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4-13-2011

April 13, 2011: John Rawls' Juvenile Conception of God

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Repository Citation

Ledewitz, B. (2011). April 13, 2011: John Rawls' Juvenile Conception of God. Retrieved from <https://dsc.duq.edu/ledewitz-hallowedsecularism/523>

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Title: John Rawls' Juvenile Conception of God

Date: 2011-04-13T21:03:00.004-04:00

4/13/2011—In December, 2010, Princeton philosophy professor Kwame Anthony Appiah published a review of a then-recent book containing John Rawls' senior thesis from Princeton in 1942 along with an essay entitled "On My Religion" written by Rawls when he was seventy-six. (Rawls died in 2002 at age 81). (Review here) Rawls was an American moral and political philosopher—quite possibly the most influential American philosopher of the postwar period. His two major works—*A Theory of Justice* (1971) and *Political Liberalism* (1993)—were in the social contract tradition and were critical of the place of religion in the public square. So it was a little surprising to read that Rawls' thesis was about sin and faith and clearly indicated a Christian orientation at the time that Rawls obviously lost later in life. The essay in the book explains that loss. Here is how Appiah puts the matter: "[Rawls] reports three moments in his loss of faith, all of them connected with his experience during the war. In the first, he was appalled by a Lutheran chaplain who preached that God was aiming 'bullets at the Japanese' while protecting Americans from Japanese fire. Private Rawls courageously upbraided the padre, a first lieutenant, for these 'falsehoods about divine providence.' The second was an episode in which, as a result of an arbitrary contingency, a friend ('a splendid man') with whom he had shared a tent was chosen over him for a mission that proved fatal. And the third was hearing about the Holocaust. 'How could I pray and ask God to help me, or my family, or my country, or any other cherished thing I cared about, when God would not save millions of Jews from Hitler?' And he went on: 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...hideous and evil." I don't see how a very intelligent young man like Rawls could have failed to notice that history is filled with violence that a loving God presumably could have prevented. The scale and barbarity of the Holocaust were perhaps unique but not the failure of God to intervene. For that matter, what kind of Christianity asks God to intervene "to help me, or my family" without adding, as Jesus did, thy will be done. The Bible itself raises the question that so affected Rawls in that the slaves in Egypt waited four hundred years without rescue before Moses was sent by God. What about those innocent lost lives? For God, Rawls seems to have had in mind a supernatural being of unlimited powers and no plan for salvation. The problem of evil is a real problem if one has that sort of conception of God. But that is not the only possible conception of God.