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Review Essay[*]

Irreducible Reality, Irreducible Persons

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The Soul of the World is based on the Stanton Lectures delivered by Roger Scruton at the University of Cambridge. Much of the book draws upon and elaborates themes developed previously by the author, but in a tone that is "more conversational than scholarly" (vii). This revisiting of familiar themes, however, does not result in a series of rehashed essays carelessly strung together, nor does its tone convey a lack of intellectual rigor. This is not a philosophy-lite text but a carefully crafted and elegant meditation on the prospect of religious belief in the frequently hostile milieu of late modernity.

According to Scruton, the current popular interest in religion stems from two sources: the perceived conflict between science and Christianity, and the terrorist attacks of 9/11 that provoked "another confrontation, between Islam and the modern world" (1). These conflicts are distinct–but also inextricable and interwoven. Whereas science springs from the intellectual need to know the "nature of reality," religion derives from an emotional desire regarding "how we should live" (1). The present confrontation between religion and science results from the tendency of evolutionary psychology to reduce human behavior in general, and religious practices in particular, to adaptations of successful reproductive strategies. Incest is a moral and religious taboo, for example, because it is a bad reproductive tactic. God, then, is an entity, or more likely a projected idea, outside space and time that exerts no causality, and this effectively means there is no God, thereby stripping believers of any rational basis for their beliefs.

[*] Roger Scruton, *The Soul of the World* (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 2014). Page references to Scruton's book appear in the text.

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Scruton dismisses this reductionist attack as nonsense. If the concept of a God beyond time and space removes any rational basis for belief, then the same may be said of science due to its dependence on mathematical methodologies. For instance, science never specifies whether the numbers it uses to describe human behavior refer to anything real or merely outline theoretical constructs. Evolutionary psychology, then, cannot explain human states of mind and human desires solely in terms of successful reproductive strategies. "We pursue the true, the good, and the beautiful, even though the false, the nasty, and the messy might have been just as useful to our genes" (5).

This lack of adequate explanation by evolutionary psychology is particularly acute in respect to religious belief and practice. Contemporary critics of religion, on purportedly scientific grounds, assume they are criticizing metaphysical claims that science easily refutes. But they are refuting a phantom. When people claim they are encountering God, they are not facing something akin to a specter, but a person: a self-revealed God within time and space. A personal encounter with a God consigned to remaining beyond this realm would be impossible, tantamount to encountering the number 2. For the believer, the "experience of the 'real presence' is at the heart of revealed religion, entailing in turn a life of prayer, obedience, and submission" (11). People seeking God are not looking for a proof of God's existence but are searching for an encounter with another "I," in this world and also beyond it.

It is at this juncture where what Scruton calls the "emotional confrontation" takes place. In response to encountering a God who is both present and absent, both in this world and beyond it, believers live out their lives accordingly through particular acts and decisions. Moreover, this response inevitably impinges upon others, for religious devotion is not limited to what one thinks or does in one's solitude. Religion is not only personal but also social, not only believing but also belonging. This shared longing for God does not rest comfortably in the late modern political milieu. Late moderns presume they have exorcised from their public space any religious sentiments that justify unwarranted violence. They are mistaken, Scruton insists, for the "desire for sacrifice" remains deeply ingrained "in all of us" (1). There is a pervasive "secular residue of the core religious thought—the thought that the sacred and the sacrificial coincide" (2). The terrorist attacks of 9/11 were horrific not only because they were inexplicable to late modern sensibilities, but also because they confirmed the lingering presence of an unsettling primal desire.

Scruton contends that the "gradual preference for the self over the other as the primary sacrificial victim" is one of the rare instances of genuine religious progress (2). This progressive preference, however, has not entirely replaced its primitive ancestor, and it is also exercised in perverse ways. The self-sacrifice of the terrorists on 9/11 entailed sacrificing many others. Consequently, not just any encounter with what is believed to be divine will do. Some judgment concerning the veracity of the encounter is required. "Only when we are sure that this moment of the real presence exists in the human being who experiences it, can we then ask the question whether

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it is or is not true revelation—a moment not just of faith but of knowledge, and a gift of grace" (23). This determination can only be made in rough correlation to the real world in which humans live and encounter God, as well as in relation to the foundation of this reality that resides, so to speak, beyond time and space. The intellectual and emotional challenges confronting late moderns are not unrelated to or divisible from each other. Both involve a simultaneous reaching out to others who inhabit the world and to the One who is beyond it. In short, what Scruton characterizes as the "cosmological and psychological paths" both head "toward the same destination, and that destination lies at the far horizon of our world" (26).

The Soul of the World maps these two, often intersecting paths, albeit in an undetailed manner. Both paths also require some weeding and rubbish removal along the way. On the cosmological path, the principal source of these eyesores is, as might be expected, reductionism. The danger of describing the world in exclusively scientific terms is not that the ensuing description is false, but that it is partial. The peril results when such a partial description is foisted as a full or complete depiction. In making this depictive move, the world that humans encounter is greatly diminished. Scruton uses music and art to illustrate this perilous descriptive turn. An acoustic engineer, for example, can chart the sound pitches of a tune, and a computer scientist can describe a painting in terms of its pixels. If appropriate methodological limits are respected, then the respective portrayals are true and harmless. Mischief occurs when these limits are violated by inferring that Beethoven's Ninth Symphony is "'nothing but' a sequence of pitched sounds of varying timbre" and the *Mona Lisa* is "'nothing but' a spread of pigments on a canvas" (40). Music and art are effectively lost in these reductionist accounts, for they fail to recognize or acknowledge that the person listening or seeing does so within an interpretive space that both receives and assigns beauty that is more expansive than sequenced sounds and pixels. A person does not attend a concert or visit a museum to encounter pitches and pigments but rather to experience a beautiful piece of music or work of visual art.

Some neuroscientists will raise a basic objection to Scruton's dismissal of reductionism. Persons, they will say, do not actually exist. In encountering various physical environments, nonhuman animals, at least the more evolutionarily advanced species, receive and process information through a "central nervous system, of which the brain is the most important part" (51). The resulting behavior is the outcome of this processed information. Consequently, to speak of an animal mind is to speak only about its brain. Presumably the same can be said of human beings, for they are, after all, animals, albeit a bit more evolutionarily sophisticated than other species. The human brain is adept at receiving information and using it over time to form effective adaptive capabilities and reproductive strategies. The gray matter encased in the skull is a "kind of digital computer, which operates by carrying out computations on information received through the many receptors located around the body, and delivering appropriate responses" (53).

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If only neuroscientists stopped at this point, they would offer insight into one aspect of human behavior. But they are not content to stop. Rather, they use this single facet to explain all behavior. What humans express as religious beliefs, moral convictions, or wisdom are simply clumsy, emotive expressions that "are of no real significance" (51). The so-called virtues, for instance, are not given or revealed norms of human behavior but originate in altruism, which is merely a successful reproductive strategy that has evolved over time. Moral acts that presumably defy a self-interested altruism are casually dismissed as statistical aberrations. A sense of personhood, then, is a useful illusion but of no real or substantive significance. There is no person listening to a concert or beholding a work of art, but only a highly complex collection of neurons interacting with collections of pitches and pixels. Even more troubling is the fact, as Scruton observes, that neuroscience, with the assistance of its philosophical handmaidens, is endeavoring to "remove the obstacles that have been laid in the path of scientific advance by popular prejudice and superstitious ways of thinking" (52).

Scruton counters the reductionism of neuroscience with a "kind of cognitive dualism . . . whereby we can grasp the idea that there can be *one* reality, which is understood in more than one way" (66; italics in original). Personhood is an emergent trait of being human in much the same way that music is an emergent quality of sounds. An understanding of personhood includes a scientific description of how the brain works but cannot be reduced to it. Describing a person requires a broader narration that cannot be fixated entirely upon the human brain. A human being is both an animal and a person, for "all the parts of the one are also parts of the other" (68).[1] Despite the unremitting reductionist penchant of neuroscience, the notion of personhood remains remarkably resilient.

Nonetheless, will neuroscience eventually expose personhood as a fiction?—as a useful concept, but not real? Scruton thinks not, for science cannot ask or answer the right questions to invalidate personhood. The realm of science is one of objects, and in this domain the question of "why" can only be answered in reductionist terms. When science asks this question of the world, God disappears, and when neuroscience asks this question of the human being, the person disappears. With these disappearing acts in mind, one wonders whether the resulting discourse is not also fictitious. Moreover, as we will see below, fictional narration is not necessarily devoid of truth.

Scruton insists that acknowledging the absurdity of reductionism "is the first step in the search for God" (40). But it is not the first step along an easy or certain path, for it entails a search for God in this world and beyond. Drawing upon Christian theology, Scruton contends that God can only be present through a kenotic (self-emptying) incarnation. Such self-emptying is required, for no one can encounter

[1] For a similar theological account of a nonreductive dualist characterization of human beings, see Gilbert Meilaender, *Neither Beast nor God: The Dignity of the Human Person* (New York: New Atlantis Books, 2009).

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God fully or completely. The revealing is necessarily partial, for the divine is disclosed but also hidden; God is simultaneously present and absent. Following Simone Weil: "To love God is to love an absence, and this absence is made present to us in Christ, the person whose being is also self-abnegation" (71). For Christians, this kenotic God, this simultaneous divine presence and absence, is depicted most intensely in the Eucharist.[2]

As noted previously, this search for God is not only personal and inward but pursued in the company of others. It is important to keep in mind, however, that these companions are fellow persons and not merely collections of neurons. "In all that touches what is deepest and most lasting in our lives . . . we address the horizon from which the other's gaze is seeking us" (75). Morality, then, requires constantly reinforcing the perception of the other not only as a fellow human being but as an irreducible person. According to Scruton, maintaining this perception requires vigilance, or what Plato called the "care of the soul" (75). He believes this care is quickly fading from the late modern world, a prospect that does not bode well for the future.

Late moderns have essentially transformed their life with one another into a series of voluntary or willed exchanges. Relationships are effectively reduced to contracts, both informally and formally, in which the parties negotiate and consent to performing certain duties that enable their respective self-interested pursuits. Justice thereby consists of faithfully fulfilling the terms of contractual obligations. More expansively, late moderns are bound together by a social contract that is subject to ongoing revision that redefines accompanying duties and obligations and also defines what constitutes their just execution. To a large extent, the contractual character of late liberal society is a secularized and diminished derivative from earlier, religious notions of covenant.

Justice, however, is not the final arbiter of human good, for the "human world reaches *beyond* the boundaries of justice, toward obligations that are bequeathed and bestowed, rather than created" (89; italics in original).[3] The most significant human relations—such as friendship, affection, and love—are not contractual but entail a "kind of unconditional giving to the other that might expect reciprocity but does not demand it" (89). A vow captures this given (rather than created) character of relations. A vow is more open-ended than a contract because it is the gift of oneself to the other. Moreover, a vow, unlike a contract, has a sacred connotation; it often entails an oath made in the name or in the presence of God. Traditional

[2] See Douglas Farrow, *Ascension and Ecclesia: On the Significance of the Doctrine of the Ascension for Ecclesiology and Christian Cosmology* (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Eerdmans, 1999) esp. ch. 1.

[3] Scruton adds: "I am skeptical of the attempts to expand the concept of justice, so as to include the many claims made on behalf of it by socialists and their fellow travelers. However, I agree with the left-liberal consensus, that we are encumbered by more obligations than those we have explicitly contracted, and free choice is not the only material from which the realm of duties is built" (89); cf. George Parkin Grant, *English-Speaking Justice* (Notre Dame, Ind.: University of Notre Dame Press, 1985).

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marriage, for example, is based on vows made before God and witnesses, which engenders an enduring but unspecified bond, whereas for late moderns marriage has become a contract specifying particular obligations enforced by the coercive power of the state.[4] In short, power has displaced piety as the principal source for sustaining relationships over time.

Since all relations, particularly the most important ones, cannot be reduced to contracts without inflicting harm, human life takes on a sacrificial and sacramental character, for the bonds of human fellowship are not only constructed but also given by a transcendent source.[5] "Not all our obligations are freely undertaken, and created by choice. Some we receive 'from outside the will'" (94). These unchosen obligations are marked by their enduring social functionality and internal inflexibility that together resist forces of self-centered longings that are often ensconced in contractual relationships. Scruton notes marriage, family, and country as examples of received obligations. Following Burke, he defines society as that which relates or binds the living with the dead and yet to be born. Consequently, a society is not bound together by a contract but by something more akin to an "inheritance of trusteeship" (94).

With the late modern emphasis on personal choice instead of piety, secularization is withering the bonds of human association because there is no transcendent or sacred reference point. Yet it would be a mistake to assume that the reductive proclivities of late moderns, in both thought and practice, have effectively eradicated the sacrificial and sacramental from the composition of contemporary life, for they are "far more deeply woven into the fabric of our experience than enlightened people like to think" (94). Indeed, they are indispensible, for any enduring society must reach into "another order, in which obligations are transcendent, attachments sacred, and contracts dissolved in vows" (95).

If Scruton is right, then the certainty and precision of contractual relationships must be exchanged for the uncertainty and imprecision of sacred vows. Since a vow entails the giving of oneself to another, that which is given and received is necessarily ambiguous. Persons come to know each other somewhat similarly to the way they come to know God—through revelation, which is always partial and never full or complete. In any disclosure, something remains hidden; there is both the presence and the absence of the self and the other. Any personal encounter, however intense, always remains opaque.

Consequently, in encountering one another, we are dealing primarily with appearances. This is not, however, the counsel of being resigned to the superficiality of late modernity but the acknowledgment that it could not be otherwise. In many

[4] See John Witte, Jr., *From Sacrament to Contract: Marriage, Religion, and Law in the Western Tradition* (Louisville, Ky.: Westminster John Knox, 2012).

[5] Cf. O'Donovan's account of "communication" in Oliver O'Donovan, *The Ways of Judgment: The Bampton Lectures, 2003* (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Eerdmans, 2005); and idem, *Common Objects of Love: Moral Reflection and the Shaping of Community* (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Eerdmans, 2002).

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respects, late moderns embrace superficial appearance, for fulfilling contractual obligations does not require the encumbrance of knowing, however partially, what is behind the appearance. Yet the notion that human interaction is mediated through appearances is not a modern invention. Hannah Arendt recalls Socrates's adage to "'*Be* as you wish to appear,' which means appear *always* as you wish to appear to others even if it happens that you are alone and appear to no one but yourself." Appearance, then, is a deliberate choice as to how one chooses to disclose oneself to others. What is uniquely troubling about late moderns is that they have "succumbed to the strange illusion that man, in distinction from other things, has created himself."[6] The appearance creates the specter behind it–hence Scruton's insistence that encountering the appearance of another is to encounter the revelation of a genuine person, another "I," behind it.

The revelatory nature of interpersonal encounter accounts, in part, for Scruton's frequent recourse to the human face, for it mediates a person's attempt not only to present oneself to others but also to reach out to and commune with them. There are good reasons that lovers spend hours gazing at each other's face or, more broadly, see the other through a "just and loving" gaze.[7] To see the face of the other is to see also the revealed appearance of another person. Unlike God, we cannot know the other in the fullness of their being but can only make incomplete judgments of what is revealed, what appears to us. In Scruton's words: "Through the example of the face we understand a little of what Oscar Wilde meant, when he said that it is only a very shallow person who does not judge by appearances" (114).

Judgment, however, is not merely indicating a subjective or emotive preference but making an assessment in respect to given criteria. Late moderns are virtually devoid of this capacity to judge, because reductive scientific methodologies have presumably stripped the world and its human inhabitants of their respective teloi of creation and personhood, dismissing them as little more than fictitious ideas. It is a breathtaking act of hubris, for science is not equipped either to discover or to invalidate the telos of anything. More importantly, the curt dismissal of any descriptions that cannot be reduced to underlying binary information discloses a deeply impoverished understanding of what constitutes truth. Truth is disclosed more through narration, not through disassembling a whole into its constituent parts. Human beings are apparently chronic storytellers.[8] This ability to tell a tale, however, is not simply an adaptive reproductive strategy but an account of the human condition between its origin and its destiny. Religious, mythological language is best suited for narrating such an immense landscape. Myths are admittedly fictitious, but fiction is a vessel that reveals truth, and a myth "is a truth,

[6] See Hannah Arendt, *The Life of the Mind* (San Diego, Calif.: Harcourt, 1978) 36–37 [italics in original].

[7] See Iris Murdoch, *Metaphysics as a Guide to Morals* (London: Penguin Books, 1993) 52–53.

[8] See Jonathan Gottschall, *The Storytelling Animal: How Stories Make Us Human* (New York: Houghton Mifflin Harcourt, 2012).

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concealed in a story" (115). The veracity of a myth, then, can be neither understood nor evaluated in scientific terms. Consequently, the "teleological foundation of the world is not perceivable to science, describable in scientific terms" (185) but is only perceived through a more expansive and complex web of understanding.

Moreover, myths motivate human behavior. Ironically, those reducing the world to things like pitches and pixels, and persons to collections of neurons, are seemingly unaware that they too are creating a myth, and one that shapes human behavior accordingly. "When we see the world exclusively as an assemblage of objects, then nothing is rescued from barter and exchange" (131), and this is what late moderns do to each other and the earth. Late modern cities, for instance, are designed not only to display the fruits of their bartering and exchanging but also to promote further commercial activity. The architecture is simultaneously garish and nondescript, functional and grandiose, a fitting habitat for disassembled and disassembling animals. In contrast, the ancient city was founded on religious belief and piety. This foundation was reflected in its architecture, disclosing an implied cosmic order, so Roman buildings, for example, were stones "with a soul" (132).[9] For Scruton, religious myths, particularly Christian myths, disclose the world for what it is, namely, a given and irreducible reality inhabited by irreducible persons. The myths of creation, fall, and redemption also reveal the origin and destiny of this world, as well as ensuing glimpses of the true, the good, and, especially for Scruton, the beautiful accompanying this encounter of God in both this world and beyond. Collectively, these myths disclose the "fundamental truth" that "being is a gift" (139).

It is in the realm of myth that the intellectual and emotional paths that Scruton has been tracing throughout the book converge. Despite the best efforts of late moderns to live their lives in contractual terms, as befits a world of assembled objects, the limitations imposed by actual living constantly intrude and disrupt "they" remain bound to remnants of covenantal ordering. There is no other recourse, then, but to accept being as a gift, a sacred gift at that, and therefore one intertwined with the sacrificial and sacramental. It is "no accident that, in all human life, the sacred, the sacramental, and the sacrificial coincide" (183). Drawing on Christian themes, self-sacrifice brings reconciliation as seen in the Cross, and the sacred nature of this sacrifice is most vividly manifested in the Eucharist. Moreover, this joining of the sacrificial and sacramental helps us to understand the importance of forgiveness as a keystone of human life in this world. Properly understood, no one has a right to be forgiven, and no one is obligated to forgive. Forgiveness is not an entitlement but a gift, a condition that does not fit easily within contractual relationships. Although it is a gift, forgiveness is not unconditional but "earned by penitence, contrition, and atonement—acts that cannot be the terms of a contract, but which must themselves be given if they are to rectify the fault" (182).

[9] For a more detailed account see Scruton's book *The Aesthetics of Architecture* (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 2013).

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It is through giving and receiving forgiveness that people are reconciled. Arendt echoes this theme, but she adds what I see as a friendly amendment: forgiving must always be accompanied by promising. For an act to be forgiven requires that the one committing the fault must also promise to amend future behavior to prevent a repetition of the wrong committed.[10] This accords with the Eucharistic liturgy in which absolution is only pronounced following the promise to amend one's life. The principal difference between the views of Arendt and Scruton is that for Scruton the efficacy of the resulting reconciliation is dependent upon divine grace, while for Arendt Kantian reason can be substituted, a dubious claim that cannot muster much historical evidence in its behalf. It is ultimately God's act of sacrifice and forgiveness that undergirds corresponding human acts. More importantly, understanding forgiveness as a gift reinforces the perception of being as a gift, and in turn, the fact of having received forgiveness and being influences the subsequent ordering of one's life. The most important moments of a person's life involve exchanging these gifts, with death finally entailing surrendering the gift of being. And in these exchanges we encounter the God who is both in the world and beyond it, a God who is both present and absent.

God, then, is our singular "end point of our search for reasons" (190). It is in this end point that the intellectual and emotional conflicts of our current circumstances are not so much solved as they are accepted as part of a reality that is both immediate and beyond. Acknowledging the gifted character of life is not devoid of reason but is chiefly an act of faith that "looks beyond nature, asking itself what is required of *me* by way of thanks for this gift" (192; italics in original). Faith, then, is not synonymous with religion and has little use for theology, for the point is not to prove the existence of God but to accept the gift of being. Yet religious devotion and practice is needed to express this faith, and this is why liturgy, rather than discourse, is the heart of religion, for in the liturgy the present is made one with the past. In liturgy, an attempt is also made to transcend time and enter the eternal, but since the eternal can only be seen through the lens of faith, it appears, at best, as a poor reflection in a mirror.

The faith Scruton offers does not promise everlasting life for the believer. "But it *does* require an acceptance of death, and a sense that in death we are meeting our creator, the one bound to us by covenant, to whom we must account for our faults" (198) [italics in original]. Through our works of love and sacrifice and exchanging the gifts of being and forgiveness, we participate in and with the eternal, and in death we are united with "the soul of the world" (198).

I have little doubt that *The Soul of World* will be attacked from various quarters of the academy, its critics armed with a burgeoning lexicon of neologisms in which the term "post" is prominently displayed. As I also have no doubt that Scruton is

[10] For an overview of Arendt's account of forgiving and promising, see Brent Waters, *Christian Moral Theology in the Emerging Technoculture: From Posthuman Back to Human* (Farnham, U.K.: Ashgate, 2014) ch. 3.

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quite capable of defending himself, I will not spend time assessing any real or imagined assaults. Rather, as one favorably disposed to this book, I end this essay with a question stemming from puzzlement rather than criticism.

For whom was this book written? It is not an evangelistic tract designed to persuade late modern reductionists to repent and change their ways. I suspect their reactions will be either brusque dismissals or vitriolic denunciations of Scruton as an unscientific antiquarian. It is also not a hortative declaration sounding a clarion call to action for those already agreeing with Scruton's judgment of late modernity. The tone is too muted to stir the blood of true believers.

My guess—and it is only a guess—is that *The Soul of the World* was written for those who are not entirely at ease with late modernity but lack a vocabulary to express their unease. In this book, the taken-for-granted presumption that the world and its human inhabitants can and should be assembled and disassembled at will is unmasked as a half-truth elevated, ironically, through its reductionism, to the full truth. The resulting myth inspires a technological and political mastery of nature and human nature, vouched for by ostensibly unassailable scientific substantiation. This ad hoc myth, however, cannot withstand prolonged scrutiny, for there are no given points of reference to judge the veracity, much less the goodness and beauty, of what it is attempting to narrate. Consequently, this myth is neither engaging nor compelling, because there is little, if any, concealed truth to be revealed within its truncated story. Its appeal, then, may be due to the convenience it affords by dismissing even the possibility of any religious or moral meaning beyond material subsistence and physical survival as an impertinence, effectively justifying intellectual laxity and emotional sloth.

Yet in unmasking late modernity, Scruton does not leave it naked but re-masks it by insisting that its presumptive assembling and disassembling cannot be so easily and casually undertaken, for the world is a given reality populated by persons, and neither the world nor the persons can be reduced to their constituent parts without inflicting intellectual and emotional damage. By proposing that there is a God who can be encountered in this world and beyond, the prospect of the true, the good, and, most especially for Scruton, the beautiful becomes interesting again. The immediate task at hand is to discover disclosures of the sacrificial and sacramental within late modernity's lengthening twilight.

The Soul of the World is an apology for faith. This is an admittedly strange characterization, for Scruton disavows any need to prove the existence of God. It is certainly not a work of apologetics in the style of Plantinga or Swinburne, for the book's tone is not only conversational, but also interrogative rather than declarative. Its elegantly understated prose invites the reader to enter a space at the far horizon of the world, along the border between the temporal and eternal, and to linger awhile to encounter a God who is both present and absent. Will late moderns accept the invitation? Perhaps, for there is at least a remnant who know that their souls are famished.

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