

AN ENGAGEMENT WITH RORTY

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§1. THE FINAL PARAGRAPH OF RICHARD RORTY'S ESSAY, "Relativism: Finding and Making," which now appears as the Introduction to his collection, *Philosophy and Social Hope* (1999), goes as follows:

I do not know how to argue the question of whether it is better to see human beings in [the] biologicistic way [advocated above] or to see them in a way more like Plato's or Kant's. So I do not know how to give anything like a conclusive argument for the view which my critics call 'relativism' and which I prefer to call 'antifoundationalism' or 'antidualism.' It is certainly not enough for my side to appeal to Darwin and ask our opponents how they can avoid an appeal to the supernatural. That way of stating the issue begs many questions. It is certainly not enough for my opponents to say that a biologicistic view strips human beings of their dignity and their self-respect. That too begs most of the questions at issue. I suspect that all that either side can do is to restate its case over and over again, in context after context. 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. (xxxii)

I agree—with a qualification that, though rhetorically small, is intellectually significant. Rather than saying that "all that either side can do is restate its case over and over again," I would say that, in disagreements of the sort that Rorty here refers to, this is all that either side can do *in the last resort*. Often there's a good deal of space between where a discussion begins and what's said in the last resort; and in that intervening space, we can usually do more than each speak our piece. We can take some fragment of our interlocutor's articulation of his perspective, hold it up against the facts, and convince even him that some revision is in order—sometimes. Or we can tease out the implications of something he said, declare in shocked tones that surely he would not want to hold this; and sometimes he will concede that he does indeed not want to hold that. It's my view that revisions thus induced will almost always be around the margins, however; in the last resort, the situation is almost always as Rorty describes it: all either side can do is restate its case over and over again in context after context. That's how things are now; I am of the view that that is how they will always be.

I do not know how Rorty fits together this picture of the depths of human disagreement with another equally prominent element in his

thought—namely, his hope for what he calls “universal intersubjective agreement.” By which of course he does not mean agreement achieved by any old means—killing off the other party is one way of achieving universal intersubjective agreement—but agreement achieved by the social practice of what he regularly calls “justification.” The two themes seem to me in tension with each other, if not contradiction. I myself have no hope for universal intersubjective agreement—or at least, no expectation. To say it again: I view our human condition as such that we must expect the endurance of such fundamental disagreements as those Rorty refers to; indeed, I think that one of John Rawls’ most perceptive comments was his observation that under conditions of freedom, such disagreements tend to multiply rather than disappear. It’s not the wicked prelates and oppressive princes who prevent us from coming to agreement.

But I am in danger now of falling into doing the very thing that I resolved not to do when I sat down to write out this talk. I resolved to resist using this occasion to respond to the many provocative things that Rorty has said about truth, justification, antirealism, and so forth, and to stick to the topic, “Religion and Democratic Culture: The Role of Faith in Public Discourse.” The point of my opening with that concluding paragraph from Rorty’s essay was not to point up an apparent inconsistency in his thought but to warn you in advance that you will be witnessing a live demonstration of the point made in the paragraph. Rorty is a Darwinian pragmatist; I am a Christian of a sort that I suppose most people would regard as relatively conservative on theological matters. You will witness some argumentative skirmishing taking place between us. But in the last resort, what you will witness are two profoundly different perspectives coming to expression. And I think that the fundamental question to which a liberal democratic society offers an answer is this: How can persons who embrace such profoundly different comprehensive perspectives as do Rorty and I on reality, human life, and the good, nonetheless live together as equals in a just, stable, and peaceful society?

§2. In his recent (unpublished) essay, “Religion after Onto-Theology: Reflections on Vattimo’s *Belief*,” consisting of remarks he made at the ceremony for his reception of the Eckhart Prize, Rorty says that he regrets having used “atheist” as a self-description in his previous writings. Not that he has undergone a conversion from atheism to faith; rather, the word “atheist” evokes the memory of epistemological and metaphysical controversies that he does not want to get into. Better to use the political term “anticlericalist” to describe his location in the controversies that he *does* want to enter.

Rorty sees religion in its institutionalized forms as a menace to liberal democratic society. Ecclesiastical institutions, he says, “despite all

the good they do—despite all the comfort they provide to those in need or in despair—are dangerous to the health of democratic societies, so dangerous that it would be best for them eventually to wither away” (4). The dangers posed to democracy by institutionalized religion are “particularly evident,” he says, in the present-day United States, where “the Christian fundamentalists whose support has become indispensable to right-wing American politicians are undermining the secularist, Jeffersonian, tradition in American culture” (4).

Rorty adds that anticlericalists like himself have a second reason “for hoping that institutionalized religion will eventually disappear.” They “think other-worldliness dangerous because, 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’ (Dewey, “A Common Faith,” in *Later Works*, vol. 9, p. 31).”

So what to do, given the menace to liberty and the quietism of institutional religion? Abolish religion from liberal democratic societies? No, that would be to over-reach. It’s not religion as such that’s a menace, but *institutionalized* religion. In order that democracy be safe from religion, it’s sufficient that religion be *privatized*. The “happy, Jeffersonian compromise that the Enlightenment reached with the religious . . . consists in privatizing religion—keeping it out of” the public square (*Philosophy and Social Hope*, 169). And to Stephen Carter’s protest that to privatize religion is to trivialize it, Rorty asks: why assume that the private is trivial? “Our family or love lives are private, nonpolitical and nontrivial. The poems we atheists write, like the prayers our religious friends raise, are private, nonpolitical and nontrivial.” In short, many of our private pursuits, so far from being trivial, give meaning to our lives (*P & SH*, 170).

This, so far, is eminently clear. Well, maybe not *eminently* clear. I find the public/private dualism both obscure and ideologically loaded; I myself try to avoid placing any weight on it. I am surprised to see Rorty, implacable enemy of dualisms, placing so much weight on this one. Granted that distinction, however, it’s all quite clear. I find that less true of that part of Rorty’s thought that we are now about to enter. What we will hear him saying is that if religion intrudes itself into debates on public policy, when the participants in those debates are not confined to religious people, it stops the discussion; for this reason too, religion should be privatized. What that actually comes to I find less than pellucid; so possibly I will be misinterpreting.

It may well be that the most famous sentence Rorty has thus far written is the following, from the essay to which I have just now been referring: “The main reason religion needs to be privatized is that, in political discussion with those outside the relevant religious

community, it is a conversation-stopper” (“Religion as Conversation-Stopper,” in *Philosophy and Social Hope*, 171). To give credit where credit is due, Rorty was merely tweaking a comment of Stephen Carter, which went like this: “One good way to end a conversation . . . is to tell a group of well-educated professionals that you hold a political position (preferably a controversial one, such as being against abortion or pornography) because it is required by your understanding of God’s will.”

I think that Carter has here offered an unusually flat-footed example of a religious argument for a political position. The speeches of Martin Luther King, Jr., were suffused with religion; I would be surprised if he ever said anything quite so flat-footed as that integration was required by his understanding of God’s will, period—though in the last resort, that was his view.

Be that as it may, however, what exactly is the problem with the reason Carter cites? It stops the conversation, says Rorty. Well, yes, for some people it does—though not, be it noted, for others. It wouldn’t stop it for me! By the same token, a Darwinian pragmatist reason tossed into a discussion by religious people might well stop the conversation. And why does the religious reason stop the conversation when it does? And so what? Recall that, as we saw at the very beginning of this talk, Rorty thinks conversation has to stop somewhere. And is it OK for Darwinian pragmatist reasons to stop conversation but not for religious reasons to do so? If so, why?

As to why Carter’s religious reason stops the conversation, Rorty says that in appealing to God’s will, one is making a comment about one’s private life in the context of a discussion about public policy. “The same goes,” he says, “for telling the group, ‘I would never have an abortion’ or ‘Reading pornography is about the only pleasure I get out of life these days.’ In these examples, as in Carter’s, the ensuing silence masks the group’s inclination to say, ‘So what? We weren’t discussing your private life; we were discussing public policy. Don’t bother us with matters that are not our concern’” (171).

I do not understand this. Clearly Rorty wants us to generalize to religious reasons in general. So in what way does King’s offering a religious reason in favor of outlawing segregation resemble revealing that one’s only pleasure nowadays comes from reading pornography, so that both are comments about one’s private life?

So far as I can make out, Rorty’s reference in this passage to privacy is really a throw-away reference; it’s not doing any work. A good example of my point about the uselessness in such discussions of the public/private dualism! My surmise is that the problem Rorty sees with offering religious reasons for political positions is not that such reasons are “private,” in any clear sense of that term, but that they are not shared by the citizenry in general.

Here is my reason for thinking that that is what is really going on. Rorty refers to Carter's critique, in Carter's own words now, of "the effort by the contemporary liberal philosophers to create a conversational space in which individuals of very different viewpoints can join dialogic battle, in accord with a set of dialogic conventions that all can accept." And then Rorty goes on to say the following about Carter's position:

Carter here gives a good description both of the least common denominator of the positions of Rawls and Habermas, the two most prominent social thinkers of the present day, and of the central secularizing message of the Enlightenment. He is quite right to say that 'all these efforts to limit the conversation to premises held in common would exclude religion from the mix.' But he thinks that such exclusion is unjust.

Such exclusion, however, is at the heart of the Jeffersonian compromise, and it is hard to see what more just arrangement Carter thinks might take the place of that compromise. Contemporary liberal philosophers think that we shall not be able to keep a democratic political community going unless the religious believers remain willing to trade privatization for a guarantee of religious liberty, and Carter gives us no reason to think they are wrong (170–71).

I infer that when Rorty speaks here of "trading privatization" for something, he just means that one limits "the conversation to premises held in common" when talking outside one's circle of fellow believers.

§3. Thus far, my attempt at exposition. It's extremely tempting for a religious person such as myself to begin by protesting the one-sided and tendentious character of Rorty's narrative of the relation of religion to freedom. Yes indeed, religion is sometimes a menace to the freedoms of a liberal society. But the full story of how we won the freedoms we presently enjoy would give prominent place to the role of religion in the struggle; the good that religion does is not confined to providing, in Rorty's words, comfort "to those in need or in despair." Has the prominent role of religion in the American civil rights movements already been forgotten? Has its prominent role in the revolutions in South Africa, Poland, Romania, and East Germany already passed into amnesia? Then too, a full and fair narrative would have to give prominent attention to the great murderous secularisms of the twentieth century: Nazism, Communism, nationalism. The truth is that pretty much anything that human beings care deeply about can be a menace to freedom—including, ironically, caring deeply about freedom. I'll get to that point later.

In short, even if religion is to be judged by those works that the Darwinian pragmatist finds praiseworthy, we need a much more nuanced narrative than Rorty gives us. Nonetheless, I do not think that harping on this point will get us very far in the present discussion. I'm

not going to argue that because religion has been such a good boy by Darwinian pragmatist standards, Rorty should adopt a more positive view of its place in a liberal democracy. And on the other hand, Rorty surely knows the more balanced story—though why he doesn't tell it, I do not know. He just thinks that, whatever good religion might do from the standpoint of a Darwinian pragmatist, it nonetheless also harbors danger, and that, all things considered, we can do better without it. Or more precisely, we can do better without its institutionalized and public manifestations.

§4. So let me begin at a different point. I find that Rorty's comments about the role of religion in the democratic polity breathe a very different spirit from that of his comments on every other topic that I have read him on. What Rorty praises in those other passages is imagination, openness, re-description, self-creation; here, the talk is all about *limits*. Religion is to *limit* itself to the private; the conversation is to be *limited* to premises held in common.

What does it mean, to say that the conversation is to be limited to premises held in common? In the conversation between Rorty and me today, are we limiting ourselves to premises held in common? How would we tell? Rorty and I each entered this conversation believing what we did, and we just started talking about the topic in hand. We didn't worry our heads over premises held in common—or at least I didn't. We do each probe for some points of agreement which we can use to present to the other person that he will regard as a *reductio ad absurdum* of something he said. But I don't suppose that that qualifies as limiting the conversation to premises held in common.

And does Rorty himself come even close to living up to his own demand? Consider that recent collection of his, *Philosophy and Social Hope*. One would have to be obtuse indeed not to discern that the arguments he gives for one and another social position in the book are, in great measure, based on his Darwinian pragmatism. They are not based on premises held in common. And the book is addressed, as are all of Rorty's books, to the public in general—not just to his fellow Darwinian pragmatists.

In my own book of almost twenty years ago now, *Until Justice and Peace Embrace*, I discussed some of the same issues of freedom and equality that Rorty discusses in *Philosophy and Social Hope*, but from a Christian perspective. Though offered to the public, I made no pretense of limiting my argumentation to premises held in common. I think that what I did in my book is quite OK in a liberal democratic society; I think that what Rorty did in his is also quite OK. My guess is that Rorty agrees with me on both points. But if so, I do not see how that fits with his comments about limiting ourselves to common premises when speaking in public.

Rorty says to Carter that he, Rorty, doesn't see what more just arrangement there could be for political discussion than limiting our conversation to premises held in common. Here's a more just arrangement: letting people say what they want to say on political issues and letting them argue for their positions as they think best to argue for them, provided they conduct themselves with the requisite virtues. They will soon find that if they want to be persuasive, they cannot just say "Here I stand," but will have to fetch around for arguments that persons of different fundamental convictions from theirs find cogent. There is one sentence in Rorty's essay on conversation-stopping in which he inadvertently makes exactly this point. Here it is: "moral decisions that are to be enforced by a pluralist and democratic state's monopoly of violence are best made by public discussion in which voices claiming to be God's, or reason's, or science's, are put on a par with everybody's else's" (172). Exactly! Permit the different voices!

Allow me a parenthetical remark here. Rorty and those who share his position on these matters—Rawls, Audi, Larmore, and so forth—often talk as if, when a Jewish person offers a Jewish perspective on some issue of social policy, there's nothing the Christian can do with what's said, that when a Christian offers a Christian perspective, there's nothing the Darwinian pragmatist can do with what's said, and so forth. This seems to me not at all how it goes. What we all do—in politics, in philosophy, wherever—is make allowances. Not all who heard King's "I Have a Dream" speech shared his religion; those who did not, made allowances. They were then moved and inspired along with everyone else.

§5. Keeping the conversation going is obviously a matter of supreme social worth for Rorty. He assumes that the only way to keep it going is for the participants to limit themselves to premises held in common; that's why he urges such limitation. I've been saying that I don't know what it is to limit oneself in a discussion to premises held in common, that in any case, I find it odd to hear Rorty talking about imposing limits, and that, so far as I can see, he has not been following his own advice.

Now of course it's true that conversations do sometimes come to a halt at a point where we find ourselves still disagreeing but without having anything further to say by way of objection to the other person's position that she hasn't already taken account of to her own satisfaction. It's the point Rorty made in the passage I quoted at the beginning. When it comes to public political discussions, however, Rorty wants to forestall in advance the conversation's coming to such a halt. I have been expressing my skepticism about the strategy he proposes for achieving that. But what about the goal itself? What's so bad about reaching an impasse in political discussions?

Rorty represents himself as being at a loss to know what to say should Stephen Carter declare that abortion must under no circumstances be legalized because all abortion is against the will of God—other than that Carter should stop talking about his private life and instead say something that's relevant to politics. I, in turn, am at a loss to know why Rorty would not instead 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; and then, if he is unsuccessful at that, declare that he, Rorty, disagrees with him. He, Rorty, does after all disagree with Carter. He does not believe that it's against the will of God to legalize any abortion. What's so bad about his saying that, and thus winding up disagreeing with Carter in public?

There is, after all, a perfectly familiar, and to my mind admirable, procedure in liberal democracies for reaching a decision on some political issue when we find ourselves still disagreeing after we have debated—as we almost always do. We take a vote. In Rorty, Rawls, Audi, Larmore, and their cohorts, there is an implicit dislike for a procedure that I regard as belonging to the very essence of a democracy, viz., voting. I do not understand it. Of course the voting procedure had better be a fair one; often it isn't. But if it is fair, then what's wrong with it? Conversation-stopping is not some appalling evil perpetrated upon an otherwise endlessly-talkative public by religious people. Stopped conversation is an all-pervasive feature of political debate in a democracy; and voting is a procedure for arriving at a decision of the body when conversation is stopped.

§6. Let me conclude with a somewhat different, though related, point. In all candor I must say that I, as a religious person, discern an illiberal, sometimes even menacing, tone in Rorty's position and argument. The message that comes through loud and clear is that religion must shape up if it's to be tolerated in our liberal democracy. Its shaping up must take the form of privatizing itself.

Why must it shape up? Have religious people been threatening to overthrow our liberal democracy here in the United States? Or without doing anything so drastic as that, have they been depriving Rorty and his fellow Darwinian pragmatists of a vote and of access to the courts? Nothing of the sort. It has to shape up because some religious people advocate a pattern of liberty and restrictions on liberty that the Darwinian pragmatists disagree with, and because, when religious people go public with their religious reasons for public policy, they stop the conversation with some members of the public.

By obvious parity of argument, Darwinian pragmatism ought also to be privatized. Darwinian pragmatists advocate a pattern of liberty and restrictions on liberty that some religious people disagree with; and when Darwinian pragmatists go public with their philosophical reasons

for public policy, they stop the conversation with certain members of the public. So why does Rorty say that religion has to shape up without also saying that Darwinian pragmatism has to shape up? Why isn't sauce for the goose, sauce for the gander?

My guess is that the fundamental reason for his difference of treatment is to be found in the idea of democracy that he is operating with; and more generally, I am inclined to think that, at bottom, it is the different ideas of democracy that he and I employ when thinking about these issues that leads to our divergent views on religious reasons for political positions in the public square. It's my view that it is the genius of liberal democracy to guarantee certain basic rights and liberties to its citizens and resident aliens, and to assure access by all normal adults to fair voting procedures. Given that basic framework, it accepts all "comprehensive perspectives"—to use Rawls' term—as they come. It does not tell religious people that they have to shape up by privatizing their religion, neither does it tell Darwinian pragmatists that they have to shape up. It doesn't tell anybody that they have to shape up. Come as you are. The results of some votes and some judicial decisions will make some religious people happy and some Darwinian pragmatists unhappy; the results of other votes and decisions will reverse the distribution of happiness and unhappiness. That's the way it goes in a democracy. A liberal democracy survives as long as those who lose the vote think it's better to lose the vote than destroy the system. Its survival does not depend on making anybody shape up to anything other than the formal requirements of the system itself.

Rorty is working with a different idea of democracy. He's thinking of democracy as Dewey thought of it: what "democratic institutions are good for," Rorty says, is "making possible the invention of new forms of human freedom, taking liberties never taken before" (*Philosophy and Social Hope*, 126). Accordingly, it's not for its service to some end that Rorty praises democracy; rather, he affirms "Dewey's exaltation of democracy for its own sake and of growth for its own sake." He adds that Dewey's exaltation is "as fruitful as it is fuzzy." But lest we think fuzziness a bad thing, he immediately adds that "the fuzziness that Dewey shared with Emerson is emblematic of what Wallace Stevens and Harold Bloom call 'the American Sublime'" (126).

In short, the reason Rorty wants to privatize religion is not that religion in the public domain somehow menaces liberal democracy understood as a certain political arrangement; he wants to privatize it because all-too-often, in his judgment, religion in public opposes the Deweyan vision of democracy. It threatens the American Sublime.

If Rorty had his way, the elementary and secondary schools of American society would socialize their students into the American Sublime; likewise, it would be the American Sublime that would be set before

our college students for their imaginative embrace. Let me quote Rorty's lyrical hymn of praise to Dewey's view of American education. It was Dewey's view that the socialization of American children in school should consist

in acquiring an image of themselves as heirs to a tradition of increasing liberty and rising hope. Updating Dewey a bit, we can think of him as wanting the children to come to think of themselves as proud and loyal citizens of a country that, slowly and painfully, threw off a foreign yoke, freed its slaves, enfranchised its women, restrained its robber barons and licensed its trade unions, liberalized its religious practices, broadened its religious and moral tolerance, and built colleges in which 50 per cent of its population could enroll—a country that numbered Jefferson, Thoreau, Susan B. Anthony, Eugene Debs, Woodrow Wilson, Walter Reuther, Franklin Delano Roosevelt, Rosa Parks and James Baldwin among its citizens. Dewey wanted the inculcation of this narrative of freedom and hope to be the core of the socializing process. (121–22)

Do you understand why I as a religious person find this menacing—why it sounds to me like yet one more example of Big Brother trying to get us all to shape up, not this time around to get us all to shape up into becoming good compliant Nazis or good compliant Communists or good compliant nationalists, rather, to get us all to shape up into becoming good compliant Darwinian pragmatists? I am opposed to a government and a state school system that tries to make us all good Darwinian pragmatists, because I am opposed to a government and a state school system that tries to make us good adherents of any comprehensive perspective whatsoever. I do not want the Darwinian pragmatist telling me that my religion should not be expressed in institutional and public form; I will make up my own mind about that. It was for everybody to be free from all such governmental intrusion that the ideal of a liberal democracy emerged from the seedbed of the religious wars of Europe in the late seventeenth century and early eighteenth. It was to be free from such governmental intrusion that religious people fought alongside others for liberal democracy. It was for such freedom that their blood was spilled.

§7. “The American Sublime.” I think I hear religious overtones in such talk. I am not one of those who argue that, deep down, everybody is really religious, and that the option before each human being is never anything other than *which* religion. I want no part of charging all self-professed atheists with false consciousness. But without violating that principle, I must say that when Rorty talks about his commitment to democracy, the rhetoric does strike me as sounding a definitely religious tone. I do not want the government pressing the Darwinian pragmatist's religion of the American Sublime on me and my children, any more than Rorty

wants the government pressing *my* religious Sublime on him and his children.

It remains my conviction that Rorty with his Sublime, and I with mine, can and should live together in our American liberal democracy without *either* of us demanding that the other shape up so as to conform to our own Sublime.