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Nicolas L. Francis

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Book Note

RELIGION WITHOUT GOD, by Ronald Dworkin¹

NICOLAS L. FRANCIS

RELIGIOUS ATHEISM: SENSE OR NONSENSE? In his final book, published posthumously, Ronald Dworkin seeks to make his case that religion is not limited to the world of theism and that religious atheism is not an oxymoron. This short book is divided into four chapters. The first chapter unpacks what Dworkin means by religious atheism,² the second maps out the case for understanding the beauty and sublimity of the universe as a sort of substitute for God,³ the third chapter considers the impact on the meaning of religious freedom,⁴ and the final chapter addresses death and immortality.⁵ Perhaps because the book is based on the Einstein lectures that Dworkin delivered at the University of Bern in 2011, it is marked by a different tone than his works *Taking Rights Seriously*,⁶ *Law's Empire*,⁷ and *Justice in Robes*.⁸

In *Religion Without God*, Dworkin uses the Abrahamic religions—Judaism, Christianity, and Islam—as the standard conception of religion, and identifies two parts to religion: a science part and a value part. Dworkin argues that the science part addresses factual questions such as the origin of human life and the

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1. (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2013) 180 pages.
 2. *Ibid* at 1.
 3. *Ibid* at 45.
 4. *Ibid* at 105.
 5. *Ibid* at 149.
 6. (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1977).
 7. (Cambridge: Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 1986).
 8. (Cambridge: Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 2006).

history of the universe.⁹ The value part provides guidance about how adherents should live and what values they must uphold.¹⁰

Dworkin proceeds to offer his conception of how religious atheism contains those two parts by providing a negative definition of religion without God. Dworkin begins by rejecting the naturalist position, which views the world as governed by laws of nature that are in principle described by science, and that qualities such as beauty or value are not independent of the mind but are humanly constructed responses to the world. Dworkin's rejection of naturalism consists of two parts. First, Dworkin argues that human life has an objective meaning and importance.¹¹ That is, certain values and moral convictions are not simply a result of evolution and natural selection. For example, the statement "murder is wrong" is an objective truth that has been discovered, not something that has been invented or developed by humans.

Dworkin's second argument against naturalism considers the intrinsic beauty and sublimity of the universe.¹² Under Dworkin's view, the universe is not simply an aggregate of particles that humans experience as beautiful. The universe is sublime with or without humans to experience it. And, to stand in awe of the universe is not a feature of our mind but a proper response to the universe. Dworkin argues that it is this experience of wonder that intimates what believers refer to as an encounter with the "numinous."¹³

After sketching out religion with an impersonal God, which Dworkin considers synonymous with religion without God,¹⁴ he begins outlining the scope and meaning of religious freedom. Drawing on a 1965 US Supreme Court case where someone who had doubts about the existence of God but professed a "religious faith in a purely ethical creed"¹⁵ was entitled to an exemption from military service, Dworkin argues that the US Constitution's freedom of religion clause should be understood as protecting people's ethical independence, not as privileging the worship of a personal God. Dworkin questions whether belief in a personal God requires a special right to free exercise and argues for the recognition of a general right to ethical independence in place of a special right to free religious practice.¹⁶ With such a general right, Dworkin claims, religions may be granted

9. *Supra* note 1 at 23.

10. *Ibid.*

11. *Ibid* at 9.

12. *Ibid* at 48.

13. *Ibid* at 37.

14. See generally *ibid* at 33-43.

15. *United States v Seeger*, 380 US 163 (1965).

16. *Ibid* at 133-34.

only the necessary freedoms required for carrying out religious practices while ensuring these practices are restricted to obey rational, non-discriminatory laws.¹⁷

Dworkin concludes the book by briefly discussing death and whether conceptions of the afterlife may properly be considered to impact one's decisions on the right way to live. Dworkin argues that both religious theists and atheists may develop an objective view of right living because such a view is not dependent on the existence or nonexistence of God.¹⁸

Religion Without God raises interesting questions for theists and atheists alike. If Dworkin's assertions are correct, we must question whether the state can ever separate itself from supporting a particular religion. According to Dworkin, secularism is religion.

17. *Ibid* at 136.

18. *Ibid* at 155-56.