

Anti-foundationalism and Liberal Democracy:
Richard Rorty and the Role of Religion in the Public Sphere

by

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B.A., St. Francis Xavier University, 2008

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Supervisory Committee

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Abstract

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The purpose of this paper is to critically examine Richard Rorty's arguments in favour of a limited role for religion in the public sphere, both with regard to their practical value and their consistency with Rorty's other philosophical commitments.

A brief description of Rorty's various philosophical commitments is followed by a detailed analysis of the negative practical consequences that can be foreseen resulting from Rorty's approach to the topic of religion and any attempt to enforce his proposed treatment of religion.

After looking at the practical problems with Rorty's position, a closer look was taken at Rorty's consistency across his philosophical writings. With a particular focus on Rorty's pragmatism and his epistemic relativism the author concludes that Rorty's arguments for reducing the influence of religion in the public sphere remain of questionable practicality and, furthermore, are at odds with his epistemological commitments.

Rorty's commitment to liberal democracy entails a commitment to protecting citizens' rights to voice their opinions in hopes of influencing public policy. Despite his controversial writings with regards to the role of religion in society, authors such as Jeffrey Stout and Nicholas Wolterstorff provide alternative approaches to the appropriate treatment of religion in society that remain consistent with an anti-foundational commitment to liberal democracy and can expect to produce more favourable practical outcomes.

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Introduction

Richard Rorty is among the most highly discussed, highly respected, philosophers of contemporary time.¹ Rorty is, perhaps, most famous for his distinctive and controversial brand of pragmatism, his critique of metaphysics and discussion of the central problems with contemporary epistemology. Some of Rorty's later works, however, focus on topics such as politics and include discussions of the appropriate place for religion in contemporary life.

Naturally, one would expect a great philosopher's writings to remain coherent across various topics and, indeed, in his writings, Rorty defends his treatment of religion as consistent with his commitment to liberalism, which, in turn, is consistent with his epistemology. Focusing, in particular, on Rorty's writings on the role of religion in the public sphere, I argue that there is a tension inherent in Rorty's various philosophical commitments. More specifically, I maintain that Rorty's discussion and treatment of religion is inconsistent with his relativist or 'anti-foundationalist' epistemological commitments.

Beginning with a brief summary of the various philosophical commitments Rorty makes - in epistemology, politics, pragmatism and the treatment of religion - I will proceed with a detailed analysis of what I see as practical and theoretical problems with his writings on the appropriate treatment of religious argument in light of his discussion on liberal democracy. Looking both at Rorty's specific treatment of the topic of religion and religious belief, as well as the solutions he proposes to some of the conflicts that religion can cause, I show that there are serious problems with Rorty's philosophy.

¹ Robert E. Brandom (ed.). *Rorty and His Critics (Philosophy and Their Critics)*. Chicago, Illinois : Blackwell Publishing Limited, 2003.

In chapter one, I lay down the foundations for my arguments, providing brief descriptions of the core elements of political liberal philosophy, Rorty's epistemological commitments and his unique support for "postmodernist bourgeois liberalism." Following this brief description of Rorty's philosophical commitments, I discuss Rorty's opinion of the appropriate role for religion in the public sphere based, primarily, on his writings *Religion as Conversation-stopper* and his later *Religion in the Public Square: A Reconsideration*. It is in these writings that Rorty expresses his arguments for why religious discussion ought to be removed from the public sphere and why ecclesiastical organizations ought to be marginalized, both of which rely, in some degree, on his argument for why a commitment to pragmatism entails a commitment to a secular liberal ideal.

In chapter two, I proceed by demonstrating some practical consequences of Rorty's theorizing. I argue that Rorty's discussion of religion as well as any attempt to implement his proposed solutions to the complications caused by religious reasons being voiced in the public sphere, can be foreseen to generate negative practical consequences. I begin with a brief look at Rorty's discussion of religion, looking specifically at his discussion of the relationship between religion and intellectuals, the appropriately 'private' nature of religious belief, and the potential consequences that the loss of ecclesiastical organizations may have for religious believers. Focusing in particular on Rorty's treatment of the topic of religious belief, I argue that Rorty fails to engage the religious reader, leading to questions in regards to how he anticipates achieving his political ideal. Not only does Rorty fail to offer a solution that will convince the religious reader of the value of his ideal, I argue that his discussion serves only to contribute to the tension that exists between religious believers and contemporary liberalism.

The tension that exists between secular liberals and religious citizens is not new and presents a serious problem in contemporary society. Using arguments presented by Jeffrey Stout and Lucas Swaine, I argue that respectful and equal treatment of religious worldviews is of upmost importance, not only because it is required by liberal democratic values, but because evidence suggests that a failure to provide respectful political treatment to marginalized groups can be dangerous.

In terms of practical problems, Rorty not only fails to appeal to religious readers, but actually instigates negative reactions from religious communities, moving him further away from actualizing his secular ideal. Indeed, there is reason to expect Rorty's proposals to cause the very opposite of his apparently intended effect. While these negative consequences themselves present an obstacle, I argue that the practical problems are of particular interest for Rorty, whose supposedly pragmatic theory is meant to be preferred because of its ideal practical consequences.

In chapter three, I present the theoretical problems I see arising between Rorty's arguments and his various philosophical commitments. In this chapter I show that many of the descriptions Rorty provides turn out to be inconsistent with his epistemological commitments. In particular, I argue, Rorty's anti-foundationalism or anti-essentialism is in tension with his descriptions of liberal institutions, the value of religion and the requirements of pragmatism. The more general epistemological problem for Rorty centers on his sectarian treatment of religion, particularly with regards to the liberal ideal that fuels his political philosophy. He is unjustified in committing to a form of epistemic relativism, while simultaneously favouring an atheistic worldview that attempts to encourage a particular, liberalized religious worldview. In the end it becomes evident that Rorty's political writings - including his discussion of the role of religion in public life - remain at odds with his philosophical foundations. Rather than regarding Rorty's

political commitments as consistent with his epistemology, one is forced to regard his political opinion as merely a sectarian opinion that, by his own standards, deserves no higher regard than any other. This is because there is no objective standard by which to judge the value of individual worldviews.

After presenting the reasons why the treatment of religion that Rorty recommends is incompatible with his epistemology, I argue for an alternative vision of liberal democracy that is consistent with a non-foundational epistemology. Relying on arguments presented by pragmatic philosopher Jeffrey Stout and anti-foundationalist Nicholas Wolterstorff, I maintain that, Rorty's epistemological commitments can be used to support a version of liberal democracy that fits more comfortably with the rights and freedoms that are supposed to be protected by liberal democracies - such as equal protection and freedom in law and neutrality - and can be anticipated to result in far fewer negative practical consequences.

Using the Danish Cartoon affair as an illustrative example, I highlight the features of liberal democracy for which Rorty's attempts to silence religious voices in the public sphere fails to account. Looking more closely at the commitments involved with liberal democracy, I demonstrate how the choice that Rorty seems to offer, between theocracy and secularism, is a false dichotomy. Following Stout and Wolterstorff, I offer support for a dialogical alternative to secularism, highlighting its practical advantages as well as its consistency with the non-foundational philosophy Rorty claims to support. Remaining committed to democracy and open public dialogue, allowing citizens of all worldviews the opportunity to voice their views and cast a vote, a liberal democracy can remain consistent with anti-foundationalism by remaining procedurally neutral. This approach has the practical advantage of avoiding the

disenfranchisement of citizens that one risks by attempting to silence particular views from the public sphere.

In the final pages of my paper, I highlight the tension inherent in Rorty's support for secular liberalism and his discussion of the role of religion in the public sphere. Rorty's commitment to anti-foundationalism led to his argument in support of keeping metaphysics out of the public sphere. Despite this commitment, Rorty ends up using his own worldview to justify a political philosophy that involves a hostile approach to religion. While the open expression of his worldview remains consistent with liberal democracy, Rorty attempts to present his worldview as anti-foundational which, I argue, it is not.

1. Foundations

I shall begin by providing a brief overview of the central elements of liberal political philosophy as well as a brief description of what Rorty understands as foundational support for the theory. I will follow with a description of Rorty's epistemological commitments. It is these relativistic epistemological commitments that lead Rorty to his anti-foundationalism, resulting in a unique defence of contemporary liberal institutions. After explaining Rorty's pragmatic defence of liberalism I will briefly describe the liberal utopia that Rorty uses to support his theory. Rorty maintains that religion is essentially at odds with his liberal ideal. As a result, he attempts to justify an unequal treatment of religion as a means to his secular liberal end.

After explaining the philosophical foundations that make up Rorty's worldview I will focus, in particular, on three positions that Rorty holds throughout his writings. The first is his argument that religion ought to be privatized, the second is his support for the marginalization of ecclesiastical organizations and, finally, I will focus on his assumption that support for pragmatism inevitably results in support for a secular, liberal utopia. In this chapter I intend to explain how these claims are meant to stem from and fit in with Rorty's philosophical commitments. Beginning with a brief description, in the following chapters I will demonstrate not only that these three arguments are at odds with some of his philosophical commitments, but further, that they encounter, as well as create, foreseeable practical problems that inevitably extinguish the ideal that is meant to provide fuel for his entire social-political project.

Liberal Political Philosophy

Richard Rorty identifies himself as a liberal and, so, a brief outline of the core elements of liberal political philosophy is in order. Of course "liberalism" is a very broad term and while there are important differences between many authors who have labelled themselves liberals, there are

some core ideas connected with liberalism that any self-proclaimed liberal must accept in order to be true to the title.

Liberalism concerns itself with the relationship between the individual and society, leaving all substantive questions, such as what constitutes the good life, to be “properly answered by the individual himself or herself, not by the collective.”² In a liberal society, therefore, all political decisions must remain neutral to competing claims of what constitutes the good life. As such, “liberal societies protect the individual by securing free choice as a matter of right and principle.”³ This, of course, does not result in completely unregulated behaviour, for, indeed, “a liberal society must remain neutral to any individual's personal conception of the good, allowing them the right to choose any action...until such action interferes with the rightful action of another.”⁴

In addition to this commitment to neutrality, which stems from the liberal principle of equality or equal liberty, liberals cherish autonomy. “Liberalism holds that personhood *is* the ability to make choices among available options.”⁵ According to this principle of autonomy, an individual that does not freely choose cannot truly be called a person.

As a liberal, Rorty can be understood as adopting the practical aspects of the view so far outlined. As Eric Gander writes, it is safe to assume that Rorty agrees “that among a society composed of a plurality of persons, each with her or his own private vision of the good, justice

² Eric M. Gander, *The Last Conceptual Revolution: A Critique of Richard Rorty's Political Philosophy (S U N Y Series in Speech Communication)*. Albany, New York: State University Of New York Press, 1998. p. 11.

³ Gander, p. 12.

⁴ Gander, p. 12.

⁵ Gander, p. 12.

demands that we let each individual act on her or his own vision.”⁶ Such actions, however, must be consistent with the principle that individuals refrain from harming one another.

For our purposes, however, we will be looking at a very specific aspect of Rorty's political theory. Although Rorty is vague when it comes to his treatment of the political liberal institutions he intends to support⁷, I will concern myself with Rorty's clear statements in regards to the appropriate role and treatment of religion in society. In particular I will be looking at his positions regarding the privatization of religion, his intentions to undermine ecclesiastical organizations and his supposedly pragmatic liberal utopia.

Kantian Defense for Liberalism

Contemporary Western society is marked by a plurality of comprehensive moral doctrines. This plurality of worldviews inevitably results in some tension when it comes to finding the appropriate form of leadership in a country claiming to have a government that is 'for the people, by the people.' Indeed, it is no easy task to form a legitimate authority capable of accommodating such apparent variety in fundamental beliefs.

Political liberalism claims to provide a moral framework that can somehow remain neutral between comprehensive moral doctrines and thereby successfully serve as a basis for public reasoning in a society marked by moral and religious pluralism.⁸ Political liberalism supposedly gained legitimacy by virtue of being able to exercise political power, as Rawls claims, “in accordance with a constitution the essentials of which all citizens as free and equal

⁶ Gander, p. 16.

⁷ Gander, p. 9.

⁸ Charles Larmore, *The Morals of Modernity (Modern European Philosophy)*. 1 ed. New York: Cambridge University Press, 1996. p. 121.

may reasonably be expected to endorse in the light of principles and ideals acceptable to their common human reason.”⁹

Remaining neutral to the value of any one particular notion of the good over another, a political liberal state “does not concern itself with philosophical and religious doctrine” but merely regulates the pursuit of moral and spiritual interests. Furthermore, the regulation must be in accordance with principles individuals would agree upon in Rawls' 'original position'.¹⁰ Indeed, Rawls' concept of an overlapping consensus allows him to claim that there are enough fundamental issues that all reasonable people will surely agree upon so as to form a basic foundation from which political progress can be achieved. This view, and others like it, ground their theories on particular foundations that a citizen would be 'unreasonable' to deny.¹¹ Rorty, however, supports liberalism for reasons that are in direct contrast to this view. A brief look at Rorty's epistemology will help to clarify Rorty's distaste for such foundational support for political institutions and set the groundwork for what he claims to be anti-foundational support for liberalism.

Rorty's Epistemology

Richard Rorty associates himself with the pragmatic tradition in philosophy, pointing to philosophers such as William James and John Dewey, who, he believes, were correct in stating that the quest for certainty was misplaced and that philosophy must proceed without foundations.¹² Arguing against a correspondence theory of truth, Rorty maintains that there are no rational standards by which to appraise the various claims of rival systems of thought.

⁹ John Rawls, *Political Liberalism*. Columbia: Columbia University Press, 1996 p.137.

¹⁰ John Rawls, *A Theory of Justice*. New Ed ed. Cambridge: Belknap Press, 2005.p.186.

¹¹ Richard Rorty, “Postmodernist Bourgeois Liberalism.” *The Journal of Philosophy*, Vol. 80, No. 10, Part 1: Eightieth Annual Meeting of the American Philosophical Association, Eastern Division (Oct., 1983), pp. 583-589. p. 583.

¹² Charles W. Anderson, “Pragmatism & Liberalism, Rationalism & Irrationalism: A Response to Richard Rorty.” *Polity*, Vol. 23, No. 3 (Spring, 1991), pp. 357-371.

Philosophy cannot be used to close the gap between mind and reality, or as Rorty writes, it cannot “mirror nature.”¹³

Philosophy, then, is not a matter of finding objective truth, but is about conversations among people who hold diverse perspectives.¹⁴ This is often referred to as a relativist view because the system of thought that prevails is recognized as being relative to the perspectives and interests of the people in conversation. It is not recognized as the ‘true’ or correct system in some objective sense, but simply gains authority out of popular assent. According to this description, the meaning of the word ‘true’, for example, is compatible with a diversity of references. ‘Truth’ is not something we can strive toward over and above warrant and justification. Indeed, in *Objectivity, Relativism, and Truth*, and *Philosophy and Social Hope*, Rorty argues that “there are only semantic explanations to be offered for why it is the case that a given sentence is true just when its truth conditions are satisfied.”¹⁵

Rorty describes the pragmatist’s form of relativism as “the view that there is nothing to be said about either truth or rationality apart from descriptions of the familiar procedures of justification which a given society – *ours* – uses in one or another area of inquiry.”¹⁶ Uneasy with the title ‘relativist’, however, Rorty distinguishes his epistemological commitments from relativism or subjectivism by virtue of the fact that these titles presuppose the very distinction his theory seeks to reject.¹⁷ For our purposes, however, we can understand Rorty’s project as

¹³ Richard Rorty, *Philosophy and the Mirror of Nature*. Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1979.

¹⁴ Richard Rorty, *Philosophy and the Mirror of Nature*. Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1979 and *The Consequences of Pragmatism*. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1982.

¹⁵ Bjorn Ramberg, “Richard Rorty” in *Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy*. (February 3, 2001). <http://plato.stanford.edu/entries/rorty/#2>

¹⁶ Richard Rorty, *Objectivity, Relativism, and Truth*. p. 23.

¹⁷ Ramberg, <http://plato.stanford.edu/entries/rorty/#2>

‘relativist’ in the sense that he maintains that there is no rational way to adjudicate conflict among competing worldviews.¹⁸

As a result of this relativist view, Rorty comes to the conclusion that it makes no sense to say that one or another worldview is ‘correct’ or ‘incorrect.’ Indeed, with no claim to objective truth by which to compare the statements made by individuals of any number of worldviews, there is no choice but to remain relativist, asserting that what may be truth to one individual is arguably falsehood for another. That is, to maintain that incompatible statements can be equally ‘true’ depending on which language game they belong to. As Rorty puts it, we must “abandon the traditional philosophical project of finding something stable which will serve as a criterion for judging the transitory products of our transitory needs and interests.”¹⁹ A number of different people, therefore, could describe the same transaction in a number of different ways at a number of different times and could all be correct within their own language game, none having any privileged claim to truth.

As a result of this epistemological view, Rorty abandons the notion that any ethical theory can be demonstrably true in some objective way. Because he denies the possibility of finding an objective moral truth, he is left to find a moral theory that is pragmatic. As Rorty explains, “the question to ask about our beliefs is not whether they are about reality or merely about appearance, but simply whether they are the best habits of action for gratifying our desires.”²⁰ The pragmatist wants to drop the distinction between knowledge and opinion, where truth is understood as corresponding to reality. “The pragmatist says that there is nothing to be

¹⁸ Ramberg, <http://plato.stanford.edu/entries/rorty/#3>

¹⁹ Richard Rorty, *Philosophy and Social Hope*. Boston: Penguin, 2000. p. xvi.

²⁰ Rorty, *Philosophy and Social Hope*. p. xxiv.

said about truth save that each of us will commend as true those beliefs which he or she finds good to believe...”²¹

Rorty must maintain, however, that individuals coming from different worldviews will have reasons for adopting different comprehensive moralities. He argues that there are no 'unconditional', 'transcultural' moral obligations rooted in an unchanging, ahistorical human nature.²² The notion of an objective moral duty, then, may make perfect sense within a particular language game. Such a duty, however, cannot be demonstrably objective and a completely opposing moral view could be equally reasonable within a different language game.

It is from this particular epistemic worldview that Rorty attempts to develop his support for liberal institutions as well as his initial support for the privatization of religion. Because reason will not lead everyone to the same 'truth' we have to anticipate a plurality of contrasting comprehensive worldviews. As one author describes it, “Rorty's social ethics are driven by a strong belief in the incommensurability of all private projects of 'self-creation' and the subsequent need to create a sharp public and private dichotomy...”²³ This particular worldview will lead to a unique form of support for liberalism and Rorty's own justification for keeping religion out of the public sphere.

Pragmatism and Liberalism

Rorty's denial of any concrete philosophical foundations leads to a relativization of knowledge, values and culture. As such, it is clear that no one comprehensive view can rightly claim authority in a pluralistic society, at least not on foundational grounds. Without any objective

²¹ Rorty, *Objectivity, Relativism, and Truth*, p. 24.

²² Rorty, *Philosophy and Social Hope*. p. xvi.

²³ Jason M. Boffetti. “Rorty's Nietzschean Pragmatism: A Jamesian Response.” *The Review of Politics*. Vol. 66, No. 4 (Autumn, 2004), p. 630.

grounds from which to work, Rorty recommends a pragmatic approach, stressing that the ideal form of government is that which produces the best practical consequences. Relying on Judith Shklar's claim that the avoidance of evil is what defines liberal politics,²⁴ Rorty presents liberalism as the pragmatically ideal form of government. "The task of the intellectual, with respect to social justice" according to Rorty's view is "to sensitize us to the suffering of others, and refine, deepen and expand our ability to identify with others, to think of others as like ourselves in morally relevant ways."²⁵ Given the fact of epistemic indeterminacy, the ideal political atmosphere, according to Rorty, is one that is open, tolerant and not dogmatic.²⁶ As he writes, "free and open encounters between human beings" will culminate "either in intersubjective agreement or in reciprocal tolerance."²⁷

Beyond this attempt to appeal to a liberal utopia, which Rorty supports with a challenge for anyone to offer a more appealing utopia,²⁸ Rorty also offers pragmatic support for liberal societies and values. As he writes, the pragmatists' justification of liberal values such as "toleration, free inquiry, and the quest for undistorted communication can only take the form of a comparison between societies which exemplify these habits and those which do not, leading up to the suggestion that nobody who has experienced both would prefer the latter."²⁹

Rorty justifies liberal politics and institutions using a similar line of argument, explaining that liberal institutions are justified in virtue of their practical advantages, their advantages in "allowing individuals and cultures to get along together without intruding on each other's

²⁴ Richard Rorty, *Contingency, Irony, and Solidarity*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press. (1989). p. 74.

²⁵ Ramberg, <http://plato.stanford.edu/entries/rorty/#L>

²⁶ Richard Rorty, *Objectivity, Relativism, and Truth: Philosophical Papers, Volume I*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, New York, 1991. p. 37.

²⁷ Rorty, *Objectivity, Relativism and Truth*. p. 8.

²⁸ Rorty, *Objectivity, Relativism and Truth*. p. 220.

²⁹ Rorty, *Objectivity, Relativism and Truth*. p. 29.

privacy, without meddling with each other's conceptions of the good."³⁰ Indeed, we should aim for a society in which assent to beliefs about the meaning of life or certain moral ideals are not a requirement for citizenship and instead "aim at nothing stronger than a commitment to Rawlsian procedural justice."³¹ The advantages of such an approach can be easily observed, he argues, through a historical comparison between contemporary liberal institutions and non-liberal societies.³²

Rorty's confidence in the superiority of contemporary Western political institutions is clear. As he states, nothing is more important than the preservation of these "fragile, flawed, institutions" which are "the creation of the last 300 years" and "humanity's most precious achievements."³³ This is because Rorty sees "the common staples of liberalism such as free inquiry, free speech, competitive election, and the like" as realizing the aspirations of his ideal polity, that is, one which can continue to improve. According to Rorty, the history of liberalism shows that "it has been enlarging itself and adapting to what it finds, and that our institutions allow plenty of room for improvement and change."³⁴

Postmodernist Bourgeois Liberalism and Religion

Despite his support for liberal institutions, Richard Rorty clearly diverges from standard interpretations of Rawls' political liberal theory. To fully understand Rorty's position it will help to take a closer look at his particular brand of liberalism, what he calls "postmodernist bourgeois liberalism."³⁵ Rorty describes his impression of liberal authors such as Rawls and Dworkin as

³⁰ Rorty, *Objectivity, Relativism and Truth*. p. 209.

³¹ Rorty, *Objectivity, Relativism and Truth*. p. 210.

³² Rorty, *Objectivity, Relativism and Truth*. p. 209.

³³ Richard Rorty, "Thugs and Theorists: A Reply to Bernstein." *Political Theory*, Vol. 15, No. 4 (Nov., 1987), pp. 564-580.

³⁴ "Philosophy as the Mirror of Liberalism: The Politics of Richard Rorty." *Polity*, Vol. 30, No. 1 (Autumn, 1997), pp. 57-78. p. 69.

³⁵ Rorty, "Postmodernist Bourgeois Liberalism." p. 583.

“Kantian,” arguing that they seem to believe “there are such things as intrinsic human dignity, intrinsic human rights, and an ahistorical distinction between the demands of morality and those of prudence.”³⁶ Rorty, however, places himself among a group of people who wish to preserve the institutions and practices of the surviving democracies while abandoning the “ahistorical morality-prudence distinction”³⁷ that serves as their buttress. “Reformist liberalism with its commitment to the expansion of democratic freedoms in ever wider political solidarities is, on Rorty's view, an historical contingency which has no philosophical foundation, and needs none.”³⁸

In his article, “Postmodernist Bourgeois Liberalism,” Rorty explains his support for liberal institutions as consistent with his epistemological, anti-foundational claims. Here, Rorty refers to his view as “Hegelian,” placing himself among those “who say that “humanity” is a biological rather than a moral notion, that there is no human dignity that is not derivative from the dignity of some specific community, and no appeal beyond the relative merits of various actual or proposed communities to impartial criteria which will help us weigh those merits.”³⁹ While remaining consistent with his anti-foundationalism, Rorty wants to preserve liberal democratic institutions “while abandoning their traditional Kantian backup.”⁴⁰

Unlike the typically Rawlsian view that considers the ‘moral self’ as an original chooser “who can distinguish her *self* from her talents and interests and views about the good,” Rorty maintains that “for purposes of moral and political deliberation and conversation, a person just *is*

³⁶ Rorty, “Postmodernist Bourgeois Liberalism.” p.583.

³⁷ Rorty, “Postmodernist Bourgeois Liberalism.” p.583.

³⁸ Ramberg, <http://plato.stanford.edu/entries/rorty/#L>

³⁹ Rorty, “Postmodernist Bourgeois Liberalism.” p. 583.

⁴⁰ Rorty, “Postmodernist Bourgeois Liberalism.” p. 584.

that network...of beliefs, desires and emotions.”⁴¹ This pragmatic view allows Rorty to claim that there is “hypocrisy involved” when people attempt to claim that religious believers somehow have no right to base their political views on their faith, but that atheists somehow have every right to base theirs on Enlightenment philosophy. As Rorty acknowledges, “the claim that in doing so we are appealing to reasons, where the religious are being irrational, is hokum.”⁴²

Despite this defence of religion, in *Religion As Conversation-stopper*, Rorty refuses to accept that “the public square should be open to 'religious argument', or that liberalism should 'develop a politics that accepts whatever form of dialogue a member of the public offers'.”⁴³ Rorty’s initial defence for this line of argument is not that presenting religious views in the public square is somehow morally wrong, but rather that it is the only way “to keep a democratic political community going.”⁴⁴ While Rorty eventually concedes that demanding the privatization of religion conflicts with his epistemological commitments, he attempts to maintain throughout his writings that there is no place for theistic religion in the liberal democratic utopia. In his discussion of the appropriate role and treatment of religion, Rorty proceeds to argue that the treatment of religion he argues for is somehow consistent with his pragmatic commitment to his postmodernist bourgeois liberalism.

⁴¹ Rorty, “Postmodernist Bourgeois Liberalism.” pp.585-6.

⁴² Richard Rorty, “Religion As Conversation-stopper.” *Philosophy and Social Hope*. Boston: Penguin , 2000. 168-174. p. 172.

⁴³ Rorty, “Religion As Conversation-Stopper.” p. 172.

⁴⁴ Rorty, “Religion As Conversation-Stopper.” p. 170.

Pragmatism and Theism

Rorty argues that non-theists make better citizens than theists because, as he explains, “theism and democracy remain at odds with one another.”⁴⁵ In his writings, Rorty describes his pragmatism as a radicalization of the secularism of the Enlightenment. Pragmatism, according to Rorty’s understanding, shares the Enlightenment’s suspicion of authority, especially religious authority that is supposedly grounded in something non-human.⁴⁶ Theism, which, “for Rorty is more or less homologous with ‘Platonism,’”⁴⁷ does not fit well with his distaste for foundational claims. Indeed, Rorty maintains that “pragmatism, pursued as a general anti-metaphysical strategy within philosophy, is inherently anti-theological.”⁴⁸

Pragmatism about norms is the notion “that social agreement among human beings is the source of all norms.”⁴⁹ The notion that “epistemic authority or privilege is always and only a matter of social agreement among human beings,” however, is simply incompatible with theism and its “characteristic acknowledgment of an ultimate, non-human source of authority.”⁵⁰ According to Rorty’s anti-foundationalism, there is a “potential infinity of equally valuable ways to lead a human life.”⁵¹ Rorty recommends attempting to “poeticize” our culture, “offering more attractive and useful descriptions and redescriptions.”⁵² As a result, Rorty maintains that “the chief aim of social organizations...becomes that of promoting the greatest possible human

⁴⁵ Richard Rorty, “Pragmatism and Democracy: Assessing Jeffrey Stout’s Democracy and Tradition.” <http://jaar.oxfordjournals.com>. p. 420.

⁴⁶ Richard Rorty, “Pragmatism as Anti-authoritarianism.” *Revue Internationale de Philosophie*, No. 207. 1999. (pp. 7-20)

⁴⁷ Nicholas H. Smith, “Rorty on Religion and Hope.” *Inquiry*, Vol. 48, No. 1 (February 2005), pp. 76-98. p. 81.

⁴⁸ Cornelius West, Richard Rorty, Stanley Hauerwas, and Jeffrey Stout, “Pragmatism and Democracy: Assessing Jeffrey Stout’s *Democracy and Tradition*,” <http://jaar.oxfordjournals.org>. p. 420.

⁴⁹ Rorty, “Pragmatism and Democracy: Assessing Jeffrey Stout’s *Democracy and Tradition*,” p. 420.

⁵⁰ Jeffrey Stout, “Rorty on Religion and Politics.” *Brown.edu*. [http://brown.edu/Research/ppw/files/Rorty on Religion and Politics.pdf](http://brown.edu/Research/ppw/files/Rorty%20on%20Religion%20and%20Politics.pdf) p. 28.

⁵¹ Smith, p. 81.

⁵² Tambornino, p.61.

diversity.”⁵³ It is not difficult to see how theism causes a tension in Rorty’s eyes, because theism, with its claims to truth and knowledge “is at odds with pluralism and so is more likely to hinder than to promote human happiness.”⁵⁴

Another reason why Rorty states that religion - in its institutional form - is in conflict with pragmatism, is that the ‘other-worldliness’ that accompanies religion is dangerous because it negatively impinges on human action and responsibility. As John Dewey put it, “men have never fully used the powers they possess to advance the good in life, because they have waited upon some power external to themselves and to nature to do the work they are responsible for doing.”⁵⁵ In the end, Rorty seems resigned to the fact that theism is dangerous to the health of democratic societies, and that ideally theism will eventually wither away.

Rorty’s Utopia

Political liberalism claims to provide an ideal form of government consistent with the fact of pluralism. This apparently ideal fit seems to make Rorty’s support for liberal institutions well placed, given his commitment to promoting human diversity.⁵⁶ Rorty maintains that the alternative to enforcing any one set of principles is to avoid enforcing any comprehensive set of principles by adopting liberal principles which will allow a tolerant and pluralistic society to flourish with minimum conflict.

Public discourse in this society ought to be secularized, Rorty maintains, because religious dialogue is not useful for achieving this liberal end. Indeed, theism, which is accompanied by authoritative claims to objective truth and knowledge, is at odds with pluralism

⁵³ Smith, p. 81.

⁵⁴ Smith, p. 81.

⁵⁵ John Dewey, “A Common Faith.” in *Later Works*. Vol, 9, p.31. as quoted by Nicholas Wolterstorff, “An Engagement with Rorty.” *The Journal of Religious Ethics*, Vol. 31, No. 1 (Spring, 2003), p. 131.

⁵⁶ Smith, p. 81.

because it seeks to establish objective standards that apply equally to all people. In order to maintain a tolerant and pluralistic society, then, religion must be removed. According to this view, modern societies are stuck with the dichotomy of choosing between “a political order in which everything is ideally to be decided in essentially secular terms and one in which a single religious vision dominates.”⁵⁷ Surely, Rorty argues, the secular alternative which encourages diversity to flourish is pragmatically superior.

As a result of this line of argument, the ideal that Rorty uses to defend the superiority of liberal institutions is, in part, a vision of the future that is a perfectly secular utopia.⁵⁸ Indeed, because of his distaste for the expression of foundational arguments, it is safe to say that Rorty understands liberalism to be essentially secular, “and indeed deeply suspicious of religion and religious inclinations.”⁵⁹

Rorty describes his understanding of the appropriate role for religion in society in terms of the “Jeffersonian compromise that the Enlightenment reached with the religious.” Rorty proceeds to describe this compromise as consisting of the privatization of religion, “keeping it out of what Carter calls ‘the public square’, making it seem in bad taste to bring religion into discussions of public policy.”⁶⁰ Indeed, as far as Rorty is concerned “the secularization of public life [is] the Enlightenment’s central achievement”⁶¹ and, as such, is of vital importance to Rorty’s liberalism.

While recognizing that attempting to abolish religion from liberal democratic societies would be to over-reach, as Wolterstorff explains, Rorty wants to maintain that “in order that

⁵⁷ Stout, “Rorty on Religion and Politics.” p. 7.

⁵⁸ Stout, “Rorty on Religion and Politics.” p. 3.

⁵⁹ Owen, p. 67.

⁶⁰ Rorty, “Religion As Conversation-stopper.” p. 169.

⁶¹ Rorty, “Religion As Conversation-stopper.” p. 168.

democracy be safe from religion, it's sufficient that religion be *privatized*.”⁶² For, indeed, because religion will inevitably lead to conflict when presented in the public sphere, it is in everyone's best interest to eliminate such conflict by removing religion from the public sphere.

Unfortunately, Rorty fails to go into any detail as to exactly what is meant by 'privatization' when it comes to religion. If we understand the public sphere as an area in social life where people gather and freely discuss and identify societal problems, and through that discussion influence political action, then what Rorty seems to maintain is that citizens, while in this area, ought to be restricted to using purely secular language. Whether such privatization should be the result of law or simply custom, his position is that religious argument does not belong.⁶³

'Privatization,' in this sense, entails that in the private/public divide of human life, religious discussion seems to fall into the private realm, appropriate only in discussion with those within the relevant religious community. For, indeed, in the public square of a pluralistic democracy, reference to a "source of moral knowledge' will always be out of place.”⁶⁴ Rorty maintains that because we can anticipate this tension, it is best to avoid the conflict by removing such appeals from public discussion.

Religion As Conversation-stopper

In his book *Philosophy and Social Hope*, Richard Rorty instigates an extended discussion in regards to the appropriate role for religion in the public sphere. In his chapter entitled *Religion As Conversation-stopper*, Rorty offers his pragmatic input to the debate. This particular discussion is Rorty's response to Stephen L. Carter's position, in which Carter brings into

⁶² Wolterstorff, "An Engagement with Rorty." p. 131.

⁶³ Rorty, "Religion As Conversation-stopper." p.172.

⁶⁴ Rorty, "Religion As Conversation-stopper." p. 173.

question the privatization of religion. In this article, Rorty marks himself as an atheist who is in favour of the secularization of public life.⁶⁵ So while Carter has been questioning the notion that it may be in bad taste to bring religious discussion into the public sphere, Rorty suggests that, if anything, the claims of religion need “to be pushed back still further, and that religious believers have no business asking for more public respect than they now receive.”⁶⁶

In pressing for the privatization of religion, or keeping religion out of discussion of public policy, Rorty attempts to demonstrate how religion is somehow inappropriate for public discussion and debate. In this article, Rorty presents his argument that religion needs to be privatized because “in political discussion with those outside the relevant religious community, it is a conversation-stopper.”⁶⁷ Religious discussion, he argues, is inappropriate in the public sphere because it is not shared by all people and is therefore unsuitable for public dialogue. In order to make any sort of political progress, it is argued, religion needs to be left aside as something belonging to one's 'private life.'

Reconsideration

While Rorty can be understood as instigating a discussion of sorts, he was open to criticism and respectfully incorporated what he took to be valid objections to his views. In response to criticisms made by Nicholas Wolterstorff and Jeffrey Stout (which I will discuss in [the following chapter](#)~~chapter 2~~), Rorty admits that his original position in his response to Carter was “hasty and insufficiently thoughtful.”⁶⁸ So, unlike in *Religion As Conversation-stopper*, where Rorty argues for strict privatization of religion, in his article “Religion in the Public Square: A

⁶⁵ Rorty, “Religion As Conversation-stopper.” p. 168.

⁶⁶ Rorty, “Religion As Conversation-stopper.” p. 169.

⁶⁷ Rorty, “Religion As Conversation-stopper.” p. 171.

⁶⁸ Richard Rorty, “Religion in the Public Square: A Reconsideration.” *The Journal of Religious Ethics*, Vol. 31, No. 1 (Spring, 2003), pp. 141-149. p. 141.

Reconsideration,” he asserts that both law and custom leave religious people free to use their religious text to support their cause. Recognizing the logical consequences of his previous stance, Rorty writes: “I can think of no law or custom that would hinder him from doing so that would not hinder me from citing passages in John Stuart Mill in justification of the same legislation.”⁶⁹

In his new stance, Rorty eases his distaste for religion in general, and sets his sights on attacking ecclesiastic organizations: organizations that “claim to offer authoritative guidance to believers.”⁷⁰ Rorty’s anti-clericalism “is aimed at the Catholic bishops, the Mormon General Authorities, the televangelists, and all the other religious professionals” who devote themselves to “promulgating orthodoxy” as well, he writes, as “acquiring economic and political clout.”⁷¹

Despite admitting that he has no grounds for arguing against the presence of religious discussion in the public square, Rorty wants to continue supporting his “secularist utopia” in which, one day, religion will be “pruned back to the parish level.”⁷² The reason he gives is that, despite the occasional good that ecclesiastical organizations produce, “history suggests to us that such organizations will always, on balance, do more harm than good.”⁷³ In contemporary society, Rorty explains, the harm coming from ecclesiastical organizations comes in the form of “the sort of everyday peacetime sadism that uses religion to excuse cruelty.”⁷⁴ What Rorty has in mind here is what he refers to as “exclusivist bigotry” that is encouraged, he claims, because it “brings money and power to ecclesiastical organizations.”⁷⁵ In the past Christian pulpits were

⁶⁹ Wolterstorff, “An Engagement with Rorty.” p. 143.

⁷⁰ Rorty, “Religion in the Public Square: A Reconsideration.” p. 141.

⁷¹ Rorty, “Religion in the Public Square: A Reconsideration.” p. 141.

⁷² Rorty, “Religion in the Public Square: A Reconsideration.” p. 142.

⁷³ Rorty, “Religion in the Public Square: A Reconsideration.” p. 142.

⁷⁴ Rorty, “Religion in the Public Square: A Reconsideration.” p. 145.

⁷⁵ Rorty, “Religion in the Public Square: A Reconsideration.” p. 146.

the main source of European Anti-Semitism and in contemporary society, Rorty explains, harm comes in the form of ecclesiastical organizations using holy texts to preach that tolerance for homosexual behaviour is a mark of moral decline.

Rorty recognizes, however, that he cannot argue for the exclusion of certain appeals to ~~religions-religious~~ conviction from the public square. He does not think it helpful to claim that the homophobes are being “irrational” since there is nothing called “reason” standing above such struggles.⁷⁶ And indeed, lack of criteria and consensus leads to Rorty’s disagreement with Robert Audi’s claim that citizens of a liberal democracy ought to “have an epistemologically adequate and motivationally sufficient basis for their political discussion, decisions and actions that is independent of each and every religion present in society.”⁷⁷

Rorty, however, justifies his anti-clericalism using the pragmatic argument that the harm that comes from ecclesiastical organizations -including the widespread homophobia they support- far outweighs any good that could come from them and, frankly, the world would be better off without them. While Rorty recognizes that there is no justification for passing laws that ban ecclesiastical institutions or tell congregants not to take them seriously, his argument seems to be that because they are generally authoritarian in nature, they are incompatible with liberal democratic civic values. As he writes: “simply waiting to be informed by church officials about what is required to be a member in good standing of a given denomination...seem[s] to be the sort of thing democratic societies have a right to discourage.”⁷⁸ Such discouragement, Rorty recommends, should come in the form of a support for the separation of faith and institution. At the same time, he encourages the favouring of liberal Christian Protestantism as the ideal form of

⁷⁶ Rorty, “Religion in the Public Square: A Reconsideration.” p. 144.

⁷⁷ Robert Audi as cited by Richard Rorty, “Religion in the Public Square: A Reconsideration.” p. 144.

⁷⁸ Rorty, “Religion in the Public Square: A Reconsideration.” p. 147.

religious commitment because it is most congenial to liberal democracy.⁷⁹ Despite being an atheist, Rorty defends such favouritism on the grounds that he has the right to “warn fellow-citizens against [the] insidious influence” of ecclesiastical organizations.⁸⁰

Given his assumption that homophobia is problematic in a liberal democracy, Rorty has a hard time reconciling religious homophobia with religious freedom. Despite his claims that people who cite the Bible in support of homophobia ought to be “shunned and despised” and that such citation ought to be treated as hate speech,⁸¹ Rorty also concedes that “hate speech laws are probably impossible to reconcile with the First Amendment”⁸² and that we “obviously” cannot pass laws “that tell congregants not to take ecclesiastical institutions as seriously as Catholics are asked to take papal authority.”⁸³ Rorty, it seems, is at a loss when it comes to supporting steps that will actively lead to his pragmatic ideal.

Rorty has difficulty offering a cohesive argument in regards to how society ought to treat ecclesiastical organizations or religious citizens who cite Leviticus 18:22 in order to influence public policy. In the end it seems that the strongest argument Rorty makes is that “what should be discouraged is mere appeal to authority.”⁸⁴ Here Rorty takes issue with the fact that members of religious groups often take the authority of the Bible without understanding it or being able to defend their decisions. As he writes, “The believer's fellow citizens should not take her as offering a reason unless she can say a lot more than that a certain ecclesiastical institution holds a

⁷⁹ Rorty, “Religion in the Public Square: A Reconsideration.” p. 147.

⁸⁰ Rorty, “Religion in the Public Square: A Reconsideration.” p. 148.

⁸¹ Rorty, “Religion in the Public Square: A Reconsideration.” p. 143.

⁸² Rorty, “Religion in the Public Square: A Reconsideration.” p. 143.

⁸³ Rorty, “Religion in the Public Square: A Reconsideration.” p. 147.

⁸⁴ Rorty, “Religion in the Public Square: A Reconsideration.” p. 147.

certain view, or that such an institution insists that a given Scriptural passage be taken seriously, and at face value.”⁸⁵

Conclusion

Richard Rorty’s philosophical commitments include a denial of foundationalism in favour of a ‘relativist’ view of epistemology, followed by a commitment to pragmatism and a support for liberal democracy as the ideal form of political organization. Rorty proposes pragmatism as an alternative to metaphysics and defends contemporary liberal institutions, not using foundational support, but based on their practical advantages.

Following from these initial commitments, Rorty makes a variety of arguments in regards to the appropriate role and treatment of religion in the public sphere. His initial claim is that religious discussion ought to be removed from the public sphere. Yet, Rorty later argues that it is somehow consistent with his commitment to pragmatism to claim that ecclesiastical organizations ought to be marginalized and further, that his commitment to pragmatism entails a commitment to a secular liberal ideal.

Having demonstrated how Rorty’s various philosophical commitments are meant to fit together, looking, in particular, at clarifying the specific arguments that Rorty makes in regards to the appropriate treatment of religion, I intend to dedicate the next two chapters to analyzing the consistency of these arguments. Of particular interest will be Rorty’s self-proclaimed pragmatism and the fact that this title seems to fit uneasily with both his discussion of religion and its role in society, as well as his epistemological commitments.

⁸⁵ Rorty, “Religion in the Public Square: A Reconsideration.” p. 147.

At times it seems as though Rorty may be merely expressing his personal moral objections to some of the remarks that religious citizens put forth in the public sphere, perhaps calling upon his fellow citizens to publically attack these views. Such remarks are perfectly in line with Rorty's epistemology as he accepts that personal moral views should be openly expressed in liberal democracies. The problem, however, is that while sometimes Rorty may seem only to be expressing his sectarian views, I agree with Wolterstorff and Stout that, at other times, Rorty seems to be going further and suggesting that liberal democratic institutions ought to prohibit or at least discourage particular religious viewpoints and reasons from being expressed in the public sphere because they are inconsistent with or that they somehow undermine liberal democratic values.

It could be argued that Rorty is doing only the former and therefore cannot be accused of being inconsistent with his epistemology. My critique of Rorty, however, is based upon the second way of reading him. Indeed, in *Religion As Conversation-stopper*, Rorty's remarks are meant as a response to Stephen Carter, whose issue is not with the open expression of anti-religious views, but with "the legal culture that guards the public square."⁸⁶ While one might read Rorty as simply suggesting that religious views and reasons are not conducive to democratic dialogue, the fact is that any active attempt to work towards the secular ideal that Rorty presents as central to his pragmatic support for liberalism would seem to require some form of enforcement, since the public sphere cannot be 'secularized' in any real sense of the term if it remains open to all forms of dialogue.

There is also the possibility that Rorty's concern with religion in the public sphere has more to do with concerns surrounding the establishment, or political recognition, of particular authoritative religions. Under conditions of pluralism, where citizens are divided in their beliefs,

⁸⁶ Rorty, "Religion As Conversation-stopper." pp. 169-70.

antiestablishment principles of separation of church and state are meant to be justified by appeals to the First Amendment.⁸⁷ It is not clear, however, that Rorty's concern is, in fact, to simply defend the antiestablishment principle. There are compelling arguments to support the principle of separation,⁸⁸ however, my interpretation is that Rorty is saying more than just this. Indeed, his insistence that liberalism necessarily entails a secular utopia and a suspicion of religion suggests that liberal democracies are constantly striving toward secularization. I agree with Stout that Rorty's writings on the role of religion in politics often retain the spirit of militant secularism. Indeed, in his writings on religion in the public sphere, Rorty attempts to portray liberal democracy and secularism as going hand in hand.

⁸⁷ U.S. Constitution, Amendment I. -Congress shall make no law respecting an establishment of religion, or prohibiting the free exercise thereof; or abridging the freedom of speech, or of the press; or the right of the people peaceably to assemble, and to petition the Government for redress of grievances.

⁸⁸ Lucas Swaine, p. 76.

2. Practical Problems

Having provided a brief description of Rorty's philosophical commitments, including his epistemology, his political views and his views on religion, I will focus, in particular, on Rorty's controversial discussion of the appropriate role for religion in society. In the following section I provide an exposition of the practical outcomes that can be anticipated from Rorty's supposedly pragmatic philosophy. Looking at critical responses from Nicholas Wolterstorff and Jeffrey Stout, as well as some works by Lucas Swaine, among others, the question I will address is whether the practical implications of Rorty's conclusions can be expected to contribute towards the achievement of his political ideal.

While many of the practical consequences I will discuss apply equally to the Kantian foundationalist liberal and the militant atheist, I maintain that the failure to anticipate negative consequences is particularly interesting in Rorty's case. Indeed, Rorty's epistemology has prepared him to accept that, regardless of the arguments people can present to one another, even in the debate between those who wish to defend a foundational worldview and those who remain relativist, "all that either side can do is to restate its case over and over again, in context after context."⁸⁹ Well aware that no one has 'reason' on their side, Rorty can safely expect those whose views are being criticized to maintain and defend their views in the face of such criticism.

Following a brief exposition of some problematic aspects of Rorty's approach to the topic of religion in the public sphere, I will present some arguments suggesting how we can expect religious citizens to respond to his statements. Beginning with a look at the specific ways in which Rorty characterizes religion, I argue that, in many cases, Rorty presents an impoverished image of religion that inevitably results in a failure to adequately engage with the religious

⁸⁹ Rorty, *Philosophy and Social Hope*. p. xxxii.

reader. Indeed, the very way in which Rorty discusses the topic of religion will quickly alienate many religious readers, pushing some to react defensively.

Religion and the Intellectuals

In *Religion As Conversation-stopper*, Rorty proceeds to discuss religion and its relation to 'intellectuals', explaining that the "typical intellectual" thinks of religion as, at its best, "something we do with our solitude."⁹⁰ In his appeal to the authority of intellectuals, the message that Rorty is sending is that - in modern political democracy - intellectuals feel that non-intellectuals are inferior and are a hindrance. As he explains, the typical intellectual is likely to be "puzzled or annoyed"⁹¹ by people like Stephen Carter questioning the privatization of religion. The intellectuals, it seems, have spoken and the rest of the world has no business questioning their authority on such matters. Indeed, they have "no business asking for more public respect."⁹²

The fact is that Rorty's claims are misleading. First of all, Rorty does not properly define his terms or support his claims. Having provided no data for these claims, let alone a definition of what he means by the term 'intellectual', Rorty's statement is at best, dubious. Secondly, not all intellectuals share this view that religion is a strictly private affair. Even if there were a common correlation between what can be considered 'intellectuals' and certain forms of religious belief, there are many prominent examples that challenge his simplified characterization of 'intellectuals'. Indeed, it is not difficult to think of examples of individuals we consider to be 'intellectuals' who have held particular religious views not commonly characterized as mere 'solitude'; Abraham Lincoln, for example or Martin Luther King Jr., whose

⁹⁰ Rorty, "Religion As Conversation-stopper." p. 168.

⁹¹ Rorty, "Religion As Conversation-stopper." p. 169.

⁹² Rorty, "Religion As Conversation-stopper." p. 169.

support for African-American civil rights included his conviction that God created human beings equal and that we should respect this as a nation.

Thirdly, and most importantly, Rorty's anti-foundationalism and commitment to liberal democracy leave his appeals to intellectuals rather hollow. Indeed, even if we assume that most religious believers are not intellectuals – by whatever definition of intellectual – as democratic citizens they have a right to their voice and their truths. While Rorty's appeals to authority may offer support for his distrust of religion, it does not supply any grounds for marginalizing one or another type of 'truth' – including religious truth, with religious reasoning. This is because his own epistemological arguments - that support his argument for a non-foundational liberal democratic society – contradict this. Recall that there are no fundamental 'truths', and that one truth cannot be favoured over another. Indeed, in this article he perhaps does little more than question the intelligence of many of his religious readers, who may be quick to take offense.

Is Religion a Private Affair?

One issue Stephen Carter has with the privatization of religion is that making religion private essentially trivializes it. This argument, that privatization entails disempowerment, is certainly not unique to religion. Indeed, feminists have long argued that “the separation of the official economic sphere from the domestic sphere, and the enclaving of childrearing from the rest of social labor... is widely held to be one, if not the, linchpin of modern women's subordination.”⁹³ In a similar way, Carter wants to suggest that to restrict religion to the private sphere is to essentially deprive it of influence and to disempower religious views. This is problematic

⁹³ Nancy Fraser, “What's Critical about Critical Theory? The Case of Habermas and Gender.” *New German Critique*, No. 35, Special Issue on Jurgen Habermas (Spring - Summer, 1985), pp. 97-131. p. 110.

because the “free and open encounters between human beings” that Rorty advocates, cannot occur if those who believe in religious reasons cannot participate in the public sphere.⁹⁴

Rorty attempts to refute Carter's worry by arguing for the invalidity of the apparent assumption that the non-political is somehow always trivial, using examples such as one's family and love lives as non-trivial private pursuits. “The search for private perfection,” Rorty writes, “pursued by theists and atheists alike, is neither trivial nor, in a pluralistic democracy, relevant to public policy.”⁹⁵ Yet even if we accept Rorty's refutations, he still cannot address the concerns raised by Nicholas Wolterstorff.

For Wolterstorff, the question of whether privatization infers trivialization is beside the point. This is because for him it is still not clear what it is about religion that makes it a so-called ‘private’ affair to begin with. As he explains, it is not clear how religious reasons are private “in any clear sense of the term.”⁹⁶ Wolterstorff - who rejects classical foundationalism - agrees with Rorty that there is no ground for believing that all rational people will come to agree on any comprehensive religious or philosophical doctrine.⁹⁷ As a practicing Christian, however, Wolterstorff objects to Rorty's secularist agenda. As he writes: “I do not want the Darwinian pragmatist telling me that my religion should not be expressed in institutional and public form.”⁹⁸ Despite his shared anti-foundationalism, Wolterstorff is opposed to Rorty's apparent imposition of pragmatism, he writes, “because I am opposed to a government...that tries to make us all good adherents of any comprehensive perspective whatsoever.”⁹⁹

⁹⁴ Rorty, *Objectivity, Relativism and Truth*. p. 8.

⁹⁵ Rorty, “Religion As Conversation-stopper.” p. 170.

⁹⁶ Wolterstorff, “An Engagement with Rorty.” p. 132.

⁹⁷ Rorty, “Religion in the Public Square: A Reconsideration.” p. 144.

⁹⁸ Wolterstorff, “An Engagement with Rorty.” p. 138.

⁹⁹ Wolterstorff, “An Engagement with Rorty.” p. 138.

While Rorty may feel content understanding religion as something one does with one's solitude,¹⁰⁰ the fact is that all Abrahamic religions come with laws and dictates which give the believer foundations for morality as well as clear commandments about how to behave in public life and even laws with respect to how society ought to be governed.¹⁰¹ As Richard Neuhaus writes, "the great majority of Americans...believe that morality is derived from religious faith and religious tradition."¹⁰² As such, religion can have a primary influence "in the shaping of character and the sustaining of communities of memory and mutual aid."¹⁰³ In short, for many religious people, religion provides its own fundamental worldview, one that informs and permeates the entire understanding and experience of a religious citizen. Therefore, it is quite evident that religion simply cannot be a private affair for many people. Expecting citizens to keep their religions private for the sake of politics is at once impractical and contradictory, as it goes directly against the non-foundationalist arguments for which Rorty advocates.

Indeed, just like any other citizen with a different worldview, religious citizens should be able to publicly express their views and concerns in hopes of influencing public policy and the world in which they live. As Rorty clearly acknowledges, "it is one thing to say that religious beliefs, or the lack of them, will influence political convictions. Of course they will."¹⁰⁴ Rorty, however, insists that when it comes to public policy decisions, religious reasons should never be appealed to.

¹⁰⁰ Rorty, "Religion As Conversation-stopper." p. 168.

¹⁰¹ Sharia Law in Islam, and the book of Leviticus in the Hebrew Bible, for example.

¹⁰² To avoid suggesting that this survey of America is somehow informative of the origins of morality in general, it may be important to note that this could more accurately read "the majority of *religious* Americans." It just so happens that the majority of Americans are also theists.

¹⁰³ Richard Neuhaus, "Religion's Role in Public Life." *Religion and Liberty*. Vol. 3, No. 5 (September and October, 1993), http://www.acton.org/publications/randl/rl_interview_92.php.

¹⁰⁴ Rorty, "Religion As Conversation-stopper." p. 172.

Rorty has not offered sufficient reasons for religious citizens to keep their religion out of the public sphere. Carter suggests that, for some people, the separation of self from religion may simply be impossible. Carter refers to this as the “problem of bracketing.”¹⁰⁵ For some people, requesting such bracketing may be insulting. For others, being told to leave behind their religious convictions is not unlike being told to leave behind an arm and a leg. As Carter explains, “it is saying to the individual, ‘Remake yourself; become someone else, and then you are prepared.’”¹⁰⁶

The Loss of Ecclesiastical Organizations

Rorty’s views on religion and its appropriate role in society are not without their critics. In *Religions As Conversation-stopper*, Rorty defended the notion of privatizing religion by claiming that religion is inappropriate in the public sphere because it stops the conversation due to the fact that religious foundations are not shared by all citizens in a pluralist society. In his ‘reconsideration,’ Rorty concedes that, according to his relativism, he has no authoritative grounds for removing religious discussion from the public sphere. He does, however, argue in favour of encouraging religious citizens to adopt particular forms of religious belief that are more conducive, he believes, to liberal democracy. Indeed, Rorty recommends liberal Protestant Christianity as the ideal form of religious belief.

In order to argue for or against any particular religion one would need to have an understanding of what such a comprehensive worldview entails. Rorty’s discussion of ecclesiastical organizations and his support for a separation of faith and institution,¹⁰⁷ however, make it seem as though he has not successfully grasped what deep religious commitment

¹⁰⁵ Stephen L. Carter, “The Culture of Disbelief.” Boardman Lectureship in Christian Ethics. Paper 10 (March, 1994). pp. 1-22. <http://repository.upenn.edu/boardman/10> . p. 6.

¹⁰⁶ Stephen L. Carter, “The Culture of Disbelief.” p. 6.

¹⁰⁷ Rorty, “Religion in the Public Square: A Reconsideration.” pp. 147-8.

involves for many religious citizens. If he is aware of the extent of their commitments and belief, then he must realize that he has fallen far short of offering them any reasons to support the religious view he argues for - one that is supposedly more favourable to a democratic political society.

However, Rorty need not, and cannot, appeal to all religious believers. For, according to him, there are no objective reasons that everyone can accept. Rorty seems to have simply accepted that some people cannot be appealed to. In fact, his arguments supporting his particular treatment of religion seem to be arguments meant to persuade the pragmatist, not the believer. Recognizing the unlikelihood of convincing the devout Catholic or Christian fundamentalist to abandon their worldview, Rorty proposes using state action to encourage citizens to opt for alternate beliefs more favourable to his ideal. Citizens' deferral to the authority of church officials, Rorty writes, "seem[s] to be the sort of thing democratic societies have a right to discourage."¹⁰⁸ The mentality seems to be that, if we can weaken the authority that ecclesiastical organizations have over members of their religions, then eventually people will all adopt a more liberal approach to religion.

If this is the case, it seems as though Rorty may be working under the assumption that this sort of blatant attempt to interfere with religious authority would survive the resistance it would encounter. Rorty's only ground for pursuing the weakening of ecclesiastic organizations is on pragmatic grounds. At the same time, he is clearly aware that using the logic that supports the need for a pragmatic approach - the assumption that ultimately no view can convince another worldview to accept theirs through debate - that members of these 'impractical' worldviews will

¹⁰⁸ Rorty, "Religion in the Public Square: A Reconsideration." p. 147.

have no reason to agree to the secular paradigm. Yet he assumes that when it comes to the religious paradigm, those who believe in it can actually be coerced out of it.

Rorty's Representation of Religious Faith

In his 'reconsideration', Rorty attempts to justify the potential loss felt by members of religions that adhere to the authority of ecclesiastical institutions by appealing to the positive consequences that, he hopes, will follow. As he writes, "we recognize that the disappearance of ecclesiastical institutions would leave a gap in the lives of religious believers, for they will no longer have a sense of being part of a great and powerful worldly institution. But that gap will be filled, we like to think, by an increased sense of participation in the advance of humanity - theists and atheists together."¹⁰⁹

This is, however, a rather unrealistic representation of religious belief. Few religious believers can be anticipated to appreciate Rorty's attempt to reduce the value of ecclesiastic institutions to merely a sense of belonging to a powerful institution. While many atheists may be content to view the human affinity for religion in this way, sincere religious believers would deny such a shallow characterization. Given the eternal claims of certain religious worldviews, what can be considered 'worth preserving' is more than just the need for belonging. Indeed, to reduce the loss of foundational religious authorities to a sense of loss that can easily be replaced by a new project or task is too simplistic and insulting.

There are, in fact, several instances in which Rorty provides descriptions of religious belief that would leave most serious religious believers dissatisfied. In fact, it is a common complaint among theists that many atheists - when discussing religious belief - will "invariably come up with vulgar caricatures of religious faith that would make a first-year theology student

¹⁰⁹ Rorty, "Religion in the Public Square: A Reconsideration." p. 142.

wince.”¹¹⁰ It is clear that Rorty also paints an unfair caricature of religious faith, essentially trivializing the entire paradigm. For example, Rorty discusses religious faith in terms of the “infantile” need for security. What Rorty seems to have in mind is “the kind of security that God understood as a big, all-powerful ally, capable of granting the wishes of those who please him, might be supposed to provide.”¹¹¹ While belief in God may provide this kind of satisfaction, this is not the only sense in which religion might satisfy the need for security. As Nicholas Smith explains, an alternative conception “construes the kind of security provided by religion in terms of an order that makes sense of whatever happiness and unhappiness there is in the world.” Religion delivers security, then, “by its role of fending off the threat of moral meaninglessness.”¹¹²

Another case is Rorty's discussion of the religious “hope of escaping time and chance.” From Rorty's perspective this sort of reasoning is objectionable, because it is ineffective in terms of bringing about human happiness. But as Smith argues, this human-transcending order is not necessarily meant as a guarantor of happiness, but “as the existential context within which human projects acquire worth and their sufferings become liveable.”¹¹³ So while it may be fair to consider the notion that there is an almighty being watching over us and looking after our interests as 'childish escapism,' this is hardly true of the notion that “the contingent satisfaction or non-satisfaction of human interests is given meaning by something that transcends it.”¹¹⁴

It is important to be careful how one characterizes religion, particularly if one intends to be taken seriously by religious readers, as Rorty seems to hope. Indeed, “critics of the richest,

¹¹⁰ Terry Eagleton, “Lunging, Flailing, Mispunching.” *London Review of Books*, October 19, 2006. <http://www.bringyou.to/apologetics/DawkinsGodDelusionLondonReview.pdg>. p. 1.

¹¹¹ Smith, p. 86.

¹¹² Smith, p. 86.

¹¹³ Smith, p. 87.

¹¹⁴ Smith, p. 87.

most enduring form of popular culture in human history” are not likely to impress religious readers unless they “confront that case at its most persuasive, rather than grabbing themselves a victory on the cheap by savaging it as so much garbage and gobbledygook.”¹¹⁵ While Rorty, at times, seems mildly sympathetic to religious ways of life, his shallow understanding of religion and religious commitment is likely to cut him off from appealing to religious readers. Furthermore, it could add to their fears that contemporary liberal authors are not prepared to take their concerns and beliefs seriously.

Setting aside these instances in which Rorty’s characterization of religious commitment may be less than accurate, Rorty’s overall approach to religion in these writings portrays a general failure to adequately understand religious commitment. For some, religious commitment is not just a feeling or a comfort that can simply be replaced, but a sincere and actual belief in a historical relationship between human beings and God. For many, such as the early Christians, it is something for which they are willing to give up their very lives. To expect that these people will allow their views to be silenced or manipulated, regardless of the cause, is simply a failure to understand their commitment. Indeed, if Rorty were to properly account for the sincerity and the depth of many peoples’ religious commitments, he would be aware that his efforts are not only likely to fail, but as I shall argue, are actually counter-productive.

The Tension

Although Rorty places himself in the category of those sympathetic to religious belief, he offers a narrow representation of religion that is not only unproductive, but actually contributes to the “us vs. them” mentality that tends to put political liberalism and deep religious commitment at odds with one another. This tension results from Rorty’s insistence that secularism is a defining

¹¹⁵ Eagleton, p. 6.

feature of the liberal ideal. At the same time, religious citizens have long argued that secularism is at odds with their worldviews as well. Christian theologian John Milbank, for example, has described the secularization that accompanies liberal theories as defining a world “in which the theological is either discredited or turned into a harmless leisure-time activity of private commitment.”¹¹⁶ Richard Neuhaus shares Milbank's concern, explaining how “secular humanism has had a pervasive and debilitating effect upon our public life.”¹¹⁷ As Jeffrey Stout writes, “theological resentment of the secular deserves attention from theorists of democracy not only because it gives voice to an animus felt by many religiously oriented citizens, but also because it reinforces that animus and encourages its spread.”¹¹⁸

However, not all theorists believe that religion and ~~secularism—liberalism~~ are fundamentally at odds with each other. Lucas Swaine describes this tension as “puzzling” considering “liberal democracies are supposed to be welcoming and open to the faithful.”¹¹⁹ Affirming political liberalism, Swaine maintains that a commitment to political liberal ideals does not entail hostility towards religious citizens. Dealing more specifically with theocratic communities, Swaine writes that liberals can provide religious citizens “with a principled, well-reasoned, and conscientious political settlement that liberals and theocrats can jointly affirm.”¹²⁰

According to Swaine, to assume that liberalism and religion are at odds with one another is simply to misunderstand liberalism. Indeed, the fact that many liberal authors tend to work with a narrow understanding of religion demonstrates the tension they view between their theory

¹¹⁶ From the introduction to *Radical Orthodoxy*, edited by John Milbank, Catherine Pickstock, and Graham Ward, London: Routledge, 1999, pp.1-3.

¹¹⁷ Richard John Neuhaus, *The Naked Public Square: Religion and Democracy in America*. Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans, 1995. pp. 80-82.

¹¹⁸ Stout, *Democracy and Tradition*. p. 92.

¹¹⁹ Lucas Swaine. *The Liberal Conscience. Politics and Principle in a World of Religious Pluralism*. Columbia: Columbia University Press, 2008. p. xiv.

¹²⁰ Swaine, p. xvi.

and a broader understanding of religious belief. As Mark Tushnet writes, “religious communities necessarily stand apart from, and in many ways stand in opposition to, the wider community of which they are a part.” To acknowledge this, however, would be to acknowledge the shortcomings of liberalism, for indeed, admitting that liberalism cannot adequately accommodate all reasonable worldviews “threatens some fundamentals of the liberal tradition.”¹²¹

Rorty presents the debate as if the way to deal with religious controversies were a matter of how a secular society ought to deal with the inconvenience of needing to tolerate the views of its religious citizens. By doing so, however, Rorty begins his discussion with underlying assumptions about the appropriate role for religion in society. Rorty's assumptions in regards to religion and his clear disdain for ecclesiastical organizations seem to be exactly the type of behaviour that Swaine discusses when he writes that “it is a deeply misguided view that liberal politics must simply repel and retaliate against theocrats.” Indeed, Rorty's contributions to the debate lead to an approach that Swaine warns against, one which “offers no plan for reconciliation, instead perpetuating nasty adversarial relationships that just make the world's problems worse.”¹²²

Despite the efforts of more extreme atheists such as Richard Dawkins and Christopher Hitchens, pluralism among citizens' comprehensive moral and religious doctrines is not likely to disappear at any time in the foreseeable future.¹²³ While Rorty himself seems to want to embrace pluralism, it is important for any proponent of liberalism to recognize that “liberalism

¹²¹ Mark Tushnet, “The Constitution of Religion.” *The Review of Politics*. Vol. 50, Issue 4 (Sept., 1988), pp. 628-658, p. 637.

¹²² Swaine, p. xv.

¹²³ Swaine, p. 1.

itself is under fire, accused of being disrespectful of religiosity, incorrigibly invasive of religious communities, irremediably ungodly, and nakedly partisan.”¹²⁴

Potential Danger

In *Religion as Conversation-stopper*, Rorty lays out his case for why he believes religious discussion should be kept out of the public sphere. Setting aside any flaws in the argument itself, one must question the effect any attempt to implement such a policy might have on a pluralist society. For indeed, it is not always clear how people will react when they feel the law is treating them unjustly. In expressing his concern over the value of religious discourse in the public sphere, Jeffrey Stout explains that when people are deprived of the opportunity to express themselves on matters about which they care deeply, we not only “lose the chance to learn from, and to critically examine what they say...they will have good reason to doubt that they are being shown the respect that all of us owe to our fellow citizens as the individuals they are.”¹²⁵

For example, as mentioned earlier, Rorty argues that religious people who claim a right to express their homophobia in public - because it is a result of their religious convictions - should be ashamed of themselves.¹²⁶ He further adds that “People who quote Leviticus 18:22 with approval should be shunned and despised.”¹²⁷ Again, recall that Rorty does not maintain that such statements can somehow be lawfully removed from the public sphere. He does, however, want to maintain - not only that he personally finds them distasteful - but that the expression of such views is inconsistent with liberal democratic ideals.

¹²⁴ Swaine, p. xiv.

¹²⁵ Stout, *Democracy and Tradition*. p.64.

¹²⁶ Rorty, “Religion in the Public Square: A Reconsideration.” p. 143.

¹²⁷ Rorty, “Religion in the Public Square: A Reconsideration.” p. 143.

However, this is not a proactive approach to resolving the issue. Here, Rorty seems to be guilty of what Swaine refers to as a “common response”, explaining that what often happens is that people resort to “countenancing claims that theocratic communities and other minority religious groups are backward, intimating that those groups are abusive to women, and children, or suggesting that such communities are otherwise ‘irrational’ or ‘mad and aggressive.’”¹²⁸ But, as Swaine explains, “it matters how religious groups get labelled by others, because indelicate and untoward treatment can create a ‘context of violence.’”¹²⁹

A failure to adequately address people’s various perspectives, then, may create a sense of persecution among religious minorities which could potentially result in a backlash of violence. An extreme case of such backlash is evident in the case of the ‘Danish Cartoon Affair’ where - after the publication of a series of supposedly blasphemous cartoons depicting the prophet Muhammad - groups of Muslim extremists responded with violent protests as well as bomb and death threats.¹³⁰ Setting aside the lawfulness and morality of the response, what is evident in this case is that when groups feel their way of life is under attack, they will react. In extreme cases, the results can be violent and, indeed, in the case of the Danish cartoons, the objects of hatred were not only the cartoonists, but Western society as a whole.

This phenomenon is by no means unique. In recent years, there has been a surge of political behaviour motivated by religion in the United States, in liberal democracies elsewhere, and in various other regions of the world.¹³¹ “Where this behaviour confronts liberal principles

¹²⁸ Swaine, p.128.

¹²⁹ Swaine, p.129.

¹³⁰ Paul Belien, “Jihad Against Danish Newspaper.” Saturday, October 22, 2005.
<http://www.brusselsjournal.com/node/382>

¹³¹ Swaine, p. 126.

and norms,” Swaine explains, “it is at times overtly violent.”¹³² The risk of violent reactions is incredibly problematic for Rorty, who claims to place avoidance of harm amongst the highest of his goals. Violence, it seems, should be avoided at all costs, and yet “such ongoing issues testify to a series of moral and prudential problems for liberals and liberal governance, putting the very legitimacy of liberal government at risk.”¹³³

While the civil peace that would apparently follow from Rorty’s liberal transformation is no doubt an admirable and worthy goal, his suggestion seems to overlook the one aspect of theistic religious faith that has always made it at once amazing and troubling: namely, the commitment to always put God(s) first. Such a commitment holds even when it comes down to issues of life or death. So while an atheist may see the altering and moulding of religious beliefs as an acceptable means, and may even encourage it if it will result in positive societal consequences, a theist, on the other hand, will likely find such tampering extremely troubling. If members of a religion believe that the steps required to achieve a particular goal, no matter how admirable that goal may be, are counter to God’s will, then such steps simply cannot be taken. Indeed, nothing can come before God(s) and His/Her/Their commands. So while we can understand why Rorty sees the weakening of the grip that ecclesiastical organizations have on religious believers as a positive goal, we can also see why theists might respond to Rorty’s remarks with alarm. Given the fact that an overwhelming majority of the population maintain belief in a higher power¹³⁴, it seems as though Rorty is getting a bit ahead of himself in assuming that religious believers are passing with the times. Jeff Spinner-Halev, who writes on the difficulties of reconciling religious identities with the demands of liberal democratic citizenship,

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¹³² Swaine, p. 126.

¹³³ Swaine, p. 126.

¹³⁴ Jeff Spinner-Halev, *Surviving Diversity: Religion and Democratic Citizenship*. Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2000. p. 213.

suggests, however, that Rorty is not alone. Spinner-Halev, who maintains that a truly complete theory of multiculturalism must take religious groups into account, explains that liberals may “have little sympathy for the reasons why people are religious,” as many assume that religion turns out to be little more than an obstacle to human progress.¹³⁵ Indeed, Rorty pigeon holes religion as a nuisance, all the while setting out an ideal in which the best case scenario involves all religions being eliminated. In his words: “If we secular humanists have our way, the liberal democracies will eventually mutate into societies whose most sacred texts were written by John Stuart Mill. But there is a long way to go before that ideal is reached.”¹³⁶ Rorty's recommendation that society eliminate the influence of ecclesiastical organizations displays hostility towards many religious ways of life. As an atheist Rorty may very well be opposed to religious organizations, denouncing them as counterproductive in a liberal democracy. However, shunning them in the public sphere clearly does not convince anyone to change their views. In fact, doing so can produce dangerous consequences. Instead of shunning them, actively including them in the dialogue would eliminate these dangers. As far as the members of religious groups who adhere to ecclesiastical organizations are concerned, Rorty's words serve merely to reinforce the tension that many religious groups feel is present between their belief systems and liberal government.

Problems for Pragmatism

In order for a theory to be truly pragmatic, it must be feasible. It is not difficult to argue that if all people believed the same things, then politics would carry on more conveniently. If Rorty is saying little more than how convenient it would be if all religious believers adopted a Protestant Christian view of religion, then it is difficult to see how this is any different from the theologian's

¹³⁵ Spinner-Halev, p. 213.

¹³⁶ Rorty, “Religion in the Public Square: A Reconsideration.” p. 144.

claim that life would be much easier if all people had faith and accepted the authority of the Church, the Qur'an or the Torah. As a pragmatist, Rorty should be committed to positive practical outcomes. This commitment, it would seem, ought to entail an abandonment of hypothetical ideals in favour of practical solutions that offer realistic goals that can feasibly be achieved given the current state of affairs. Rorty's arguments in regard to the role of religion in society, which are part of his commitment to a secular ideal, are of dubious practicality, a fact which brings into question the coherency of his philosophical commitments.

While Rorty's secular liberal proposal may be much more appealing to the reader in the modern West, it is a mistake to presume that religious believers will allow their religions to be so blatantly ignored. Rorty's discussion of religion serves only to reinforce the fear that liberalism is inherently inimical to deep religious commitment. While Rorty may have abandoned any attempt to satisfy all groups within society, his treatment of religion remains questionable. For, indeed, no worldview has a claim to superiority and every competent adult maintains the right to an equal vote.

There is reason to believe that many religious citizens are not likely to respond positively to Rorty's treatment of religion. Given this fact, it seems as though Rorty's recommendations are far from pragmatic because it cannot be practical to incite civic unrest. Why Rorty does not foresee this indignant response and active resistance is puzzling. Indeed, as Stout writes, "If we are not at all likely to enter an age in which religion ceases to have public influence, it seems unlikely that pursuing a secularist political agenda is going to have beneficial consequences on the whole."¹³⁷

¹³⁷ Stout, "Rorty on Religion and Politics." p. 5.

In fact, evidence suggests that the dominance of secularism in an American institutional context is actually countered with an opposite reaction from religious groups elsewhere. As Stout explains, “highbrow secularism seems to be feeding the very tendencies in religious life that it most fears.”¹³⁸ In an article entitled *Universality and Truth*, Rorty explains how secularists, like himself, “are going to go right on trying to discredit you in the eyes of your children, trying to strip your fundamentalist religious community of dignity, trying to make your views seem silly rather than discussible.”¹³⁹ As Stout argues, however, religious citizens are simply going to take such anti-religious statements as evidence that secularists are plotting the eradication of their way of life and that they are “less than wholeheartedly committed to democratic practices and the Bill of Rights.” Indeed, they are likely to conclude that “secularists cannot be trusted to hold political office, to educate the children of believers, or to give citizens the news.”¹⁴⁰ Instead of working towards his ideal, Rorty is indirectly encouraging a polarization of the religious and the non-religious, pushing religiously moderate citizens to join the extremists in order to protect their beliefs.

It is such examples that lead Christopher M. Duncan to ask: assuming Rorty means everything that he says, why does he say everything he means? For, “his honest practice of his philosophy undermines his politics.”¹⁴¹ Duncan goes on to explain how Rorty has chosen to venture beyond the confines of the academy and engage the political world on a quasi-practical level. “There, for someone who is unconstrained by metaphysical concerns about the “right” or

¹³⁸ Stout, “Rorty on Religion and Politics.” p. 7.

¹³⁹ Richard Rorty, “Universality and Truth.” in Robert B. Brandom [ed.], *Rorty and his Critics*, Oxford: Blackwell, 2000, pp. 21-2.

¹⁴⁰ Jeffrey Stout, “2007 Presidential Address: The Folly of Secularism.” *Journal of the American Academy of Religion*, Vol. 76, No. 3 (Sep., 2008), pp. 533-544. p. 540.

¹⁴¹ Christopher M. Duncan, “A Question for Richard Rorty.” *The Review of Politics*, Vol. 66, No. (Summer, 2004), pp. 385-413. p. 385.

the "good," what counts is not being right, but being successful?"¹⁴² Some have argued that Rorty's approach works to produce "the very absence of the necessary political conditions needed for even the most basic realization of his political vision"¹⁴³ and this is particularly true when it comes to Rorty's discussion of religion. Indeed, the problem with secular liberals who treat evangelist Pat Robertson as though he is "a dangerous Neanderthal because he happens to believe that God can heal diseases," for example, is that, tens of millions of Americans also believe that God can cure disease (although they are not all fans of Robertson).¹⁴⁴

The world's great democracies are currently composed of a wide variety of comprehensive doctrines, religious and otherwise. Democracies are becoming more and more multicultural, featuring a wide variety of racial and ethnic diversity as well as religious communities representing every major religious tradition. "The condition of permanence" attached to the multiplicity of comprehensive doctrines suggests that "pluralism of this kind exists at present and is not likely to disappear at any time in the foreseeable future."¹⁴⁵ Despite the devout liberal theorist who will no doubt dream of a secular liberal utopia, and the theocrat of a glorious theocracy, any practical theory of government must take this feature of contemporary democracies into account and must take it seriously.

Conclusion

In his writings discussing the value and role of religion in public life, Rorty makes many controversial statements and propositions. When it comes to the treatment of religion, I have argued that such remarks are only adding fuel to a fire that rests on the apparent tension between

¹⁴² Duncan, p. 386.

¹⁴³ Duncan, p. 400.

¹⁴⁴ Stephen L. Carter, "Evolutionism, Creationism, and Treating Religion as a Hobby." *Duke Law Journal*. No. 6 (December, 1987) p. 978.

¹⁴⁵ Swaine, p. 1.

liberalism and deep religious commitment. As Jeffrey Stout and Lucas Swaine argue, this tension should not be overlooked because it not only seems to be counter to political liberal values, it is potentially dangerous.

Evidence suggests that when citizens feel their views are not being taken seriously, they can be expected to respond. Rorty's writings and any attempt to impose his ideas can be expected to encourage vocal religious citizens to rally support for their cause and in some cases, may even lead to acts of violence. Although, well aware that his Darwinian pragmatism will not likely appeal to many readers, Rorty fails to account for this. Indeed, the practical problems associated with Rorty's views on politics and religion threaten to bring into question his commitment to positive practical outcomes.¹⁴⁶

In his original response to Stephen Carter, Rorty takes a moment to express what he believes to be the position of intellectuals towards religion. I have argued against Rorty's authority to make such a claim, although I do not deny the fact that some intellectuals simply are not interested in theology, while others are even hostile toward it. On the other end there are also theologians who describe atheists as "despicable fools who have wilfully, half-knowingly, and selfishly turned their backs on religious truth."¹⁴⁷ While it may be ridiculous to expect the Richard Dawkins and the Pat Robertsons of the world to one day see eye to eye, as Stout simply puts it, "why let these people keep the rest of us from achieving some mutual understanding?"¹⁴⁸

¹⁴⁶ This is not to imply that the open expression of religious views will not lead to any negative practical outcomes. Indeed, the imposition of religious views on non-religious citizens, for example, may also result in violence. While committed to positive outcomes, however, religions are not necessarily committed to positive *practical* outcomes in the same way that Rorty's pragmatism commits him.

¹⁴⁷ Stout, *Democracy and Tradition*. p. 113.

¹⁴⁸ Stout, *Democracy and Tradition*. p. 113.

I do not intend to make any claims about the rights of these individuals to speak their minds on the topics of religion and politics, I wish simply to question the practicality of these approaches that result in hostility rather than resolution. While Rorty actively attempts to distance himself from any form of extreme atheism, the impoverished representation of religion he offers serves as a stumbling block for his theorizing as it is likely to produce negative practical consequences. Whether it is due to Rorty's limited knowledge of religion or his failure to take certain aspects of religious belief seriously throughout his writings, Rorty quickly loses appeal to many religious members of his audience.

3. Epistemological Limitations

In the previous chapter I explained three practical problems with Rorty's position on religion in the public sphere. The first problem is that Rorty's failure to appeal to religious readers causes his arguments to become ineffective in achieving his apparent goals. The second problem is that Rorty's treatment of religion and those devoted to controversial beliefs is potentially dangerous, as people who feel their worldviews are under attack have been known to sometimes react with violence. And finally, Rorty's hostility towards religion is actually counterproductive, as it confirms the fears of many religious citizens, having a polarizing effect between the religious and the non-religious. The problems for Rorty, however, go beyond the consequences that I believe will result from both the presentation and implementation of his theory. I will proceed by looking at some inconsistencies and epistemological problems surrounding Rorty's pragmatic support for his secular liberal utopia.

In his political writings, Rorty expresses his support for liberal institutions as anti-foundational due to his epistemic relativism in terms of fundamental values and comprehensive worldviews. People, Rorty argues, are rationally entitled to disagree on what constitutes basic values. Therefore, as far as Rorty is concerned, to claim that liberalism is somehow based on undeniable foundations is far too ambitious. Rorty believes his political writings remain relevant in a pluralist society because they are based, not on appeals to reasons that all rational people must accept, but on his basic assumption that liberalism ought to be preferred on pragmatic grounds.

There are, however, epistemological problems that can be found in Rorty's writings, particularly with regards to the inconsistency between his anti-foundationalism and his description of liberal institutions, the value of religion and the requirements of pragmatism.

Throughout his writings, Rorty describes these three things in general, absolute terms as though he were picking out something essential to each. Rorty's epistemology, however, ought to restrict him from making these types of claims. It is upon these general descriptions, however, that Rorty tends to rely in order to justify his arguments in regards to the appropriate role for religion in contemporary life.

These problems relate to a more general concern accompanying Rorty's epistemology, particularly with regard to his attempt to abandon realist meta-theories. At the very least, I argue, this epistemological stance ought to provide the foresight to anticipate the negative practical consequences of his approach, bringing into question why Rorty maintains that his liberal ideal is achievable to begin with. More importantly, however, I argue that his epistemological stance proves to be a non-starter, offering no grounds for Rorty to argue in favour of any one theory over another, not even his Darwinian pragmatism. Indeed, while Rorty claims to have abandoned metaphysics, the problem is that any argument that he makes based on his epistemic worldview only has force if you accept his epistemology as realist. People who do not agree with his relativist views are not going to be convinced of the value of his pragmatism.

Beginning with a brief look at some of Rorty's arguments in favour of keeping religion out of the public sphere and his support for his secular liberal ideal, I will point out some of the tensions that these arguments produce. I will proceed by taking a closer look at Rorty's claim to pragmatism. Despite his epistemological commitments, I argue that Rorty's 'pragmatism' includes a variety of normative claims that simply cannot be squared with a commitment to anti-foundationalism in a society marked by a plurality of comprehensive moral and religious worldviews.

Problems with Privatization

Rorty's attempt to privatize religion has sparked much criticism. Responses from Nicholas Wolterstorff and Jeffrey Stout focus on the question of what grounds Rorty has for his claim that religious believers are somehow obliged to "trade privatization for a guarantee of religious liberty."¹⁴⁹ It cannot be any foundational claims to fairness or reason. But without such foundations, Rorty's support for the privatization of religions seems to be reduced to what Wolterstorff describes as a sort of threat, that "religion must shape up if it's to be tolerated in our liberal democracy."¹⁵⁰

The clear problem with such a statement, of course, is the question "what is the standard by which religion is required to shape up?" For, indeed, in a society marked by a plurality of comprehensive worldviews, it is not at all clear that there are any uncontroversial grounds from which to argue. Unlike the Rawlsians who might want to justify their position with a Kantian appeal to human reason, Rorty has already admitted that moral appeals to restraint based on reason are nonsense. So if the grounds for placing restrictions on religion are that it 'stops the conversation' with some members of the public who do not share their views, then, as Wolterstorff explains, "by obvious parity of argument, Darwinian pragmatists" like Rorty, "ought also to be privatized."¹⁵¹

Indeed, Darwinian pragmatists hold certain views on liberty and its restrictions such that "when [they] go public with their philosophical reasons for public policy they stop the conversation with certain members of the public."¹⁵² In his initial criticism of Kantian liberalism, Rorty denies the notion of intrinsic human dignity, intrinsic human rights or any sort

¹⁴⁹ Rorty, "Religion As Conversation-stopper." p. 171.

¹⁵⁰ Wolterstorff, "An Engagement with Rorty." p. 136.

¹⁵¹ Wolterstorff, "An Engagement with Rorty." p. 136.

¹⁵² Wolterstorff, "An Engagement with Rorty." p. 137.

of foundational claim to objective truths. Whatever Rorty's personal views turn out to be, according to his own definition, they remain one perspective among many with no special claim to privilege over and above any other. It is surprising to see how Rorty manages to concede to the inevitable plurality of worldviews and at the same time single out *any* view as fundamentally problematic.

In order to be consistent it seems that Rorty would have to require not only that religion remain out of the public sphere, but also that many nonreligious commitments be silenced as well. Stout, like Wolterstorff, seems to recognize Rorty's failure to follow his argument through to its logical conclusion. If we are to restrict public discussion to premises held in common, setting aside claims to what 'all reasonable people' would accept as 'hokum,' Rorty is left with the problem, as, Stout explains, that the reasons citizens actually hold in common cannot answer enough of our political questions. "The proposed policy of constraint, if adopted, would cause too much silence at precisely the points where more discussion is most badly needed."¹⁵³ Issues such as welfare assistance, punishment, military policy, abortion, euthanasia and environmental policy, to name a few, all require such kinds of non-consensual reasons.

Perhaps too eager to silence a group of people whose views he finds unsettling, Rorty neglects to recognize the countless number of issues on which citizens are entitled to disagree on a variety of other grounds. Despite his apparently sincere attempt to clear religion from public discussion for the pragmatic purpose of political progress, Rorty fails to recognize that the implementation of his policy, on the grounds he argues, "would itself be a conversation stopper."¹⁵⁴

¹⁵³ Stout, *Democracy and Tradition*. pp. 89-90.

¹⁵⁴ Stout, *Democracy and Tradition*. p. 90.

Protestantism and the Private/Public Divide

The fact that Rorty attempts to defend the distinction of the public and private sphere, itself, remains puzzling. Indeed, Rorty's epistemology clearly rejects the correspondence theory of truth. Given his epistemology, as Frederick Gedicks writes, "the public or private character of an activity depends not on the discovered attributes of a self-existent world but on the classifier's subjective perception of the world."¹⁵⁵ Rorty's support for secularism, then, is not marking out some natural distinction between what belongs in private life and what belongs in public life. Indeed, "the confinement of religion to private life reflects the exercise of contingent social power, not the disinterested discovery of essential meaning or self-existent reality."¹⁵⁶

Rorty's use of the private/public divide reflects a way of viewing the world that is simply not shared by all people. Indeed, Rorty's choice of Protestant Christianity as the ideal form of religious belief in a liberal society is no coincidence. "Liberal religious toleration is based on a Protestant conception of religion that was established in a particular historical context."¹⁵⁷ It is the Protestant conception of religion as a private matter, one of personal conscience, that informed the early liberal conception of religion and religious toleration. As Jeff Spinner-Halev writes, "the liberal conception of public and private has its origins in the (eventual) Protestant conception of privatized religion."¹⁵⁸

This historical fact leads many to question whether contemporary secular liberal views can be considered neutral in terms of comprehensive doctrines. As Saba Mahmood argues, "mechanisms of the law are not neutral but are encoded with an entire set of cultural and

¹⁵⁵ Frederick Mark Gedicks, "Public Life and Hostility to Religion." *Virginia Law Review*, Vol. 78, No. 3 (Apr., 1992), pp. 671-696. p. 681.

¹⁵⁶ Gedicks, p. 681.

¹⁵⁷ Spinner-Halev. p. 29.

¹⁵⁸ Spinner-Halev. p. 33.

epistemological presuppositions that are not indifferent to how religion is practiced and experienced in different traditions.”¹⁵⁹ Indeed, Mark Tushnet argues that “most of the Courts’ religion clause decisions...rest on a set of ideas that do not take religion seriously as a form of human endeavor.”¹⁶⁰ Mahmood continues, “contrary to the ideological self-understanding of secularism (as the doctrinal separation of religion and state), secularism has historically entailed the regulation and re-formation of religious beliefs, doctrines, and practices to yield a particular normative conception of religion (that is largely Protestant Christian in its contours).”¹⁶¹ And indeed, as Wolterstorff points out, “even the free and equal doctrine, which lies at the very heart of liberal democracy, had religious roots –in Protestant dissent of the seventeenth century.”¹⁶²

Rorty’s favouring of the Protestant conception of religion, therefore, is not by chance. While Protestantism may, indeed, be more conducive to liberal ideals, the reason this is so is because liberal ideals are based on the Protestant conception of religion. Once we accept that this notion of religion as a private affair may be flawed, we must accept that we are working with a flawed solution to dealing with religious diversity. As Mark Tushnet argues, liberal tradition has proven incapable of developing “a concept of politics into which religion would comfortably fit,” and attributes at least part of this failure to “liberalism’s hostility toward religion.”¹⁶³ Rather than attempt to correct the way liberals deal with religion, Rorty suggests encouraging believers to change their understanding of religion.

¹⁵⁹ Saba Mahmood, “Religious Reason and Secular Affect: An Incommensurable Divide?” *Critical Inquiry*. Vol. 35, No. 4, (Summer 2009), pp. 836-862. p. 858.

¹⁶⁰ Tushnet, p. 634.

¹⁶¹ Mahmood, p. 858.

¹⁶² Wolterstorff, “The Role of Religion in Decision and Discussion of Political Issues.” *Religion in the Public Square*. Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield Publishers, Inc., 1997. 67-121. p.80.

¹⁶³ Tushnet, p. 628.

Problems with Rorty's Reconsideration

In his reconsideration Rorty manages to alter his position from one in which religion in general is inappropriate for public discussion, to one in which religious discussion of a certain kind is somehow conventionally inappropriate. The problem Rorty is now confronted with is the issue of placing limits on what sort of actions individuals can justify in the name of religion. On one hand, Rorty seems content with allowing religious individuals to support charity in the name of religion - as he sees nothing stopping them from quoting Psalm 72 - stating that God "has commanded that the cause of the poor should be defended."¹⁶⁴ At the same time, he does not seem to maintain an equivalent position when it comes to using biblical passages to support one's position advocating for the immorality of homosexual activity.¹⁶⁵ Rorty seems to have no grounds from which to draw any sort of moral limits.

Yet in his reconsideration, Rorty argues that liberal democracies ought to discourage "mere appeal to authority,"¹⁶⁶ taking issue with the fact that members of religious groups often take the authority of the Bible or ecclesiastical organizations without questioning it and without being able to rationally defend their decisions. However, this is not an argument against ecclesiastical organizations. The authority that ecclesiastical organizations have over citizens is limited by the degree to which those citizens have committed themselves to that religion. Therefore the degree of commitment is a free choice that individuals choose for themselves, utilizing their own sets of reasons. Ecclesiastical organizations have no authority over the conscience of those who do not believe in the authority of the institution. Some have, then, chosen to follow ecclesiastical organizations, in different degrees. Rorty is right to encourage people to think things through and be capable of defending their positions beyond mere appeal to

¹⁶⁴ Rorty, "Religion in the Public Square: A Reconsideration." p. 143.

¹⁶⁵ Wolterstorff, "An Engagement with Rorty." pp. 143-147.

¹⁶⁶ Rorty, "Religion in the Public Square: A Reconsideration." p. 147.

authority. He is wrong, however, to assume that such thoughtfulness can only lead to his own version of liberal ideals.

The Catholic Church, for example, insists on the consistency of its doctrines and offers arguments in support of the authority of the Church and the authenticity of the Bible. Similarly, many devoted Muslims maintain the authority of the Koran and Islamic Imams to interpret it, based on arguments. Rorty argues that the religious homophobe who is incapable of providing arguments and explanations for his or her position - beyond a mere appeal to authority - is not offering fellow citizens 'reasons'.¹⁶⁷ It is difficult to believe, however, that Rorty would be any more satisfied with the well-educated religious believers who are able to defend their reasons for following ecclesiastic organizations. Rorty seems to assume that, once encouraged to actively inquire, citizens will abandon religious views that are dominated by ecclesiastical organizations. In doing so, however, he overlooks the fact that thoughtful and active inquiry has led many people to accept the authority of ecclesiastical organizations.

Rorty explains that he "see[s] liberal Protestantism as the form of Christian religious life most congenial to a liberal democracy."¹⁶⁸ The reason is that "the idea of 'the priesthood of believers' encourages the believer to interpret Scripture, theology and devotional literature on his own, rather than simply waiting to be informed by church officials about what is required to be a member in good standing of a given denomination."¹⁶⁹ The fact, however, is that Protestant Christian values are in tension with the values of a variety of other comprehensive religious views. Again, Rorty is free to express his favouritism of particular types of religious belief, but he is mistaken in thinking he is contributing anything positive to the debate. For, indeed, citizens

¹⁶⁷ Rorty, "Religion in the Public Square: A Reconsideration." p. 147.

¹⁶⁸ Rorty, "Religion in the Public Square: A Reconsideration." p. 148.

¹⁶⁹ Rorty, "Religion in the Public Square: A Reconsideration." p. 147.

rarely choose their religious commitments based on their conduciveness to liberal democracy, but quite the contrary. Individuals' religious commitments are often prior to their political commitments and, as a result, shape them.

Rorty's epistemology has led him to accept that religions cannot simply be considered unreasonable. This fact undoubtedly sets serious limitations to the practical value of criticizing the tenets of organized religion. Indeed, Rorty's own arguments offer no grounds for excluding any argument based on religion from the public forum. Rorty expresses frustration at this argumentative dead-end when he explains: "it would be nice if I could appeal to a principle which differentiated between citing Psalm 72 in favour of government-financed health insurance and citing Leviticus 18:22 in opposition to changes in the law that would make life in the U.S. more bearable for gays and lesbians. But I do not have one."¹⁷⁰

The fact that Rorty's epistemology prepares him to accept that there will be no agreement in favour of the implementation of his rules for public discourse ought to prepare him to accept their impracticality. As he writes, "there is nothing called "reason" that stands above such struggles." Indeed, just as there is "no particular ground for believing that all reasonable and rational people will eventually come to agree on Rawls' principles of justice, or on any comprehensive philosophical or religious doctrine,"¹⁷¹ there is no reason to expect people to agree on Rorty's proposals, even if their successful implementation would be pragmatically preferred.

In concluding his reconsideration, Rorty writes that "we should do our best to keep the conversation going without citing unarguable first principles, either philosophical or

¹⁷⁰ Rorty, "Religion in the Public Square: A Reconsideration." p. 143.

¹⁷¹ Rorty, "Religion in the Public Square: A Reconsideration." p. 144.

religious,”¹⁷² claiming that to cite such principles is a sign of failure. The meaning of this statement, however, is terribly confusing given his admission only lines before that he himself would have to exclaim: "Don't ask me for reasons. I don't have any. It is a matter of faith," if asked why he believes that the aim of political life should be the greatest happiness of the greatest number.¹⁷³ For if all of our arguments are based on such ‘first principles’, which they inevitably must be, then any time we are pressed to explain *any* of our arguments we will be forced to make recourse to these foundations. Indeed, at the very bottom line it is all a matter of faith.

Epistemological Problems with Secularism

Rorty's insistence that a secular utopia is the pragmatic ideal is connected to his belief “that non-theists make better citizens than theists.”¹⁷⁴ This statement, however, seems to conflict with Rorty's anti-essentialism. Indeed, as Stout explains, “it is unwise to pass judgment as Rorty does on theists as such.”¹⁷⁵ Defined simply in terms of belief in God, theism, on its own, “involves no political implications whatsoever.”¹⁷⁶ What needs to be evaluated is theism in combination with other commitments. As such, the question of whether theists or non-theists make better citizens is not the sort of question a pragmatist should ask. Indeed, “a pragmatist would be expected to undermine [it].”¹⁷⁷

Rorty maintains that religion is essentially at odds with his commitment to pragmatism about norms. Again, we see a tension manifesting between Rorty's claims. As Stout explains: “I find it ironic and unfortunate that Rorty, the anti-essentialist, appears to have a strong interest

¹⁷² Rorty, “Religion in the Public Square: A Reconsideration.” p. 148-9.

¹⁷³ Rorty, “Religion in the Public Square: A Reconsideration.” p. 148.

¹⁷⁴ Richard Rorty, “Comments on Jeffrey Stout's Democracy and Tradition.” delivered on November 23, 2003. As quoted by Jeffrey Stout in “Rorty on Religion and Politics.” p. 22.

¹⁷⁵ Stout, “Rorty on Religion and Politics.” p. 24.

¹⁷⁶ Stout, “Rorty on Religion and Politics.” p. 23.

¹⁷⁷ Stout, “Rorty on Religion and Politics.” p. 25.

in debating the question whether this or that 'ism' is inherently compatible or incompatible with some other 'ism'¹⁷⁸ Whether we view these things as compatible depends largely on how we choose to define the terms. For example, different people are epistemically entitled to maintain different beliefs towards, and definitions of, 'pragmatism'. As Stout explains, "there is no sound reason to commit *everyone* to a single rule for using this term, or even a sound reason to commit *anyone* to use this term in one way for all purposes."¹⁷⁹ Rorty's epistemic relativism leaves no room to claim that someone is irrational for disagreeing. In the end it seems as though Rorty has avoided seeking foundations for political institutions only to use particular value assumptions in his evaluation of what counts as 'pragmatic'.

Rorty claims that pragmatism is devoted to de-divinizing the world.¹⁸⁰ However, many prominent thinkers who self-identify as pragmatists also align themselves with some form of theism. As Stout argues, pragmatism is "open to both theistic and anthropocentric interpretations."¹⁸¹ The fact that pragmatism can arguably be compatible with theism means that a pragmatic support for liberalism need not require a secular ideal. Indeed, as Stout explains, it is possible to "see pragmatism as a philosophical tradition in which theists and non-theists have kept a conversation going on the social-practical sources of authority..."¹⁸²

Rorty's Move to Pragmatism

While Rorty would maintain that there may be pragmatic reasons to favour one moral theory over another, he is also committed to the claim that different individuals with different life

¹⁷⁸ Stout, "Rorty on Religion and Politics." p. 29.

¹⁷⁹ Stout, "Rorty on Religion and Politics." p. 29.

¹⁸⁰ Rorty, *Contingency, Irony, and Solidarity*: p. 21.

¹⁸¹ Stout, "Rorty on Religion and Politics." p. 30.

¹⁸² Stout, "Rorty on Religion and Politics." p. 30.

experiences will reasonably adopt different moral theories and further, that there is no reason to expect all reasonable people to agree on any sort of basic principles.

The problem with this relativist view of morality is that different people will have different ideas of what is of ultimate value and no one, it seems, will have a moral or rational claim to priority. Indeed, these various 'ultimate values' will likely conflict, forcing us to choose among them. But as George Crowder explains, from a relativist perspective plural values, in many cases, are incommensurable. "That is, there is no common measure according to which they can be ranked or traded off against one another for a determinate reason." From the relativist perspective, in a pluralist society it is impossible to use reason to decide between competing values simply because "the choice between them is 'underdetermined' by reason."¹⁸³

There is nothing in pluralism itself that can tell us which particular values ought to be chosen.¹⁸⁴ Rorty recognizes this fact when he admits that "the controversy between those who see both our species and our society as a lucky accident, and those who find an immanent teleology in both, is too radical to permit of being judged from some neutral standpoint."¹⁸⁵ Indeed, the fact of pluralism seems to leave us with the fact that a choice needs to be made, but no answer as to what to choose.

Despite his epistemological commitments, Rorty proceeds to make a variety of normative claims with regards to the ideal form of government and the appropriate role for religion in the public sphere. At this point we are forced to make one of two assumptions: either Rorty intends to proceed to make the realist claim that his epistemology manages to grasp an insight into the

¹⁸³ Crowder, p. 296.

¹⁸⁴ Crowder, p. 299.

¹⁸⁵ Rorty, *Philosophy and Social Hope*. p. xxxii.

reality of the world and our relation to it, or he intends only to address readers who already agree with his view that no one metaphysics can lay claim to epistemological authority.

Despite Rorty's appeal to pragmatism, having committed to anti-foundationalism, such an appeal can only be fruitful if we assume a consensus in regards to the 'relativist' nature of epistemology. Indeed, one can acknowledge that there is a plurality of worldviews without abandoning metaphysics or committing to pragmatism. For Rorty to assume that pragmatism is the only appropriate solution he needs to assume that his epistemology is the correct epistemology. As Ronald Beiner writes, "As soon as he starts to make his pitch for pragmatism, he is forced onto the realist's turf."¹⁸⁶

Indeed, a genuine commitment to antirealist epistemology seems to offer little room for argument. If, as Rorty claims, the ultimate aim is to come up with as many redescriptions as possible,¹⁸⁷ "we seem to be left with no normative constraints on the stories that we can get away with."¹⁸⁸ Rorty's epistemology, whether it is true or not, turns out to be a useless tool for his purposes, since the only way to move beyond the claim itself in order to support his Darwinian pragmatism is to make realist assumptions.

Conclusion

Despite the apparently ideal fit between pluralism and liberalism, Rorty's epistemology ought to prepare him to accept the inevitable failure of his proposals in regards to the treatment of religion. Indeed, while pluralism and liberalism are often understood as going hand in hand, the fact that Rorty's liberalism is only favourable to pluralism of the non-religious variety makes the connection lose appeal for many citizens. "That it would simplify political life if people stopped

¹⁸⁶ Ronald Beiner, "Richard Rorty's Liberalism." *Critical Review*. (New York) 7:1 (Winter, 1993), p. 18.

¹⁸⁷ Richard Rorty, *Essays on Heidegger and Others*. Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 1991. pp. 154-55.

¹⁸⁸ Beiner, p. 17.

believing in divinities of any kinds goes without saying.”¹⁸⁹ The fact that Rorty’s epistemology allows him to acknowledge that his theory has no appeal to large portions of the population ought to offer him adequate foresight to anticipate the inevitable negative consequences that will not only bring into question the pragmatism of his approach, but actually interfere with any hopes of reaching his ideal.

Despite the fact that Rorty reconsiders his original argument with regards to the appropriate role for religion in public life, his insistence on the pragmatic superiority of a secular liberal ideal remains in tension with his epistemological position. Having admitted that belief in God is not irrational, and that theists are not unreasonable when they commit to certain religious views, Rorty insists on arguing that the most practical way to deal with epistemic plurality involves an abandonment of a variety of religious worldviews. While Rorty himself, is free to personally evaluate religion and theism, to argue that the only justifiable way to proceed from epistemic relativism is to marginalize religious belief is mistaken. By doing so, he fails to truly appreciate the relative nature of epistemology.

¹⁸⁹ Stout, “Rorty on Religion and Politics.” p. 31.

4. Alternative Approach

In a pluralist society, an appeal to practical consequences may still provide a way out of the epistemic standstill that incommensurable worldviews provide. For, indeed, in contemporary pluralist societies, citizens are forced to accept that their individual worldview is not going to be enforced upon all citizens, even if they believe it ought to be. Pragmatism, however, loses its appeal if it precludes a large portion of relevant worldviews. If pragmatism is essentially at odds with theism, as Rorty maintains, then pragmatism no longer provides a solution that the majority of citizens can be expected to embrace.

Many, however, maintain that pragmatism does not lie in opposition to theism. In fact, the liberal democracies that Rorty defends seem to actually preclude his attempts at secularization. According to Jeffrey Stout, a true commitment to liberal democracy is capable of avoiding the complications that result from attempting to clear the political arena of the expression of particular worldviews by committing to free and open dialogue.

Liberalism is committed to allowing individuals to appeal to their private conceptions of the good, so long as it does not harm others. The use of harm here, however, must be limited to some degree. I cannot maintain that the free expression of my fellow citizens' beliefs constitutes harm to me without severely limiting freedom of speech. Rorty explains this as the general tone for American liberal politics. As he quotes Thomas Jefferson; "it does me no injury for my neighbor to say that there are twenty Gods or no God."¹⁹⁰

The limits to what counts as harm, however, remain controversial and need to be established. As Stout explains, "our expressions of anger and contempt make clear where each

¹⁹⁰ Thomas Jefferson, *Notes on the State of Virginia*. as quote by Richard Rorty in "The Priority of Democracy to Philosophy. *Objectivity, Relativism, and Truth*. Cambridge University Press. New York, 1991. p. 175.

faction comprising the body politic intends to locate the limits of cooperation.” “One function of political discourse,” he continues, “is to negotiate those limits.”¹⁹¹ Another look at the example of the Danish Cartoon Affair can be helpful in further exploring the value of liberalism and democratic dialogue.

Danish Cartoon

Muslim objections to the Danish Cartoons are often regarded as objections to a liberalism that allows for public expressions of blasphemous speech. While this may very well be the case for extremist Muslims who reacted with violence, there is reason to believe that many of the individuals who spoke out against the publications were not against freedom of speech. Instead, many Muslims may have objected to these cartoons simply because they amount to anti-Muslim hate speech. By expressing their opinions, they practiced their right to publicly object – nothing more. Indeed, there is reason to believe that objections were voiced with the hope that such hateful expressions will one day become seen as unacceptable. By allowing individuals the opportunity to express the potential harm associated with particular forms of free expression, open public discussion has the potential to help reach mutual understanding when it comes to the appropriate limits on acceptable forms of expression.¹⁹²

Rorty’s objection to what he understands as religious expressions of homophobia in public can be understood in a similar way. Rather than understanding his position as objecting to a form of liberalism that allows for the public expression of hateful speech, it is in line with liberal politics that Rorty is simply publically expressing his objection to hateful speech he hopes will one day be seen as unacceptable. Understood in this way, however, it becomes clear that

¹⁹¹ Stout, “Rorty on Religion and Politics.” p. 12.

¹⁹² This should be understood to include limits to both non-religious and religious expression.

Rorty's statements are not statements about how liberalism ought to operate, they simply constitute Rorty's liberal right to object to views he dislikes.

In his "Reconsideration," however, Rorty implies that ecclesiastical organizations oppose basic liberal democratic values and that a more "liberal" alternative should be encouraged.¹⁹³ Rorty offers liberal Protestantism as the democratic alternative to authoritarian religions that supposedly discourage understanding and require blind obedience. Rorty's depiction of traditionally "non-liberal" religions, however, is overly-generalized and does not adequately characterize all such religions and their adherents. Beyond merely voicing his opinion, Rorty goes one step further and proposes a solution to what he believes to be the problem of religious organizations propagating hateful attitudes: to actively pursue a weakening of the hold that ecclesiastical organizations have on religious citizens. Indeed, the equivalent scenario in the religious case would be when extremist Muslims recommend the weakening of the secularization of the state, to replace it with Sharia law. People are not likely to take these recommendations seriously, and such arguments do not convince those who do not feel that their behaviour was unjustified in the first place. Thus, it fails to contribute to open dialogue.

If Rorty does believe that the open expression of - what he considers to be religiously inspired hate-speech - is counter to liberal democratic ideals, then it becomes clear that Rorty is operating with a unique understanding of liberalism. Indeed, the understanding that the expression of particular worldviews can work to erode basic liberal values, seems to be in opposition to the understanding of liberalism held by Stout and Wolterstorff, who want to maintain that the open expression of views is exactly what liberalism is about.

¹⁹³ Rorty, "Religion in the Public Square: A Reconsideration." p. 147.

As Rorty writes, the attitude encouraged by Catholicism is "the sort of thing democratic societies have a right to discourage."

Indeed, the value of open, public dialogue in liberal democracies is not that it allows us to eliminate the actions we don't like, but that it allows us to voice our opinions in the hopes of persuading others and to engage in dialogue that will potentially influence the opinions and actions of others that we believe to be harmful. This approach does not always guarantee a successful resolution. However, a more hostile approach tends to result in anger and violence.

The fact that Rorty evades this understanding of liberal democracy leads many of his critics to question his commitment to liberalism. J. Judd Owen, for example, explains that “insofar as [Rorty] rejects the idea of justification of moral and political agendas, his exclusion of religion proves to be nakedly dogmatic and therefore of dubious liberality.”¹⁹⁴ Stout describes Rorty's political commitments as confusing, explaining that he “tends to waver between a form of pluralism that in principle ought to welcome the expression of religious as well as secular outlooks in political contexts and a relatively aggressive form of secular liberalism that appears to exclude views unlike his own from public life.”¹⁹⁵

Democratic Alternative

It is often assumed that liberalism and religion are somehow at odds with one another. This belief, however, is fuelled by the false understanding that the only alternative to secularism is theocracy.¹⁹⁶ Such a misunderstanding has the potential to cause great tension as it comes down to a struggle for power, each side “inspir[ing] fear in one another...because they are trying to establish rules of discursive purity that would take the concerns of the opposite party off the list of things one ought to express.”¹⁹⁷

¹⁹⁴ Owen, p. 71.

¹⁹⁵ Stout, *Democracy and Tradition*. p. 295.

¹⁹⁶ Stout, “Rorty on Religion and Politics.” p. 7.

¹⁹⁷ Stout, “Rorty on Religion and Politics.” p. 8.

Stout describes both of these alternatives as “monological” because they each “propose to set the terms of public deliberation in advance.”¹⁹⁸ The clear problem with this picture is that there is little hope for a satisfying solution. Indeed, as individuals on each side are epistemologically entitled to their beliefs and views, there is little reason for either side to quietly concede and allow their concerns to be stripped from public discussion. As long as the issue is understood in terms of such a dichotomy, there is little hope for any peaceful resolution.

The simple fact, however, is that secularism and theocracy need not be the only options. Indeed, as Stout explains, democracy avoids setting the terms of public deliberation in advance. Instead, it encourages dialogue and “an open-ended political culture in which citizens of various kinds hammer out their differences with one another as they go along.”¹⁹⁹ Such an alternative seems to be favourable to Rorty’s position for two reasons. First, it has the practical advantages of avoiding ostracizing members of a society. Secondly it has the theoretical advantage of not having to choose sides in a dichotomy for which there are no epistemological grounds from which to choose. Indeed, Rorty, “whose commitment to democracy is paramount,”²⁰⁰ may have some difficulty defending secularism if Stout is correct when stating that “the spirit of democracy, being dialogical, is at odds with both secularism and theocracy.”²⁰¹

Liberal democracy originated as a solution to the conflicts arising in societies marked by different religions and a plurality of comprehensive worldviews in respect to reality, the good life, and destiny. Among the core ideas of liberal democracy are “*equal protection* under the law for all people, *equal freedom* in law for all citizens, and *neutrality* on the part of the state with

¹⁹⁸ Stout, “Rorty on Religion and Politics.” p. 8.

¹⁹⁹ Stout, “Rorty on Religion and Politics.” p. 8.

²⁰⁰ Smith, p. 81.

²⁰¹ Stout, “Rorty on Religion and Politics.” p. 9.

respect to the diversity of religions and comprehensive perspectives.”²⁰² In addition to these core ideas there is, of course, the commitment to giving all law-abiding adult citizens equal voice in the governance of society, normally exercised by voting.²⁰³

The liberal commitment to neutrality means that “the state should not reward or penalize particular conceptions of the good life. Instead, it should provide a neutral framework within which different and potentially conflicting conceptions of the good can be pursued.”²⁰⁴ Many liberals see their account of legitimacy as committed to neutrality of aim, or justificatory neutrality, which means that “the liberal state should not do anything intended to favour or promote any particular comprehensive doctrine rather than any other.”²⁰⁵

New Approach

Jeffrey Stout and Nicholas Wolterstorff suggest an alternative to Rorty's problematic approach to dealing with the issue of religion in public. Keeping with the theme of democratic dialogue, both authors seem to recommend a much more dialectic approach to this controversy. Wolterstorff, for example, explains his confusion as to why, when in conflict with Carter's views on religion, Rorty does not “try to get inside Carter's way of thinking for a while, so as to see whether he couldn't get him to change his mind.”²⁰⁶ As Stout points out, “when Rorty discusses the role of religion in politics, he completely neglects the potential benefits of ad hoc immanent criticism in overcoming momentary impasses.”²⁰⁷ Indeed, “sincere believers are sometimes susceptible to

²⁰² Wolterstorff, “The Role of Religion in Political Issues.” pp. 69-70.

²⁰³ Wolterstorff, “The Role of Religion in Political Issues.” p. 70.

²⁰⁴ Will Kymlicka, “Liberal Individualism and Liberal Neutrality.” *Ethics*, Vol. 99, No. 4 (Jul., 1989), pp. 883-905. p. 883.

²⁰⁵ John Tomasi, *Liberalism Beyond Justice: Citizens, Society, and the Boundaries of Political Theory*. Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2001. p. 10.

²⁰⁶ Wolterstorff, “An Engagement with Rorty.” p. 136.

²⁰⁷ Stout, *Democracy and Tradition*. p. 90.

persuasion if their interlocutors are prepared to take the details of the Bible seriously.”²⁰⁸ If this attempt should fail, in the end, Rorty can simply declare his disagreement.

Wolterstorff, Stout and Rorty all seem to agree that two people can each be justified in holding different beliefs, “given the vocabularies, styles of reasoning, and evidence available to them in their respective contexts.”²⁰⁹ This is not to say, however, that dialogue is somehow useless. That is, to say that competing claims can both be justified is not to say that any and all claims can be justified. For example, Wolterstorff and Stout agree that we are no longer justified in holding our beliefs in “cases where we have adequate reason to doubt or reject them or where for some other reason (like culpable neglect of evidence) we are not doing our best as inquiring minds.”²¹⁰

In response to Rorty's insistence on attempting to silence religious believers on the issue of homosexuality and same-sex marriage, Stout explains his suspicion that, while some of the people who cite the Bible against the morality of homosexual activity may be simply masking their ill intentions, some are likely “sincere believers” trying to figure out how the Bible ought to be properly interpreted on this issue.²¹¹ This being the case, Stout suggests that the best way to move forward would be to “encourage them to have their say...and then challenge them on their own ground.”²¹²

Part of Stout's point here is to emphasize the value of having the reasons that are actually at work in citizens' decision making openly and publicly expressed, rather than kept private and left outside of public discussion. For indeed, “how can the rest of us challenge premises that are

²⁰⁸ Stout, “Rorty on Religion and Politics.” p. 14.

²⁰⁹ Stout, *Democracy and Tradition*. p. 232.

²¹⁰ Stout, *Democracy and Tradition*. p. 234.

²¹¹ Stout, “Rorty on Religion and Politics.” p. 13.

²¹² Stout, “Rorty on Religion and Politics.” p. 14.

left unexpressed?”²¹³ Rather than supporting the privatization of religion, particularly given his acceptance that religion will, no doubt, influence citizens' decisions, Rorty ought to avoid losing the chance to critically examine people's arguments by stopping the conversation before it even gets a chance to start.

Given the fact of pluralism, it is clear that no particular comprehensive doctrine can provide a publicly acceptable basis of political justice. The problem, however, is that a neutral solution is not always possible. Indeed, in a deeply plural society, consensuses are few. In *Religion As Conversation-stopper* Rorty admits that “when it comes to morals...every textbook, Scripture or teacher is offset by a competing textbook, Scripture or teacher.”²¹⁴ While the initial implication of this statement is meant to demonstrate how comprehensive religious and moral views are inappropriate in public, the fact is that no society can avoid making ‘moral’ decisions and carrying out actions that are ethically and religiously evaluable. Sometimes decisions must be made for which there are no neutral solutions; the decision of whether to support abortion or euthanasia, for example, and the relativist is limited in his ability to offer uncontroversial support for any particular worldview.

When it is possible for the government to remain neutral in a non-controversial sense then this seems to be the liberal democratic solution in a society of competing worldviews. When it comes to cases where neither neutrality of aim, nor neutrality of consequence is possible, the only sense in which a liberal democratic society can be neutral, it seems, is through a commitment to fair procedures that are not biased in favour of any worldview. Since no set of values can be given priority, the only ‘neutral’ way to make a decision in these complicated

²¹³ Stout, “Rorty on Religion and Politics.” p. 14.

²¹⁴ Rorty, “Religion As Conversation-Stopper.” p. 173.

cases is through a commitment to a process for negotiating conflicting values that is itself neutral. But, as Wolterstorff writes, there is already a perfectly admirable procedure in liberal democracies for reaching a decision on political issues when we find ourselves still disagreeing after we have debated -as we almost always do. “We take a vote.”²¹⁵

Allowing all citizens the opportunity to voice their views and cast a vote, regardless of their worldview, has the practical advantage of avoiding the disenfranchisement of citizens that one risks by treating them as though their views do not count. Indeed, for citizens it is one thing to have a controversial decision made by government based on majority rule, it is quite another to have their voices excluded from the public forum as the result of principles with which they do not agree.

The ideal form of government for an anti-foundationalist, it seems, would be a government that recognizes the epistemic plurality of a nation by refusing to adopt any particular worldview and, furthermore, accepts that any particular claim to pragmatism is, no doubt, contestable. This government avoids making controversial value claims altogether. “It doesn't tell anybody that they have to shape up.”²¹⁶ As Wolterstorff explains, “a liberal democracy survives as long as those who lose the vote think it's better to lose the vote than destroy the system.”²¹⁷ The survival of the system, then, does not depend on supporting any particular outcome.

Conclusion

The difficulty for Rorty comes in the form of a tension between Rorty the epistemologist and Rorty the individual, moral citizen. Rorty's epistemology supports this form of foundationless

²¹⁵ Wolterstorff, “An Engagement with Rorty,” p. 136.

²¹⁶ Wolterstorff, “An Engagement with Rorty,” p. 137.

²¹⁷ Wolterstorff, “An Engagement with Rorty,” p. 137.

democracy in which the government is structured such that it makes decisions without making value claims. His independent moral view, however, cannot resist peeking through when it comes to the discussion of religion and its role in the lives of citizens. The epistemological relativist cannot say which views are worth maintaining and which ought to be swept into the dustbin of history.²¹⁸

In *Postmodernist Bourgeois Liberalism* Rorty explains his support for liberal institutions as consistent with his epistemological, anti-foundational claims. In his discussion of the appropriate role and treatment of religion, Rorty proceeds to argue that the treatment of religion he argues for is somehow consistent with liberalism. What I hope to have demonstrated, however, is that Rorty's attempts to remove religion from the public sphere and to encourage particular forms of religious belief in favour of other views are a result of Rorty's particular worldview and are, therefore, inconsistent with his anti-foundational epistemology.

In a pluralist society, the benefit of liberalism is that it allows individuals to pursue their own individual conceptions of the good. Unfortunately, at times these views conflict with one another and decisions must be made for which there are no neutral solutions. While Rorty attempts to support a secularization of the public sphere in order to avoid such conflicts, Stout explains that such behaviour simply works to further polarize the political community, “a

²¹⁸ Swaine, p. xiv.

political community” he continues, in which polarization is a primary impediment to fruitful democratic action, such as that “on behalf of the poor and the oppressed.”²¹⁹

Stout and Wolterstorff suggest that a commitment to liberalism need not entail a commitment to setting out the terms of public debate ahead of time. Indeed, being dialogical in nature, a liberal democracy can remain unbiased by offering an equal value assessment of each individual's perspective through open dialogue and a commitment to the democratic procedure of voting. Leaving citizens free to voice their concerns, regardless of their sectarian nature, democracy can provide the government with a non-arbitrary and non-foundational reason for acting.

In the final instance, it seems that Rorty is guilty of allowing his personal worldview to infiltrate his anti-foundational understanding of liberal institutions. Although, perfectly free to present his personal opinion on this or that issue, Rorty does not clearly distinguish his personal views from what he attempts to set out as a foundationless support for liberal institutions. The liberal utopia Rorty envisions turns out to be a personal utopia, tainted by his own worldview and moral doctrine, making it unfit for a discussion claiming to have shed all foundations. Boffetti highlights the tension in Rorty's position well when he explains that, “although Rorty is on record as agreeing with Judith Shklar that liberalism means that “cruelty is the worst thing we do” and that the “redescription” of another's most central beliefs is about the worst form of

²¹⁹ Jeffrey Stout, “2007 Presidential Address: The Folly of Secularism.” *Journal of the American Academy of Religion*, Vol. 76, No. 3. 2008, (pp. 533-544). p. 540.

cruelty imaginable, he seems willing enough to visit such cruelty on college students who happen to wander into his classroom.”²²⁰

²²⁰ Boffetti, p. 29.

In Richard Rorty, “Universality and Truth.” Rorty explains how secularists, like himself, “are going to go right on trying to discredit you in the eyes of your children, trying to strip your fundamentalist religious community of dignity, trying to make your views seem silly rather than discussible.”

Conclusion

The issues surrounding the appropriate role of religion in public - particularly the potential consequences of untoward treatment of religious believers - are relevant regardless of whether one accepts that people are entitled to fundamental disagreements. For people can be expected to react to attempts to silence their concerns, regardless of whether one believes they are rationally entitled to them. Authors should think twice before publicly proclaiming their intentions to undermine religious authority as there is good reason to believe that such actions not only risk raising tensions and resulting in violence, but evidence suggests that such attempts turn out to have the exact opposite of intended effect.²²¹

While political life may arguably be less complicated if everyone abandoned religious belief, the fact is that there is no reason to expect politics to become any less entangled with religious concerns in the near future.²²² The fact that this is not about to change brings into question the utility of Richard Rorty's approach to discussing the appropriate role for religion in public life. If the majority of the public is likely to view Rorty's liberal ideal as hostile to their ways of life, then they are more likely to rally in opposition to him than to comply. The fact that Rorty is fully aware that individuals are epistemically entitled to disagree with his ideal makes it surprising that he does not foresee the counterproductive results that are most likely to unfold as a result of his proposed actions. Indeed, Rorty's failure to accurately account for the apparent state of permanence of religious belief in contemporary society leads him to propose a political ideal that is not only controversial, but simply unfeasible.

²²¹ This holds equally for religious writers as well, who should think twice before publicly proclaiming that their intentions are to undermine secular rights.

²²² Jeffrey Stout, "Rorty on Religion and Politics." p. 31.

What I have demonstrated is that, despite his efforts, Rorty has failed to remain harmonious across his various philosophical commitments. In particular, Rorty's discussions of politics and religion do not seem to fit well with his epistemological commitments and his support for positive practical consequences. Rorty's tendency to offer controversial value assessments and epistemically debatable characterizations of both 'religion' and 'pragmatism' is counter to his commitment to anti-foundationalism. The fact that people can reasonably disagree with what is essential to this or that "ism" makes Rorty's position difficult to defend. Indeed, with no objective standard from which to judge, Rorty has no claim to overrule the definitions of those who disagree with him.

In the end, Rorty has managed to present a highly contestable claim to an audience that can be largely anticipated to disagree with him. Nowhere closer to his secular ideal, there is reason to believe that the expression of Rorty's opinions are more likely to have added fuel to the fire of religious zealots than to have convinced his readers of the pragmatic appeal of liberal democracies. Indeed, Rorty's treatment of religion risks sharpening the divide between theists and atheists, encouraging the more moderate religious believers to side with the more fanatical in order to defend their faith.

Fortunately, Jeffrey Stout offers an appealing alternative to the double horned dilemma that Rorty's discussion presents. Rather than being forced to choose between secularism and theocracy in a deeply pluralistic, and religious society, a proper commitment to liberal democracy will allow all citizens to voice their concerns in the public arena, offering the opportunity for open dialogue and debate in the hopes of reaching mutual understanding or compromise. This alternate vision remains consistent with Rorty's epistemological commitments and can anticipate a much warmer public reception.

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