cases such as lust. The distinguishing attribute of egoism is that it is indifferent to the value of others. “Just as there is nothing anti-social about appetitions as such, there is likewise nothing pro-

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<sup>43</sup> Gregory. p. 188. (*A Brief Inquiry*. p. 124)

<sup>44</sup> Voegelin, Eric. *Order and History Vol. 4: The Ecumenic Age*. In *The Collected Works of Eric Voegelin*, Vol. 17. Ed. Michael Franz. (Columbia: University of Missouri Press, 2000). pp.83-91

<sup>45</sup> *A Brief Inquiry*. p. 122

<sup>46</sup> Gregory. p. 193

<sup>47</sup> *A Brief Inquiry*. p. 122

social about them.”<sup>48</sup> Whoever is used as a means is irrelevant as long as the goal is achieved.

“Hence, no community can be based on egoism, because egoism is indifferent to community, either for or against.”<sup>49</sup> Based on this understanding, Rawls concludes that:

No community can be based upon mutual egoism or mutual advantage. The idea of justice expressed in the political theories of Hobbes and Locke, the view of Adam Smith that we best 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.<sup>50</sup>

At first glance, this passage appears as though it will cause much difficulty for readers attempting to deduce a logical nexus between young Rawls and his later work since he is viewed as a social contract thinker. Gilbert Meilaender has focused on this as the greatest point of disparity in the two phases of Rawls’ thought.<sup>51</sup> Later discussion of the implications of the thesis on his political writings will prove that this is not the case, and that Rawls’ formulation of his later theory has the objections raised about egoism in mind.

What is of interest and will become pertinent to those searching for some embodiment of Rawls’ religious notion of community in his later work is the distinction he draws between egoism as a result of appetite, and egoism stemming from pure appetite. Rawls’ assessment of the human body understands it as something created by God and therefore innately good, regardless of its natural desires. The body’s constitution makes it necessary for humans to want certain things such as food, drink and sleep. Often times, even these

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<sup>48</sup> Ibid. p. 186

<sup>49</sup> Ibid. p. 187

<sup>50</sup> Ibid. p. 189

<sup>51</sup> Meilaender, Gilbert. “We Were Believers Once, and Young” in *First Things*. Vol 20, No. 8 (October, 2009). Available at: <http://www.firstthings.com/article/2009/10/we-were-believers-once-and-young>



necessary appetites are intertwined with larger goals that result in sinful egoism. To illustrate what is meant, Rawls imagines a scenario of a sailor who has worked all night on a cold boat and has exhausted himself. All he wants is warmth and rest, and soon finds “his whole consciousness [is] concentrated on this blissful future state.”<sup>52</sup> Since no ends are encapsulated except those that the constitution of the human body demands, the sailor has reached a point of pure appetite. Here, the realm of legitimate needs is distinguished from sinister egoism. Rawls argues that: “the more we approach the point of pure appetite, the more the sinful activities of personality fall into the background.”<sup>53</sup> It may be difficult to grasp in this form, but Rawls is arguing that there are certain egoistic needs that it is both rational and good to desire, and are therefore not sinful. This distinction echoes the rationality that Rawls calls for in *TJ*, which argues for basic primary goods that are to be desired when establishing the principles of justice; a concept that will be explored more fully later in the discussion.

Though egoism presents a great obstacle to Christians, Rawls argues that egotism is more detrimental to personality, and, consequently, a greater sin. For Rawls, “The egotist is the sinner par excellence.”<sup>54</sup> Its consequences do not simply extend to the acquisition of objects, but permeate throughout the individual and ground all of their actions on pride. In less than flattering terms, Rawls describes the egotist as: “a man of conceit, pride, vainglory; he is self-esteeming, boastful, malicious, deceitful, and so forth.”<sup>55</sup> Egotism is a spiritual sin since it thrives on the destruction of personal relationships, and attempts form them in terms of

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<sup>52</sup> *A Brief Inquiry*. p. 184

<sup>53</sup> *Ibid.* p. 185

<sup>54</sup> *Ibid.* p. 193

<sup>55</sup> *Ibid.* p. 193-194

superior and inferior beings rather than accepting that God created humans as equals. Rawls defines egotism as: “that perverse desire for height and that sinister craving for self-worship.”<sup>56</sup> Relationships such as these attempt to radically transform what are meant to be personal relations into natural ones. Although egoism also uses personality in a natural manner, Rawls views it as less sinful because it is based on an appetite; egotism uses people as objects solely for the aggrandizement of their own self worth. As a result, “Egotism per se is the destruction of community.”<sup>57</sup>

Pervasive egotism is a problem for Rawls because of the selfishness it engenders. The radical egotist “wants to reserve everything for himself, not because he needs everything, but because he wants to possess everything as a badge of his superiority.”<sup>58</sup> Concern with status in this manner leads to the “phenomena of the closed group.”<sup>59</sup> Associations of this nature result in the formation of “haves and have-nots,” which perpetuate a deepening rift in society that prohibits the establishment of a cohesive community. Those outside of the successful group are derided and seen as lesser than the rest, though they are likely more righteous. Rather than understand that all things are a gift from God, egotists delude themselves into believing that God chooses His elect based on merit that they can earn; driving them to prove their superiority in hopes gaining favor with God. Once again Rawls foreshadows his later work by arguing that: “there is no better way to kill pride belonging to a group than to let everybody

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<sup>56</sup> Ibid. p. 193

<sup>57</sup> Ibid. p. 194

<sup>58</sup> Ibid. p. 195

<sup>59</sup> Ibid. p. 196

into it.”<sup>60</sup> This prescient statement is reminiscent of Rawls’ later attempt to establish community by letting all participate in the political realm.

Combing through the major themes of Rawls’ thesis forces one to wonder what he hoped to accomplish by presenting this exegesis. Were he interested in establishing a true community on earth, it would be logical to conclude he was a utopian.<sup>61</sup> It is evident throughout the work that he is referring to an ideal community. As a result, Rawls’ understanding of the human condition must be seen as an eschatological view that speaks of an ideal that is the ultimate end of man, but cannot be realized in historical time. Though he defines how egotism may be avoided, he understands that there exists an “ineradicable perversity which infects human relations. It is always present. There are none free from it.”<sup>62</sup> Echoing a classic Christian notion, Rawls claimed that community had been undermined by sin and necessitated God’s proactive attempt to reestablish it through the Incarnation. Faith is defined by Rawls as the: “spiritual disposition of the whole of a personality which is fully integrated into community.”<sup>63</sup> Those who are able to achieve it are called to help others reach the same end. Therefore, it becomes evident that establishing community has no profound effect on the nature of historical existence, but merely guides humanity in hopes of someday reaching “the goal towards which creation moves, namely the Kingdom of Heaven.”<sup>64</sup> While accepting that even his exegesis cannot lead to a realization of the Eschaton, Rawls remained sanguine since he believed that: “Creation moves toward that great day, burdened by the

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<sup>60</sup> Ibid. p. 197

<sup>61</sup> I am indebted to Dr. David Walsh for clarification of this issue.

<sup>62</sup> *A Brief Inquiry*. p. 194

<sup>63</sup> Ibid. p. 123

<sup>64</sup> Ibid. p. 246

stubbornness of man's sin to be sure, but then all things are possible with God. That day may not be so far off as we think."<sup>65</sup>

Rawls' political writings proceed in the same vein as his religious thesis. Rather than focus on the particulars of justice, Rawls' aim is to establish a theory that expounds the ideal. Therefore, "We should view a theory of justice as a guiding framework designed to focus our moral sensibilities and to put before our intuitive capacities more limited and manageable questions for judgment."<sup>66</sup> From the outset, it is clear that human beings are thrust into a social setting and must adapt to realize their potential in community. In his thesis, Rawls argued that: "By being a person, man lives in relationship with God, the angels, with the devils and his fellow men, and he cannot destroy this relationship or this attachment to community."<sup>67</sup> This remains consistent with his understanding in *TJ*, which is that: "No scheme can, of course, be a scheme of cooperation which men enter voluntarily in a literal sense; each person finds himself placed at birth in some particular position in some particular society..." Community does not begin with choice for Rawls, but in both religious and political associations, it is up to those who find themselves in it to strive towards the ideal.

Though the principles of justice would be restated many times by Rawls, they always maintained the same basic concepts. His final formulation of them before his death defined them as:

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<sup>65</sup> Ibid. p. 252

<sup>66</sup> Rawls, John. *A Theory of Justice: Revised Edition*. (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1999). p. 46 (hereafter *TJ*)

<sup>67</sup> *A Brief Inquiry*. p. 112

- (a) Each person has the same inalienable claim to a fully adequate scheme of equal basic liberties, which scheme is compatible with the same scheme of liberties for all; and
- (b) Social and economic inequalities are to satisfy two conditions: first, they are to be attached to offices and positions open to all under conditions of fair equality of opportunity; and second, they are to be to the benefit of the least-advantaged members of society (the difference principle).<sup>68</sup>

What becomes clear at first glance is that Rawls attempts to take each individual seriously while maintaining a concern for the disparity that could emerge in a democratic society. Such a theoretical construction makes utilitarianism Rawls' main enemy throughout his life's work. As a comprehensive concept, utilitarianism bases its success on distributing the greatest amount of happiness throughout the largest group. Formulating the goal of society in this manner allows individuals to justifiably exhibit the mutual egoism that Rawls claimed to be the destruction of community in his thesis. The personal relations which Rawls saw as crucial to the establishment of community could not endure in a society which is based on the principle of greatest happiness. Utilitarianism would allow appetite to run wild while establishing natural relations between persons that would view others as means to an end. Individual personality, which Rawls understood as the basis of humanity in his thesis, would be at the mercy of providing a greater happiness for all. As Rawls points out, "Utilitarianism does not take seriously the distinction between persons."<sup>69</sup> This conception would have been repugnant to Rawls in his youth and continues to be so in his later political writings because, "Where there are no distinct persons, there can be no personal relation, and no community."<sup>70</sup>

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<sup>68</sup> JAF. p. 42-43

<sup>69</sup> TJ. P. 24 Quoted in Bok, Hilary. "When Rawls Met Jesus" in *Democracy: A Journal of Ideas*. Issue 14 (Fall, 2009). pp. 103-109. Available at: <http://democracyjournal.org/article.php?ID=6717> p. 107

<sup>70</sup> Bok. P. 107

Not only does Rawls' thesis maintain continuity with justice as fairness, it provides the necessary understanding of personality that is absent from his later work. Reading *TJ* and other later works forces the reader to see that Rawls believes in the uniqueness of each individual that demands society respect their rights as a person. The mature Rawls unsuccessfully attempts to justify the uniqueness of individuals without resorting to metaphysical proofs. While we are told that individuals are to be given certain basic liberties, it is difficult to discern why they are deserving of such rights apart from an adherence to traditional liberal practices. This astonishing failure of Rawls' later theory is supplemented nicely by the insights on personality offered by his thesis. Though there may be some other explanation, it appears quite likely that, "the mature Rawls relied upon but suppressed the religious understanding of human nature that gives life to his liberalism."<sup>71</sup>

Rawls's unwillingness to ground his political understanding of persons with his religious background forced him to proclaim himself a Kantian. Immanuel Kant was the only source Rawls could look to that established the human being as a creature containing a distinct personality that demanded to be treated with dignity without resorting to an explicitly religious justification. Kant's formulation of the categorical imperative as: "Act in such a way that you treat humanity, whether in your own person or in the person of another, always at the same time as an end and never simply as a means," echoes Rawls' understanding of community in his thesis.<sup>72</sup> In essence, Kant's exegesis demands that all moral beings act in accordance with

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<sup>71</sup> Berkowitz, Peter. "God and John Rawls" in *Policy Review*. No 155 (June & July 2009). Accessible at <http://www.hoover.org/publications/policyreview/46479972.html>

<sup>72</sup> Kant, Immanuel. *Grounding for the Metaphysics of Morals with On a Supposed Right to Lie because of Philanthropic Concerns*. Trans. James W. Ellington. (Indianapolis: Hackett Publishing, 1993). p. 36

something akin to Rawls' notion of personal relations. Though Kant does not mention God in his formulation of the person, Rawls admits that he is aware of the religious undertones in Kant's concept. Later in his life, Rawls would end a lecture on Kant by stating that: "I conclude by observing that the significance that Kant gives to the moral law and our acting from it has an obvious religious aspect, and that his text has an occasionally devotional character."<sup>73</sup>

Correspondingly, Rawls argued that: "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."<sup>74</sup> Since it is evident that Rawls was able to grasp Kant's subtle religiosity, his subsequent willingness to describe justice as fairness as Kantian proves that the views expounded in his thesis continued to play a major part in his political formulations throughout his career.

Justice as fairness claims that the two principals of justice would be decided upon by equal and rational persons in the original position under a veil of ignorance. The original position is simply a hypothetical construct that depicts a point of entry into the just society. What Rawls means by the veil of ignorance is that all those present in the formulation of the principles of justice would be blind to their social condition. Status, talents, and any other information that could affect the impartiality of the decision makers would be made unavailable so that the principles they chose would be fair to all rather than attempt to maximize the position of those involved. Chosen in this manner, "They are the principles that free and rational persons concerned to further their own interests would accept in an initial

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<sup>73</sup> Rawls, John. *Lectures on the History of Moral Philosophy*. Ed. Barbara Herman. (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2000). p. 160. Quoted in Berkowitz

<sup>74</sup> Ibid. p. 161 Quoted in Berkowitz

position of equality as defining the fundamental terms of their association.”<sup>75</sup> It is interesting that Rawls points out that such an arrangement would further the individual interests of all involved since he argued in his thesis that such a basis for society would prove catastrophic. While at first glance it appears as though Rawls has made a radical shift, his refined view of the original position simply extends the argument from his thesis.

Establishing the veil of ignorance in the original position is a hypothetical arrangement that mirrors Rawls’ explanation of the cold and tired sailor in his thesis. By removing all outside information, the veil of ignorance establishes the individual in the original position as one who bases his decisions on what we may refer to as pure political appetite. Rather than attempt to use the principles of justice in a manner which may lead to sinful behavior, they are established so that individuals will obtain the most basic elements of liberty that make it possible to be a political being. In the same sense that warmth and sleep allow the sailor to live based on his bodily constitution, the rational interests that those in the original position under the veil of ignorance pursue are those necessary to maintain one’s self in the political community. The device of the veil of ignorance makes this pure interest possible and distinguishes it from the Hobbesian view that all are united because there are unlimited desires and limited resources; a view which he repudiates in his thesis and would continue to detest for the rest of his years.

In addition to establishing the proper type of egoism based on rational political interests, Rawls’ principles of justice and their formulation harbor a much greater objective of combating both negative egoism and egotism. Since the principles of justice establish certain

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<sup>75</sup> *TJ*, p. 10



liberties which may never be threatened, Rawls establishes a check on the egoistic impulse to abuse individuals in hopes of obtaining all objects of appetition. Egotism, which constituted the greatest threat to religious community for Rawls, continued to do so in the political. Rawls' concern focused on "the social damage wrought by a preoccupation with relative position."<sup>76</sup> To combat egotism Rawls employed a number of tactics. First, by restricting the knowledge of social position to those in the original position, Rawls attempted to force all involved to establish principles of justice which would protect them if they were less privileged; thereby checking the impulse to further egotistic ends. Secondly, in the same manner that Rawls had suggested in his thesis, the closed group of society was to be broken by allowing entry to all. Positions and offices were to be open to all people equally regardless of their talents and wealth. Finally, Rawls offered the difference principle. By arguing that social disparity is to be beneficial to the least advantaged group, he artificially establishes a society in which the egotistic ends of those more successful in society would be checked by the demands of the least advantaged. Rawls argued that: "While the distribution of wealth and income need not be equal, it must be to everyone's advantage, and at the same time, positions of authority and responsibility must be open to all."<sup>77</sup> Such a formulation attempts to check the anxiety and insecurity of the egotist, which drives him to constantly reaffirm his superiority by widening the gap between himself and others. Regulating the economic distance between the extremes of society engenders a mutual respect absent of class antagonisms that makes community possible. Furthermore, it deserves mention that the difference principle and its concerns about

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<sup>76</sup> *A Brief Inquiry*. p. 16

<sup>77</sup> *TJ*. p. 53

distributive justice maintain a distinctive Christian quality of caring for one's neighbor.<sup>78</sup> While unwilling to address the issue in explicitly religious terms, Rawls' entire project focuses on establishing community to the greatest extent possible in a world of differing comprehensive moral views. The only way to do so successfully is through the notions of public reason and political liberalism. Though Rawls applied his prescriptions to the political instead of the religious in his later life, the ultimate end of community remains static.

To be fair, there are some inconsistencies between the works. For example, although Cohen and Nagel point to the rejection of merit in both his religious and political writings, to call such a relationship congruent is a stretch.<sup>79</sup> In his religious work, Rawls disputes the notion of merit because all things are a gift from God, and therefore, we deserve nothing. By the time Rawls seriously address the issue of merit with more than a passing comment, he wrote that: "The concept of moral desert is not questioned. Rather the thought is that a conception of moral desert as moral worth of character and actions cannot be incorporated into a political conception of justice in the view of the fact of reasonable pluralism."<sup>80</sup> Though the result is the same, it is evident that the ground for the claim has shifted dramatically from one where merit has no basis to one where merit is valid, but is beyond the scope of civil society to assess.

Rawls is also forced to drop his criticism of the Greeks and Romans for their negative contributions to Christian thought through the work of Augustine and others. Rather than rebuke them, Rawls accepts their ethos, which demanded loyalty in state matters while

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<sup>78</sup> Beckley, Harlan R. "A Christian Affirmation of Rawls' Idea of Justice as Fairness: Part I" in *The Journal of Religious Ethics*. Vol. 13, No. 2. (Fall, 1985). pp. 210-242.

<sup>79</sup> Cohen and Nagel. p. 17-18

<sup>80</sup> *JAF*. p 73

relegating all else to individual communities. Through these examples Rawls was able to conclude that there are different types of communities that form, and in order for them to subsist, they must establish a larger, though less comprehensive, community in the political. In turn, the political would extend reasonable toleration to religious communities; allowing them to maintain themselves. Contrary to those that believe Rawls' later version of political liberalism ignores the importance of religion, his propensity to make sure that all religions are respected demands this construction. Vatican II articulated Roman Catholics' belief that toleration was an essential part of their faith. Christ does not compel us to follow him, but implores us to do so. Forceful attempts at conversion quickly degenerate into forced affirmation of faith when dogmas become too intertwined with political power. As Rawls points out:

The spiritual ideals of saints and heroes can be as irreconcilably opposed as any interests. Conflicts in pursuit of these ideals are the most tragic of all. Thus justice is the virtue of practices where the competing interests and where persons feel entitled to press their rights on each other. In an association of saints agreeing on a common ideal, if such a community could exist, disputes about justice would not occur. Each would work selflessly for one end as determined by their common religion, and reference to this end (assuming it to be clearly defined) would settle every question of right. But a human society is characterized by the circumstances of justice. The account of these conditions involves no particular theory of human motivation. Rather, its aim is to reflect in the description of the original position the relations of individuals to one another which set the stage for questions of justice.<sup>81</sup>

Therefore, the most that can be expected in a pluralistic society is a reasonable amount of freedom for these comprehensive views to express themselves while respecting the agreement affirmed by all. While fighting in World War II, Rawls saw first-hand just how tragic the forced

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<sup>81</sup> *TJ*, p. 112. Quoted partially in Weithman, Paul. "A Brief Inquiry into the Meaning of Sin and Faith (With 'On My Religion') in *Notre Dame Philosophical Reviews*. (August, 2009). Accessible at: <http://ndpr.nd.edu/review.cfm?id=17045>

implementation of comprehensive views could become; thereby constituting the catalyst for his abandoning of a specifically Christian viewpoint for his later liberal position.

The key to understanding Rawls' belief in tolerance, which defined his political liberalism, is found in his reference to Jean Bodin's *Colloquium of the Seven About Secrets of the Sublime*. It is quite odd that Rawls would refer us to such an obscure work, yet it provides much insight into his understanding of the matter. Bodin is a peculiar role model for Rawls to have chosen. Though he was originally raised Catholic and was eventually buried with Catholic rites, he can be best described as a mystic. Throughout his life, Bodin changed religions as the political situation demanded. His concern was with a "personal religiousness; and it cannot be characterized in terms of adherence to one or the other of the religious movements of the sixteenth century."<sup>82</sup> Rather than concern himself with the particulars of any religious practices or dogma, Bodin's belief was that all properly constituted faiths maintain the same central truths that are universally valid. Correspondingly, Bodin believed that, "true religion is nothing but the intention of a purified mind toward true God."<sup>83</sup>

Based on such a definition, true religion is depicted as something in which people participate as individuals. Regardless of this fact, Bodin believed it was crucial that the major religions stay intact and be allowed to worship freely. Since most individuals lack the ability to handle the demands of true religion alone, they look to these faiths for guidance and structure. The established religions provide for them a function akin to a "people's myth."<sup>84</sup> What Bodin

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<sup>82</sup> Voegelin, Eric. *The History of Political Ideas: Vol. 5 Religion and the Rise of Modernity*. In *The Collected Works of Eric Voegelin*. Vol. 23. Ed. James L. Wiser (Columbia: University of Missouri Press, 1998) p. 186

<sup>83</sup> Bodin, Jean. "Letter to Jean Bautru," Quoted in Voegelin, *Religion and the Rise of Modernity*. p. 188

<sup>84</sup> Voegelin, *Religion and the Rise of Modernity*. p. 212

advocated was the need for a precarious balance between structured churches, which would unite individuals in the pursuit of God, and the necessary freedom to act as an individual within each faith. Tolerance is necessary in a political sense, since multiple religions must be allowed to co-exist, as well as in a spiritual sense, since individuals in their churches demand the freedom to interact with the divine as each sees fit. Just as the state can stifle worship by repressing certain sects, dogmatization within the church can render true faith paralyzed since “Those who press the people with a multitude of rites turn religion into superstition.”<sup>85</sup> In essence, if the organized faiths are left to their own devices, then it allows those less qualified in religious matters to participate, while those who understand the nature of true religion would be free to pursue it on their own. Nowhere does this teaching become clearer than in the subtext of Bodin’s *Colloquium*, and the ever perceptive Rawls was up to the task of deciphering the message.

Bodin’s dialogue is set in Venice at the home of a Catholic merchant named Coronaeus. In addition to him there are six other interlocutors-Salomon, a Jew- Octavius, a Muslim-Fredericus, a Lutheran- Senamus, a skeptic- Curtius, a Calvinist- and Toralba, a natural philosopher. Except for a few innocuous slights offered at one another’s faiths, the dialogue is permeated with a deeper sense of civility. Though each does their best to defend their religion as they see fit, it soon becomes evident that:

They all have broken the limits of their dogma; in none of them is living seriously the exclusiveness of his faith; they all have a wide comparative knowledge of religions; and all of them are aware of the historical conditions of the variety of religions and are willing to discuss them under this aspect.<sup>86</sup>

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<sup>85</sup> Bodin, Jean. *The Colloquium of the Seven About Secrets of the Sublime*. Trans. Marion Leathers Daniel Kuntz. (University Park: University of Pennsylvania University Press, 2008). p. 228

<sup>86</sup> Voegelin. *Religion and the Rise of Modernity*. p. 210

While they remain separated by their religious beliefs, they are drawn together by a social bond between men. They share a camaraderie that transcends their individual beliefs. Each resides under the laws of civility they are expected to uphold as guests in a residence; in the same way that Rawls believed all individuals live under the accommodations of the state. As citizens are expected to live within the mores of the political establishment, the interlocutors respect one another as men regardless of their disagreements. "The determining order of life for these men is not the church but the political society in which they find their material existence."<sup>87</sup> Rather than risk religious and political strife, Bodin's interlocutors ask: "how can dissension be harmonious when there can be no firmer bond for the eternal harmony of citizens and friends than supreme agreement and will in the mutual love of human and divine matters?"<sup>88</sup>

Bodin's characters are members of the elect who are able to understand the essence of true religion. As aforesaid, they have come to the realization that the truth of existence and its relationship to the divine is something that transcends any specific faith. Well ahead of his time, Bodin was able to discover a concept that both Rawls and Voegelin would later incorporate. Rather than try and prove the validity of any of the faiths represented, Bodin attempts to illustrate that: "What is permanent in the history of mankind is not the symbols, but man himself in the search of humanity and its order."<sup>89</sup> Each of the major religions, once removed from the reality of the experiences that formed them, becomes "dried up to doctrinal

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<sup>87</sup> Ibid. p. 211

<sup>88</sup> Bodin. *Colloquium of the Seven*. p. 148

<sup>89</sup> Voegelin, Eric. "Equivalences of Experience and Symbolization in History." In *Published Essays 1966-1985* in *The Collected Works of Eric Voegelin Vol. 12*. Ed Ellis Sandoz. (Baton Rouge: Louisiana University Press, 1990) pp. 115-133. p. 115

belief.”<sup>90</sup> They are little else but a set of laws established to keep men from drifting off course. Bodin is clear that: “Even without these laws, a good man can attain salvation”<sup>91</sup> because there exist “natural laws [which] have a justice forever binding them without any decrees or edicts.”<sup>92</sup> Since the search for truth is that equivalent symbol which transcends all beliefs, the basic tenets of the openness towards truth established the validity of the law of nature which is “sufficient for man’s salvation.”<sup>93</sup>

For Bodin, and later, for Rawls as well, in order to be able to argue against one faith to establish another implies that one is able to prove the validity of it beyond a shadow of a doubt. Since there is a common element of truth in them, it is up to each individual to choose that which allows them to best adhere to the law of nature. Voegelin poignantly points out that for Bodin:

If it does not please God to establish the one and true religion as the public order through his human institutions in history, it does not lie within the power of a private individual to produce this order through pragmatic devices. The mysterious historical disorder, on the other hand, does not impair the validity of true religion, about whose nature the prophetic initiates of all ages are well informed.<sup>94</sup>

Therefore, it is not the place of the magistrate or other citizens to coerce individuals into any faith since any man who lives according to the universal law of nature “will be pleasing to immortal God although he worships foreign gods in good faith and just error.”<sup>95</sup> It was the

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<sup>90</sup> Ibid. p. 118

<sup>91</sup> Bodin, *Colloquium of the Seven*. p. 187

<sup>92</sup> Ibid. p. 194

<sup>93</sup> Ibid. p. 225

<sup>94</sup> Voegelin, *Religion and the Rise of Modernity*. p. 217

<sup>95</sup> Bodin, *Colloquium of the Seven*. p. 422

concurrence on this basic premise that allowed each of the men to conclude their discussion amicably and continue their lives in adherence to their respective faiths.

Though the political implications of this notion of tolerance are only a peripheral component of Bodin's *Colloquium*, they provide a firm basis on which Rawls could form his own views. In a much clearer statement of his notion of political toleration, Bodin wrote:

I will not here, in the variety of people so much differing among themselves in religion take upon me to determine which of them is the best (howbeit that there can be but one such, one truth, and one divine law by the mouth of God published) but if the prince well assured of the truth of his religion would draw his subjects thereunto, divided into sects and factions, he must not, therein, use force. For that the minds of men, the more they are forced, the more forward and stubborn they are, and the greater punishment shall be inflicted upon them the less good is to be done, the nature of man being commonly such as may of it selfe bee led to like of anything, but never enforced so to do.<sup>96</sup>

Later, in the *Colloquium*, Bodin echoed this sentiment when he wrote that:

The theologians call infused faith a theological virtue which has God as its only proof and object. This faith, however, is granted by divine gift and concession. If, however, it is inevitable and fixed so that it cannot be lost, this is force, not faith. If faith is based on free assent, it is the greatest impiety to try to tear away from anyone by human arguments the instruction which God has bestowed from his bountiful goodness. Since these things are so, we must abstain all together from discussions about religion.<sup>97</sup>

For Bodin, it is both impious and politically imprudent to bring religion into the social realm.

Rawls attempts to clarify Bodin's sentiments in hopes of justifying his own theory when he wrote that:

For him, toleration is an aspect and consequence of the harmony of nature as expressed in God's creation. Although he recognized the political importance of toleration, and held that the state should always uphold it, his belief in toleration was religious and not only political.<sup>98</sup>

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<sup>96</sup> Bodin, Jean. "Letter to Queen Elizabeth 1581" quoted in *Colloquium*. p. xxiii-xxiv

<sup>97</sup> Bodin, *Colloquium*. p. 169

<sup>98</sup> "On My Religion". p. 266



Drawing on Bodin's concepts, Rawls concluded that for religion to be taken seriously, a notion akin to his political liberalism was necessary. The fundamental reasonableness of those who act in concordance in the original position would have established the basic tenets of the law of nature in their conception of justice. Therefore, any outside interference into, or from, individual religious communities could only be construed as superfluous and dangerous to the stability of the law of nature itself. Additionally, the integrity of each religion would be called into question by each attempt to establish the validity of its competitors. Faith could not exist in its truest sense unless it stood outside the political. Its inclusion into the realm of public reason could only fuel dissent and flare tempers to the point where neither the principles of justice, nor the tenets of that faith, would be respected any longer. Without this basic harmony, that which is worst in each person would be stirred to action in defense of their sect. Rawls was aware of this tendency, and believed that:

Part of the significance of this is that a person's religion is often no better or worse than they are as persons, and the idea of the reasonable, or some analogous idea, must always be presupposed.<sup>99</sup>

For community to be properly realized, lines must be drawn between political and religious if both associations are to persist; though in the Lockean tradition, the necessities of government always maintain precedence. With this greater end of political stability in mind, Rawls writes:

...while friendly and sympathetic discussions of our beliefs is accepted as an important part of religious life, argument and controversy is not. In view of the harmony and multiplicity of religions, what point would argument and controversy serve?<sup>100</sup>

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<sup>99</sup> Ibid. p. 267

<sup>100</sup> Ibid. p. 266

Aware of the likely repercussions of religious quarrels, Rawls wrestled with the issue throughout much of his career and concluded that:

...God's being, however great the divine powers, does not determine the essential canons of reason. Moreover, the content of the judgments of practical reason depends on social facts about how human beings are related in society and to one another. The divine practical reason will also connect with these facts, just as ours does; and this is so even if these facts are themselves the outcome of God's creation. Given these facts as they undeniably are in our social world, the basic judgments of reasonableness must be the same, whether made by God's reason or by ours. This invariant content of reasonableness-without which our thought collapses-doesn't allow otherwise, however pious it might seem to attribute everything to the divine will.<sup>101</sup>

The demands of social reasonableness and community are simply too strong to allow comprehensive views to enter public reason. First and foremost, the demands of citizenship forced Rawls to acknowledge that people's primary identity must be as parties to the contract established in the original position behind the veil of ignorance. But, as is evidenced by Rawls' constant struggle to define and redefine the extent to which the beliefs in one's faith may enter into public reason, he had no intention of relegating religion to a dead letter.

Obviously, the biggest change in Rawls' personal stance from his thesis to his mature works is that the ground of reason shifts from God to the social necessities of the day. Ironically, the Christian dogmatism that Rawls later rejects has little to do with the Christian notion of community he affirms throughout his thesis; thereby maintaining an overall continuity in his writings.<sup>102</sup> His notion of faith as the proper integration of individuals into community becomes transformed into the concept of justice in his later work. Sin transforms

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<sup>101</sup> Ibid. p. 268

<sup>102</sup> Weithman.

into injustice while maintaining the same egoistic and egotistic bases; leading to congruent destructive results to the ideal of community. From beginning to end, Rawls stands by the inviolability of the individual and the need to fully realize personality in the community. The essence of his later political liberalism simply demands that all integrated into community no longer do so as fellow pilgrims, but of their own accord as reasonable participants in the formation of a political unit; thereby making it impossible for any religion to be the basis for community in liberal society. It was Rawls' sincere hope that the notion of public reason would affirm the right of religious groups to worship free from public intrusion so that neither they, nor the overall stability of their community, would be adversely affected.

Essentially, Rawls' life work is an attempt to reestablish the basic communal tendencies of Christianity through a liberal political theory. Sheldon Wolin understood the impulse of some liberal thinkers to do just that, and could not have foreseen just how prescient his assessment of Rawls would become after the publication of his thesis. Poignantly, Wolin wrote:

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 a sign of the lost religious.<sup>103</sup>

At the time, little did Wolin know how right he was. After carefully studying Rawls' body of work from *A Brief Inquiry* to *Justice as Fairness: A Restatement*, it would be evident to any reader that Rawls could not be described more accurately. Correspondingly, Rawls stated in his thesis that: "the chief problem of politics is to work out some scheme of social arrangements

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<sup>103</sup> Wolin, Sheldon. *Politics and Vision: Continuity and Innovation in Western Political Thought: Expanded Edition*. (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2004). p. 542. Quoted in Gregory. p. 200

which can so harness human sin as to make the natural correlates of community and personality possible.”<sup>104</sup> Though eventually Rawls would alter the language in which he expressed these issues, the overarching problem of his life’s work was clearly stated as early as 1942.

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<sup>104</sup> *A Brief Inquiry*. p. 128

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