

ESSAYS

RELIGIOUS ATHEISM AND THE BEAUTIFUL

Bonaventure Chapman, O.P.

Math, anyone? I will keep it simple. Say you have a coin and you flip it twice. How many different outcomes are possible? Answer: four, of course. Heads-Heads, Heads-Tails, Tails-Heads, Tails-Tails. Why do people think math is so difficult? Who knows. In any event, and probably to your great relief, this essay is not about math, or coins either. It is about religion—the Christian religion in particular.

It seems that a helpful way of dividing Western attitudes toward Christianity today is along the lines of our coin toss example, this time with heads representing true and tails false. Now image two coin flips. First, Is Christianity True? Two outcomes are possible. Second, Is Christianity Good? Again, two outcomes are possible. If we combine the two questions, we have four fundamental attitudes towards Christianity

THE FUNDAMENTAL FOUR

First, the traditional (and Christian!) attitude is that Christianity is **both true and good**. The claims Christianity makes (God exists, he is Triune, Jesus Christ is God and man, he died and rose again, through his redemption we have eternal life, etc.) are historically, philosophically and, inasmuch as they can be, scientifically true.

These claims are also good; they are a source of moral growth, comfort, and peace amid a world of sin, corruption, and chaos.

Second, a more recent phenomenon has been to say that Christianity is **neither true nor good**. From this perspective, Christianity's claims are not in any sense, other than a vaguely mythical one, true; and Christian morality is far from recommendable. Thanks to the *evangelizing* work of Richard Dawkins, Sam Harris, and the late Christopher Hitchens, this sort of attitude is common now in bookstores and college campuses. For them, Christianity is a tribal way of living and thinking, sorely in need of scientific updating in both doctrines and morals. One wonders whether the *evangelical zeal* necessary to sustain this atheistic view is possible for the masses, especially since it promises a world full of meaninglessness and incoherence on a cosmic scale. But perhaps Gnosticism is what these evangelists are really after; too many times refused entrance into the "cool club" growing up, now there is chance for cliquish revenge. But I digress, since this essay will not deal at all with this attitude.

The third option seems very rare: Christianity is **true but not good**. The group closest to espousing this would be some version of hyper-Calvinism (I know whereof I speak...). For such a Calvinist, God is the utterly supreme and sovereign commander of all being, and his predetermining decrees span all space and time. So far, so Thomist, but the Calvinist goes a step further and admits that even sin, or at least the decree of eternal reprobation, is within God's sole control: God predestines some for eternal glory, and he predestines others for eternal damnation. He is the cause of their damnation, creating some (most?) of humanity as the infernal black canvas upon which he paints the dazzling white mercy and justice of his elect. Vessels of eternal wrath: this doctrine Calvin rightly called the "dreadful decree (*Decretum horribile*)."¹ It is hard work to show that such a theology is *good*, even if you think you can show it to be logically and philosophically *true*. Happily, those with this attitude are a chosen few and do not pose much of a threat to the traditional Western attitude.

Have you been keeping track? There is only one possibility left: Christianity is **good but not true**. This, I think, is the newest and most threatening modern Western attitude to Christianity. Now you may be asking: How new? And how threatening?

THE NEW(ER) RELIGIOUS ATHEISM

As to newness, is not this good-but-not-true attitude just that of the Enlightenment that sought (and still, in places, seeks) to rob Christianity of its dogmas but to keep its moral precepts or principles? Is not this the common form of liberal Protestantism that Karl Barth and Hans Urs von Balthasar, to name two theological giants of the twentieth century, consistently railed against? How is this different than the “Jesus as moral teacher” view of many Americans today? The difference is not one of origin; I think it can be shown to come from the Enlightenment view, although I will not develop that genealogy here. The difference lies in content: the Enlightenment view still believes in the truth of Christianity; it just waters it down so much that this truth is so thin as to be useless. The Enlightenment view believes in the truth of Christianity inasmuch as this amounts to a truth of Deism or pantheism or whatever-theism. It is half-true and half-good, barely-true and barely-good. We have here a paring down of truth, not an outright denial of it.

The attitude I want to address is more radical: it is atheistic to the core, *but* it still believes in transcendent goodness, in something beyond the microscope or the biology lab. It believes firmly, and with a conviction described by its adherents as faith, in truth with a capital T. For these persons, in moral matters there is always a right answer; but this answer is not grounded in God nor is it a subjective expression of personal preference. It is objectively the *right* answer. Such a perspective is new.

And it is threatening. This view has all the benefits of the scientific, naturalist one, but without the disappointing and morally unbelievable side effects. It offers a way of thinking morally about the world that does not involve God or Christ, but does not lead

to some form of nihilism or new Stoicism. It claims to secure the goodness of Christianity without the apparent baggage of dogma, something neither of the other two non-traditional attitudes could manage.

This view has a history. Perhaps its first proponent is Hegel in his *Phenomenology of Spirit*. If it were to remain the avocation of postmodern French philosophers like Alain Badiou and Quentin Meillassoux it would garner as much attention as the hyper-Calvinist attitude. But it is becoming more mainstream, especially as presented in the work of two university professors in America: Roberto Mangabeira Unger and the late Ronald Dworkin. Unger's latest book is called *The Religion of the Future*. Dworkin's small *Religion without God* was published after his death in 2013. Both advocate the good-but-not-true attitude, although in different ways. Both present a vision of religion that I think will have more influence in the twenty-first century than the scientific "screedal" view. Both also allow for a new kind of witness, one I will sketch out with the assistance of a painting by Andrew Wyeth. This witness is the revelation of beauty.

UNGER'S PROFANE CHRISTIANITY

Everything in our existence points beyond itself. We must nevertheless die. We cannot grasp the ground of being. Our desires are insatiable. Our lives fail adequately to express our natures; our circumstances regularly subject us to belittlement. Religion has been both an attempt to interpret the meaning of these irreparable flaws in the human condition and a way of dealing with them. It has told us that everything is ultimately all right. However, everything is not all right.¹

Thus opens Roberto Unger's new book, *The Religion of the Future*. Well, perhaps not a book. What does one call a 456 page document *with no footnotes*? Manifesto? Essay? Poem?

Long-winded rant? All of the above, but under one large banner: *existential prophetism*. As he says: “The gates of prophecy are never closed (196).” This phrase marks the turning point in the work. Chapters proceeding it chronicle past efforts of religion to deal with the fundamental defects of the human condition: mortality, groundlessness, insatiability, and belittlement. In the second half Unger offers a prophetic vision of any future religion. But what are the religions of the past?

THE RELIGIOUS STANCES

According to Unger, religion is the perennial response to the four fundamental defects of life. He categorizes three basic religious responses to them. The first is called “Overcoming the world.” This religious stance emphasizes world-transcendence: “It must treat history as a nightmare from which we seek to awake rather than as the stage of our salvation” (78). It is the stance that ignores the fundamental defects of life by denying significance to this life: one must overcome the world by escaping it in transcendent experience and hope. The second stance is labeled “Humanizing the world.” Instead of avoiding the world’s terrors and life’s defects by escape, one embraces them: “We can step back from the edge of the abyss and build a human realm sufficing to itself. In this realm, human beings create meaning, albeit in a meaningless world” (91). Both of these fundamental stances are inadequate to the task of living though; overcoming denies life and humanizing denies the spiritual dimension of humanity. This leads to a third stance, called “Struggling with the world.”

The central idea here is “that there is a path of ascent, requiring and enabling us to undergo a transformation of both society and the self, and rewarding us with an incomparable good.” What is this incomparable good? “A greater share in the attributes of the divine...or a greater life, with higher powers, making us more godlike” (121). Struggling comes in two forms: sacred and profane. The sacred is that of the Abrahamic faiths, but

Christianity in particular, due to its doctrines of the Incarnation and Redemption. How is struggling different from overcoming and humanizing? Struggling embraces the three human defects and aims to conquer the fourth. Struggling, especially its Christian form, accepts mortality (the death of Jesus), groundlessness (the importance of faith), and insatiability (the desire to be godlike) and has a plan for solving belittlement, namely, becoming godlike through the theological virtues.

STRUGGLING WITH THE WORLD IN TWO MODES

The aim is godlikeness. This is not the traditional liberal Protestant form of religion, which Unger castigates correctly as “a halfway house between belief and unbelief” (261). Still, the religion of the future is not Christianity. Even the sacred version of struggling, Unger thinks, must be transcended in the profane version, for Christianity has marred itself in the world and its defects through political institutions and Greek philosophy. The believer of the future must replace “the idea of our radical dependence on God with a view of our divinization, according to which we can become at once more human and more godlike without mistaking ourselves for God” (287). Unger seeks the liberation *of* the world, not redemption *from* the world.

How is one liberated from belittlement? The cardinal and theological virtues, Unger says. The first he labels virtues of connection: respect, forbearance, fairness. He then adds the virtues of purification, virtues which “had no place in the philosophical and religious traditions that preceded the revolutionary emergence of the higher religions” (378). These virtues are based in the idea of kenosis, taken from patristic theologians, meaning “an emptying out, undertaken for the sake of a raising up of our faculties of resistance and reception, valued as a heightening of life” (379). Virtues of purification are simplicity, enthusiasm, and attentiveness. Finally he offers the virtues of divinization, our theological virtues of faith, hope, and charity. “Among the world

religions, they have no secure place, other than in the Christian conception” (382). He offers a summary of these virtues:

Openness to the other person is the equivalent of charity. Openness to the new is the equivalent of hope. Acceptance of the vulnerability required by the always inadequately justified commitment of life to a particular direction is the equivalent of faith. (383)

These virtues provide the key to the religion of the future. What Christianity got right was the development of these virtues; where it went wrong was in the stress on God, as opposed to a stress on humanity. The religion of the future, this profane struggle with the world, should

make us more willing to unprotect ourselves for the sake of bigness and of love. It should convince us to exchange serenity for searching... Then, so long as we live, we shall have a greater life, and draw farther away from the idols but closer to one another, and be deathless, temporarily. (444)

DWORKIN'S DEEPER RELIGION

The theme of this book is that religion is deeper than God. Religion is a deep, distinct, and comprehensive worldview: it holds that inherent, objective value permeates everything, that the universe and its creatures are awe-inspiring, that human life has purpose and the universe order.²

The late Ronald Dworkin was one of America's most pre-eminent legal scholars and political philosophers. His final book, *Religion without God*, was published posthumously and is largely his text from his Einstein lectures given in 2011. This short work is something of an application of the theory he developed in his magnum opus, *Justice for Hedgehogs*. In that work he argued

for two connected theses: the unity of value and the independence of morality. “Morality stands or falls on its own credentials. Moral principle can be neither vindicated nor impeached except through its own connivance.”³ He makes the unfashionable claim that morality and value can neither be reduced to some more fundamental account of biology or physics, nor fretted away by a insipid relativism. There are objective moral values and moral truth, like it or not! In *Justice for Hedgehogs*, Dworkin already pointed to the religious implications of this objectivity: “We need not rely on our own religion, leaving those other faiths behind, when we argue for the innate rights of all human beings. We can argue not from what divides us but from what unites us. We all—Muslim, Jew, or Christian, atheist or zealot—face the same inescapable challenge of a life to lead, death to face, and dignity to redeem.”⁴ *Religion without God* develops this religious position, one he calls “religious atheism.”

DWORKIN’S RELIGIOUS ATHEISM

The phrase “religious atheism” requires explanation. “The religious attitude accepts the full, independent reality of value. It accepts the objective truth of two central judgments about value” (10). The first is the objective value and meaning of human life. The second is that nature, “the universe as a whole and in all its parts,” is something beyond mere fact. It is sublime, “something of intrinsic value and wonder” (10). These two judgments are, of course, the same two that Immanuel Kant made famous at the end of his *Critique of Practical Reason*: “Two things fill the mind with ever new and increasing admiration and reverence, the more often and more steadily one reflects on them: *the starry heavens above me and the moral law within me.*”⁵

Since religious atheism “rejects all forms of naturalism” (13), the ideas of Dawkins and his followers are out. But what about non-atheistic religion? Dworkin admits that there are many ideas of god: the pagan gods, the “Sistine God” of Abrahamic faiths,

the “bookmark God” of deistic Enlightenment faith, and even the impersonal god of pantheism, ancient and new. All of these may have arguments for or against their god, but these mean not a whit for value and morality. Why not? Because for Dworkin that puts questions of science in the place of questions of value, and the independence of value strictly prohibits just such a reduction. “The science part of conventional religion cannot ground the value part because—to put it briefly at first—these are conceptually independent. Human life cannot have any kind of meaning or value just because a loving god exists” (25–26). For Dworkin, the question of God’s existence is a question for speculative science (not far from St. Thomas here), and reasons can be given for or against. Crucially, however, the result of this speculative reasoning has *nothing to do with morality*. Morality is an objective realm of values that cannot be affected by any fact of the matter, whether that fact is a physio-chemical one or a theological one. “What divides godly and godless religion—the science of godless religion—is not as important as the faith in value that unites them” (29).

SCIENCE AND BEAUTY

Dworkin develops his religious atheist position through a discussion of cosmological aesthetics. He argues for the intrinsic beauty of the universe through a discussion of mathematical simplicity and symmetry used in the selection of physical theories. Beauty is an indication of truth. “Whether a theory is beautiful seems a very different question from whether it is true. But what is the alternative? Shall we say that, on the contrary, the beauty of a true scientific hypothesis is only a coincidence” (52)? But is there any ultimate reason for the universe as it is? Dworkin finds a negative answer unacceptable: “If the universe just is whatever way it is, for no reason, then it would make no sense to presume that it is beautiful or awe-inspiring. It could then be beautiful, if at all, only by coincidence” (81). This is because “the scientific presumption

that the universe is finally fully comprehensible is also the religious conviction that it shines with real beauty” (104).

LIVING WELL AND RELIGIOUS ATHEISM: BEYOND THEOLOGY

In the final two sections of the book Dworkin turns to the second of Kant’s causes for wonder: the moral law within. What does it mean to live well? Is there such a thing as objective human morality? In *Justice for Hedgehogs* Dworkin argued that the question of objective morality is inescapable: any position on morality is a moral position. Morality cannot be reduced to something else. It stands on its own credentials and judgment—this is the independence of value thesis. The question of what it is to live well always follows upon the more fundamental point that there is a way to live well, an objective way to act in accord with moral truth. This assumption of moral truth is “as much available to an atheist as to a theist. Provided, that is, that the atheist is a religious atheist” (155). He concludes:

That is the crucial point. What matters most fundamentally to the drive to live well is the conviction that there is, independently and objectively a right way to life...it is not available to a naturalist who things that reality consists only of matter and mind.... In this most fundamental respect religious theists and religious atheists are at one. The existence or nonexistence of a god does not figure in the instinct of value that unites them. What divides them is science: they disagree about the best explanation of the truths of matter and mind, but it by no means follows that they disagree about the further truths of value. (155-156)

THE RELIGIOUS ATHEISM OF UNGER AND DWORKIN

Religion, and Christianity in at least Unger’s work, is **good but not true**. According to these two thinkers one can (and perhaps

should?) be a religious atheist, one who believes in objective morality and virtuous living but does not accept the idea of God that is traditionally used to support this moral objectivity. Both recognize that faith and conviction are essential to the moral life, yet both deny the validity of scientific naturalism. Religion is essential to making life worth living, but God is not essential or necessary for religion.

How should one respond to this vision of reality which I suspect will become more and more prevalent once the naturalistic forms of atheism are left behind? One could give a Thomistic response starting from the natural virtue of religion, showing that much of what Unger and Dworkin are arguing for is perfectly correct with respect to the virtue of natural justice—it just needs further metaphysical grounding. Alternatively, one could use John Calvin's notion of the *sensus divinitatis*, a natural sense of the divine, and its source in the workings of the Holy Spirit. Or one could even use Kant to argue for the necessity of God, not in speculative reason but in practical reason, in order to provide the ground of duty to the moral law that Dworkin takes from Kant's second *Critique*. All of these—and others—are perfectly acceptable and worthy avenues of attack. I will take a different one, following the lead of the Catholic theologian Hans Urs von Balthasar.

BALTHASAR'S PRINCIPLE: BEAUTY FIRST!

Hans Urs von Balthasar grappled with truth and goodness. He saw modernity as turning against both notions, especially in regard to Christianity. To combat this rejection he offered a new strategy: *start with beauty, and then work back to goodness and truth.*

Most people dare not make strong affirmations about the ultimate nature of the world's essence [truth] or about the ultimate justice of human actions [goodness]. But all those who have been once affected inwardly by the worldly beauty

of either nature, or of a person's life, or of art, will surely not insist that they have no genuine idea of what beauty is. The beautiful brings with it a self-evidence that en-lightens without mediation.⁶

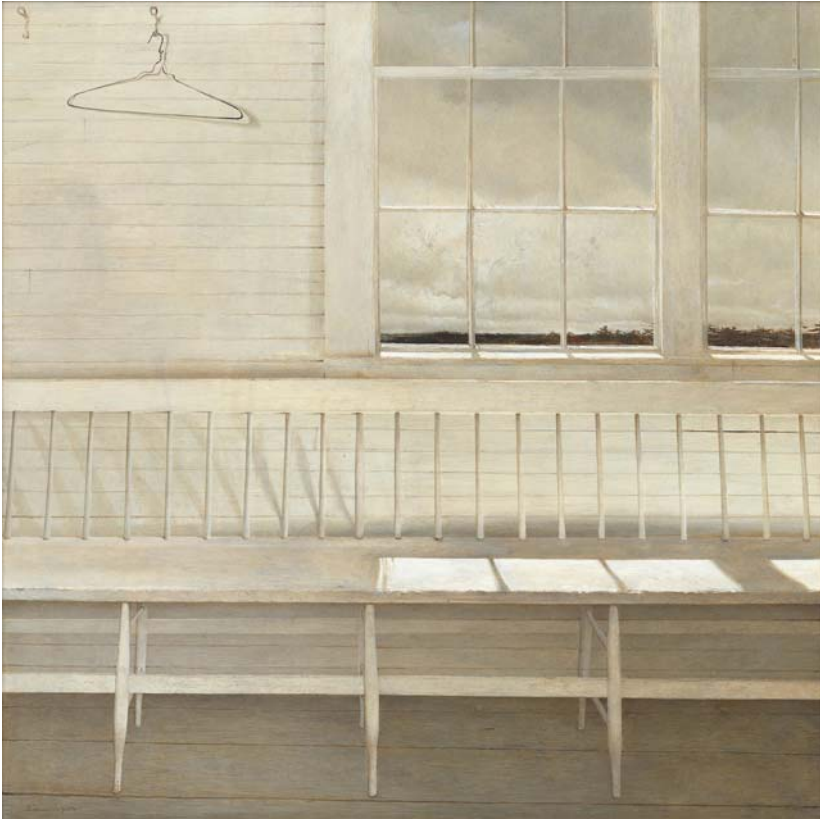
Balthasar agreed with Dostoevsky's idea that beauty would save the world, especially in modernity. People who close themselves off to Christian truth and goodness may yet be open to Christian beauty. And because Balthasar believed that beauty was convertible with goodness and truth, beauty once secured can provide reason for the other two. I think this "beauty first" strategy goes a long way in answering the challenge of a religious atheism. To show how this works concretely I offer an interpretation of a painting from one of America's greatest artists, Andrew Wyeth.

ANDREW WYETH'S *OFF AT SEA*

Wyeth was a virtuoso, known especially for his work in tempera, a medium that requires extreme patience and technical skill. His works are breathtaking, as anyone knows who has been in the presence of his most famous works such as *Christina's World* or *Wind from the Sea*. The detail is incredible, but it is more than precise painting that makes Wyeth the artistic genius he is: this accolade comes from his ability to express aesthetic and moral truth *through* the painted medium. His works express the transcendent truth of the world in the immanent frame of everyday life. This makes Andrew Wyeth, following the intuition of Balthasar, an antidote to the religious atheism of Unger and Dworkin. Let us gaze and reflect upon one of his masterpieces: *Off at Sea* (1972).

Off at Sea is a haunting image. Its hues, shapes, emotions...it is truly a work of beauty because one is transfixed in its presence. The painting is not something to be known, nor something to be acted on, but something to be experienced, something to rest in

as it arrests one's gaze. In this piece one finds the presence of the true, the good, and the beautiful united and interwoven on one extremely detailed canvas.



OFF AT SEA, 1972 TEMPERA © ANDREW WYETH

Off at Sea is beautiful: the colors, shading, proportion, harmony, and shadows. But these are merely elements in an insufficient explanation of the painting's beauty. It draws one in, forcing thought to go out and forcing one to stand fixed on the dazzling white present throughout. There is an intuitive grasp of beauty here, described by Balthasar as bringing its own self-evidence. This is not merely a beautiful work—it is a moral one too.

Off at Sea is good. The painting itself tells a moral story. The stark white colors evoke a primordial purity and goodness. The simplicity of the scene intones innocence, yet the clouds beyond the window threaten with a sense of foreboding: all is not well, but goodness remains in the forefront. The light falling on the bench offers warmth and friendliness while the dangling hanger speaks of loss or absence. This is a picture of good and evil in the everydayness of Wyeth's world, a good holding evil at bay while recognizing its power. It is a moral work, one that tells a sophisticated story of goodness and infuses something of that goodness in the viewer. But this goodness is not just beautiful in its whitewashed ebullience. This is a picture of truth.

Off at Sea is about truth. Finding the true is about finding the essence of a thing. And this search was something Wyeth revealed in. Many of his paintings began their lives with a person included, frequently a member of the Olson family with whom he lived and painted. But Wyeth sought to get to the things themselves, in true phenomenological style, removing the people from his paintings when he could convey the truth of them without them. *Off at Sea* is a perfect example: it originally included a boy sitting on the left end of the vestry bench, but upon a later visit to the paintings environs he noticed a coat hanger and was able to convey the sense of presence through its metallic curves better than through the human figure. He removed the boy and we are left with a geometrical masterpiece—the truth of figures and angles and lines. In some ways the beauty and goodness depend on the mathematical precision and photo-realistic detail of the work. Everything in it is as real as can be: the grain of the wood, shadows of the bench, light falling on the seat, and the shine of the silver hanger. The truth of the vestry is proclaimed in this painting, but not as would a photograph with its mechanical reproduction. Rather it is true but more than true. It has that distinctively human and transcendent truth about it.

Off at Sea offers an experience of the unity of beauty, goodness, and truth. It is true in its beauty and goodness, good through its

truth and beauty, and beautiful as true and good. Wyeth's work can teach the religious atheist (as well as ourselves!) that something truly good must also be beautiful and true, that it is not necessary nor even desirable to separate goodness from truth. The traditional stance of Christianity as both true and good is reaffirmed through unity with or in the beautiful.

THE PRESENT ABSENCE OF THE PERSONAL

A second revelation from *Off at Sea* is the simultaneous absence and presence of the personal, the absent presence of an Other. On a superficial level the painting has nothing human about it: it is an empty room with a window open to the sky. But this is a naïve interpretation; sustained reflection finds this painting saturated with personal presence. First it is not a natural landscape that is depicted but a human, all too human setting: a bench in the vestry of a small country church. The floor, walls, window, and white bench itself all point to human works of calloused hand and sweat-worn brow. We are looking at a human world, even if no humans are presently present. Second, of course, is the coat hanger. Dangling at head level, it is the reminder of a recent presence and a promise of a return. The absence of a person is proclaimed as temporary. We are catching a short strip of time where the going and coming of people are registered. But will he return? The title is a euphemism. *Off at Sea* refers beyond the temporary absence of a fishing trip, a day at the beach, a holiday after holy worship. It is a New England phrase meaning "Lost at Sea." The dangling hanger may remain unused—our eyes shift from it to the ominous clouds and a thought dawns on us: he will not return. The painting is now marked with remembrance, white becomes absence of color and feeling as the emotion enters the viewer. The geometry of the bench becomes the desiccated bones of a wayfarer lost to us. But the person is not absolutely absent. In a third moment the white becomes the haunting of a ghost; he remains.

This absent presence of the personal, the haunting of the painting by a ghost, is an apt description for our religious atheism. Upon initial reflection it seems that the world, scientific and moral, remain devoid of Another who stands above and beyond it. But as we attune ourselves to the beautiful we find that the absence of God is not an absolute absence, a negation or privation, but a hidden transcendence. The truth and goodness of the world are permeated by the still, small, beautiful presence of Another, one who may seem far away but is actually hinted at, pointed to, hauntingly present, all around us. This is true of the painting as well, not just in its subject matter, but also in its composition. This can only be an Andrew Wyeth painting, a unique creation of his aesthetic genius, and knowing him and his story is as important for understanding the painting as any merely technical artistic knowledge. It is impossible to escape the personal in looking at *Off at Sea*: the absent presence of the man at sea stands before us while the ghost of Andrew Wyeth stands behind us, offering silent hints and suggestions about the meaning of the painting and of the world.

RETURN OF RELIGION AND GOD

The new attitude to God found in religious atheism, as exemplified in Roberto Unger and Ronald Dworkin, is not as threatening as we first thought. It merely presents a new horizon for Christianity, a new moment in this secular age's attempt to escape its loving Father. Perhaps it is even a maturing of the infantile atheism offered by the scientific naturalism perspective: it looks at the world and finds moral truth, objective value, and goodness. But it still misses the ground of this goodness, the truth structuring and ordering such a morality. Yet because it is open to beauty, open to the transcendent, it remains open to Another, to a presence that is all the more present in being absent, at least from a certain perspective and for a certain time. Even here *Off at Sea* offers an answer, or at least a thought. As the painting ages the boy

seated on the left, painted over, becomes more visible, a shadow darkening under the lonely coat hanger. The piece becomes a palimpsest, a painted parable for the future of religion: the return of God. The religion of the future remains the religion of the past, because it is the religion of the eternal present.

Bonaventure Chapman entered the Order of Preachers in 2010. He received an M.Th. in Applied Theology from Wycliffe Hall, Oxford University, where he studied for the Anglican priesthood.

ENDNOTES

1. Unger, R., *The Religion of the Future* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2014), 1. All page numbers in the text of this section refer to this work.
2. Dworkin, R., *Religion without God* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2013), 1. Unless otherwise noted, all page references in this section refer to this work.
3. Dworkin, R., *Justice for Hedgehogs* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2011), 79.
4. *Ibid.*, 344.
5. Kant, I., *Critique of Practical Reason*, trans. M. Gregor, in *Practical Philosophy*, The Cambridge Edition of the Works of Immanuel Kant (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996), 269.
6. Balthasar, H. U. v., *The Glory of the Lord*, vol. 1, trans. E. Leiva-Merikakis (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 1982), 37.