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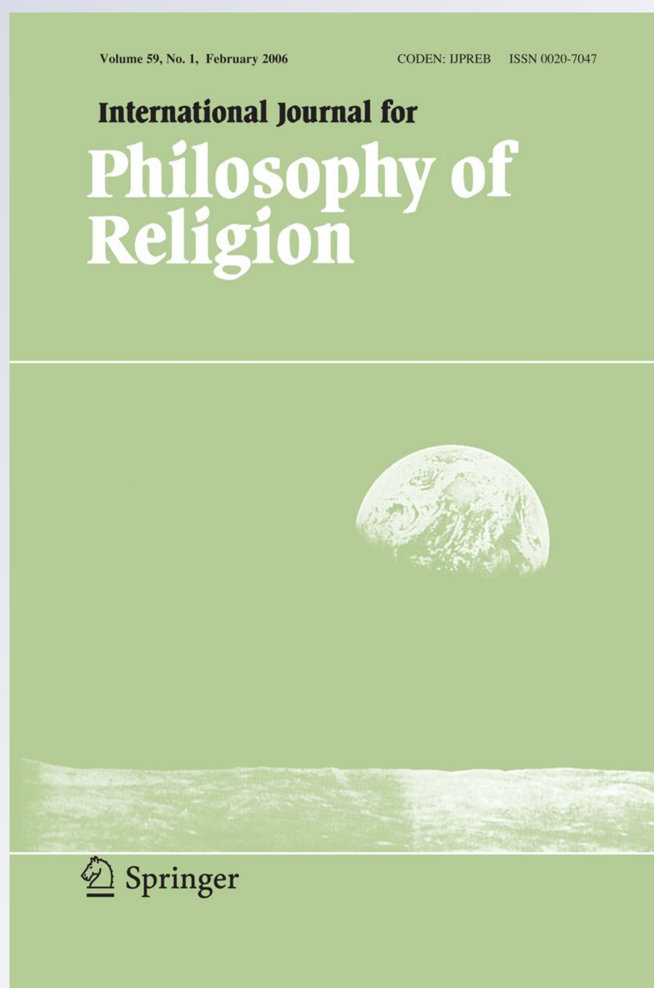

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ARTICLE

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Abstract This article offers a review of Richard Rorty's attempts to come to terms with the role of religion in our public and intellectual life by tracing the key developments in his position, partially in response to the ubiquitous criticisms of his distinction between private and public projects. Since Rorty rejects the possibility of dismissing religion on purely epistemic grounds, he is determined to treat it, instead, as a matter of politics. My suggestion is that, in this respect, Rorty's position is best construed as that of a humanist rather than a post-modernist. Ultimately, it appears that, in his view, the positive element of religion—i.e. the idea of religion as a social gospel—has been absorbed and transformed into a utopian striving which humanists associate with the ideal of democracy. Hence, in this regard, religion can be considered obsolete. Yet, without explicitly invoking the usual epistemic grounds, Rorty's arguments for excluding religion from the public sphere remain rather thin, and an interest in reforming rather than excluding religion would have been more consistent with his general outlook.

Keywords Humanism · Pragmatism · Religion · Post-modernism

At the turn of the previous century, Rorty's grandfather, Walter Rauschenbusch, argued, with intelligence and passion, that the Christian church had an obligation to become actively involved in the political shaping of our social reality. To be more precise, he believed that it was imperative for the church's interventions into our public life to be guided by the true spirit of Christianity. The difference between these two formulations is an important one. An erudite historian, Rauschenbusch was quite aware

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that the church had never been particularly shy when it came to promoting its own political interests. In fact, he argues that the clerical fascination with power corrupted the church and made it complicit with the social apparatus of oppression and injustice (Rauschenbusch 2007, pp. 153–155); with the institutions of faith coming to resemble more and more the apparatus of secular power, which they were originally intended to rectify (pp. 157–159). As a result, while railing against this or that particular evil, the church, for the most part "has accepted as inevitable the general social system under which the world was living at the time" (p. 128), resulting in "a startling absence of any thorough and far-seeing determination or effort to transform and Christianize the social life of humanity" (p. 129). Those calling for radical social transformation had usually been reminded of the unworthiness of material things and advised to attend instead to the state of their souls: since desire for a better material lot is undoubtedly a sign of a soul consumed by cupidity. Thus, when it came to challenging the established order of things churches have had a tendency to become downright otherworldly.

As Rauschenbusch saw it, however, the concern with the otherworldly as well as the exclusive emphasis on personal religion were signs of a religious and social decline (pp. 137, 20), whereby "the force of religion was exerted to lift men out of their social relations, instead of bringing them into normal relations" (p. 142). In the early Christian communities, he argues, the structure of the church was not tailored to service and worship but to "the administration of the common life" (p. 106) within a network of mutual support (p. 108). This type of social organization, for Rauschenbusch, expressed the inherently democratic nature of the true Christian spirit, which takes equality to be the essential basis of morality because, "healthful human relations seem to run only on horizontal lines" (p. 203). And the mission of Christianity, on Rauschenbusch's view, was to establish such healthful relationships in this earthly existence by maintaining the determination of the original prophetic tradition to "stand for the rights of the helpless" (p. 9). He believed, accordingly, that in the twentieth century, the vocation of the church would be found in opposing the "materialism and mammonism" of the existing [capitalist] social order, which treats human being as a *thing* (p. 300). For, he says, there is "no doubt that the spirit of Christianity has more affinity for a social system based on solidarity and human fraternity than for one based on selfishness and mutual antagonism" (p. 320). In short, Rauschenbusch was hoping that, in the century to come, religion would deliver us from injustice by lifting "the social question to a religious level by faith and spiritual insight" (p. 332). In an essay titled "Buds that Never Opened," contributed to the centennial edition of Rauschenbusch's work, his grandson, Richard Rorty, looking at the present state of affairs, regretfully avows that "Christianity has probably missed its chance" (Rorty 2007a, p. 349).

Taken in earnest, Rorty's statement appears somewhat enigmatic. For one thing, Rorty does not deny that Christianity *has* (or at least had) a potential to fuel positive social transformation. He stands ready to acknowledge that the work of some theologians has promoted the struggle for justice (1999, p. 206) and that our very democratic values owe much to the Christian ideals (2007a, p. 350). In fact, at least on one prior occasion, he suggested that, insofar as "Christianity" is understood in terms of an appeal for social justice, "that word still names a powerful force working for human decency and human equality" (1999, p. 205). So, in what sense has Christianity missed its chance? Surely it had missed countless chances: one is tempted to say, more chances

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than it had taken. But, in spite of this, the undertow of social gospel has persevered thus far, leaving one to wonder why it should finally fizzle out at the start of the new millennium. What is being signaled by Rorty's statement? A crisis of Christianity? A crisis of religion? Or a crisis of social justice? To begin unraveling this little puzzle we shall turn to examining Rorty's stance on religion; and will do so in a somewhat unorthodox fashion: by beginning with what others say about Rorty before letting Rorty speak for himself.

1.

Commentators sympathetic to Rorty generally focus on his commitment to pluralism and anti-foundationalism which, at least theoretically, suggest a possibility of productive exchanges between the believers and non-believers. In the intellectual climate where the advocates of atheism proselytize with the fierceness of firebrand preachers, Rorty's insistence on the individual's right to believe what they will is unusual and refreshing. Admittedly, Rorty is no champion of religion; instead he emerges as the spokesman for the rights of the private, the unshared, and the imaginative vis-à-vis the public, the objective, and the universal (Tarbox 1997, p. 317; Soneson 1997, p. 299). Yet, from his perspective, the irony of the agon between the acolytes of scientism and the religious fundamentalists becomes immediately apparent: both are, ultimately, fundamentalists, hankering (in their different ways) for the authority of "something big, powerful, and non-human" (Rorty 1989, p. 16; 1999, p. 157; 2007c, p. 29), for some set of shared principles to which all of us, despite our differences, owe an unconditional allegiance. Both are hoping for a kind of epistemic trump-card that would render conversation and negotiation with other human beings unnecessary.[1]

Rorty's advice to the fundamentalists is to recognize the difference between "projects of social cooperation and projects of individual self-development" (2007c, p. 28) and to keep the two separate. We are entitled to romanticize our relationship to something greater—be it scientist's truth or a worshipper's deity—but we have no ethical right to impose our private fascinations onto the general public (ibid., p. 29; 1999, p. 157). Rorty, then, is not against religion; instead he is content to treat religion as being on par with poetry (2007c, p. 28), as a possible source of personal inspiration which, like all the other inspirational sources, may be indispensable to some and entirely uninteresting to others. Ultimately, Rorty simply wants us to recognize that, while some of us have a right to care deeply about religion, others are equally entitled to not have "a view about God" at all (1982, p. 98).

Now, in principle, a sword this sharp should cut both ways. Those who feel an itch to duke it out over matters divine could all be set a-sailing on the same ship, with Dennett and Ratzinger at the helm; while the rest of us continue to go about their daily business: dissecting frogs, playing ball, or musing over passages from St. Luke. But that, of course, would be a futile dream. For, as Rorty himself realizes all

[1] Dann puts an ethical spin on this point when he says that that a fundamentalist hopes for something big and non-human to take his side "in the struggle with other people" (p. 54).

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too clearly (2007b, p. 30), the problem of religious belief, at this point in time, is a matter of politics, not of epistemic virtues. The right to a private belief which Rorty so graciously concedes to the religious is already a right which they have, with the nagging from the crusading atheists being more of a tease than a threat. In fact, one could argue, it is this ultimately harmless nagging which ensures that, within the religious community itself, the balance of power remains permanently shifted towards the militant wing. Christianity, for one, is known to thrive under persecution, whether real or imagined; and without the secular opposition, the more feisty among the faithful may have a harder time convincing their brethren that religion is thoroughly oppressed in a country where religion is favored by tax and military exemptions, while the only media outlet secured for atheism is the comedy channel. In short, a religious zealot has nothing to gain from Rorty's compromise, and the neutrality of the public space is unequivocally a victory for the atheist, since "atheist" is the proper name for the public space that excludes religion. At the same time, Rorty's proposal is insulting to those whose labors in ameliorative and humane public projects are undertaken explicitly in the spirit of one or another gospel. For they see no reason why their sincere creed should be any worse off than many other ethical commitments not shared by the entire populace.

The point is by no means lost on Rorty's critics.[2] As Audi once pointed out in a relevant context, there is no question of whether we can mix religion and politics; they are mixed (2007c, p. 38). Those who, like Audi, are wary of the dangers that stem from infusing political action with a religious motivation, find it prudent to advise restraint as opposed to a wholesale withdrawal of religion from politics.[3] Yet, to a religious thinker like Wolterstorff, even such mild-tempered advocacy of (religious) restraint appears entirely unwarranted. To begin with, Wolterstorff regards as an outdated prejudice the idea that religion is somehow more dangerous politically than any other cause that people strongly believe in (1997b, p. 178; 2003, p. 133). In a liberal society, people are often committed to conflicting moral visions, without being required (or able) to supply an articulate (secular) justification for their beliefs (1997, pp. 86, 163). To deny such people a public voice or a vote, he says, would be thoroughly undemocratic (1997, p. 161). This is a powerful point since the concept of democracy does seem to imply a commitment to getting along even when no agreement is in the offing, and even with those who refuse to volunteer the kinds of explanations that we would ideally like to hear. Deciding things by a vote, after all, is a procedure for people who cannot agree. And while someone who is citing a religious belief appears to invite

[2] And even his friends, like Dann wonder about the reasons why "the religious language need fade away in order to have a truly cultured and liberal society" (p. 47).

[3] It is far from clear that the arguments for restraint can fare much better in practical terms. Audi's suggestion that religious ideals can be promoted albeit not by political means (2007c, p. 68), as well as his admonition that acquiring the knowledge required for responsible political participation may cut short the time devoted to one's religious duties (ibid., p. 69), seem a bit theoretical in an untoward sense. What are the proper limits of the political? And which political figures are concerned to acquire the requisite knowledge? Can we say *what* knowledge is requisite for a responsible participation in contemporary politics? Audi's suggestion that a person acting for religious reasons should be obliged to supply at least one secular one (2007a, p. 123) is equally question-begging. Should it be a reason that is entirely compelling in its own right? If so, then in difficult and hotly contested matters no party is ever in command of such reasons. And if not, then what is the point of adding a half-hearted secular reason to a wholehearted religious motivation?

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a special kind of scrutiny, this does not imply that such scrutiny is more warranted in their case than in the case of an average person; and, regardless of the outcome of such scrutiny, we have no more right to disenfranchise such a person than we would any other person who has no articulate neutral grounds for their moral and political beliefs. The suggestion that such disenfranchisement should be self-imposed in the case of the religious does not change the nature of the problem.

Wolterstorff's second concern is with the very idea of a neutral ground. Aside from the requirements of basic civility (1997b, p. 180; 2003, p. 135), it is far from clear that there is some obvious principle of epistemic restraint in the name of which we could rightly demand from people to withhold their opinion or (insofar as we require secular reasons) to misrepresent their reasons for holding it. The liberal dream of establishing such a ground (1997a, p. 69; 1997b, p. 166), according to Wolterstorff, comes from a misplaced desire for some overarching community that would trump the divergent interest of existing and often competing groups within the population (1997a, p. 109). The leading liberal proposals fail to convince him, for not only do they appear to be at odds with the general will which they tend to invoke as the ultimate source of authority (ibid., p. 98), but the very form of society which they envision as paradigmatically liberal is "*nowhere near* being exemplified *anywhere*" (ibid., p. 158). Thus, the liberal tramples upon the fragmented community's right to an ideological self-determination in the name of a purely theoretical and poorly defined vision of a utopian commonality. Such commitment, as Wolterstorff is quick to point out, is especially problematic in Rorty's case, who appears to subordinate his advocacy of the right to be different to the normative hope for the "universal intersubjective agreement" (2003, p. 130).

Thus, the right to an individual view remains sovereign—but only in private; whereas the public sphere is governed by the demands of sharedness under the guise of solidarity. We receive the freedom of conscience and perhaps also the freedom of expression, at least as long as this expression does not place any demands on others—i.e. as long as it doesn't become a political expression. The distinction between the public and the private, then, is a politically charged one. To avoid the specious segregation which would banish the private unshared interests from the public sphere, we could try to reinterpret Rorty's distinction more generously, stipulating that one is entitled to public expression *always*, as long as the view expressed stems from the truly private, rather than corporate, structures of belief. Thus, one's personal fascinations would be fully acknowledged in public as a wayward yet salutary contribution to the pluralistic discourse, but only as long as they remained strictly individual, instead of stemming from some recognizable group identity. In other words, a spiritual commitment would be welcome, while all forms of organized religion would be checked at the door. Such a stance would constitute a significant departure from the earlier formulation of the private/public distinction, but it is a stance towards which Rorty seems to have drifted over time (Rorty 2003).

Yet, his religious individualism (if we are permitted to call it that) has drawn almost as much fire from Rorty's critics as the original suggestion to keep religion out of the public sphere altogether. Some commentators place the emphasis on the guiding role of the religious community in helping individuals interpret their spiritual commitments in a way that sheds light on the nature of their real interests (Vroom 1997, pp. 342, 348). But a stronger line of argument defers to the fact that for many believers religion

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is inseparable from a communal identity, since it is the community, the church, and not the individual, which constitutes the body of faith. For a more traditional philosopher of a skeptical bent the objection presents no difficulty whatsoever; in fact, it pinpoints the exact nature of the problem: mystical communalism of this sort is precisely the kind of unintelligible nonsense that entitles us to discount religion in a science-based and enlightened discourse. Rorty, however, cannot help himself to this tough-minded stance. Instead, he is obliged to "muddle through" (Rorty 1991, p. 67) and attempt to enchant us away from the promise of faith by a different promise.

Viewed from the communitarian vantage, Rorty's commitments are not particularly difficult to place. They are quite typical of what Taylor describes as the disenchanted modernistic outlook.[4] There is an emphasis on individual responsibility (Taylor 2007, p. 541) and a commitment to "mutual respect and service" (ibid., p. 165) with intention to promote security and prosperity (ibid., p. 166) among the fundamentally equal members of the polity (ibid., p. 168). These commitments, moreover, are accompanied by the trademark pathos of maturity (cf. ibid., p. 565), famously exemplified by Freud's somewhat shallow account of religion as childishness (Freud 1970, p. 45), echoed in Rorty's view that religion attests to a "debilitating lack of human self-confidence" (Smith 2005, p. 86). Similarly, when Taylor describes James's account of religion in terms of a dialectical "interplay of inspiration and banalization" (Taylor 2002, p. 20), wherein powerful experiences of select individuals become joined to the "spirit of corporate dominion" (James 1902, p. 337) and institutionalized so that they could be lived by others "in a kind of secondhand way" (Taylor 2002, p. 5), Rorty's distinction between private inspiration and organized worship is not far off.

As Taylor points out, the emphasis on personal religion has always been interwoven with a move towards secularism (2002, p. 13), since the retreat from the intrinsically social enchanted world created the possibility of a disengaged individual existence for those content to dwell in their self-sufficient private realm (Taylor 2007, p. 42). On the downside, it created a secular "structure without moral boundaries" (ibid., p. 52), from which there is no escape and against which there is no appeal. Instead of interpreting her moral commitments in terms of a relationship to the other members of an organically constituted community, a contemporary individual exists in an anonymous public space, governed by abstract laws, where human relationships are constituted by what Taylor calls "the stranger sociability" (ibid., p. 368). Deprived of its public significance, privatized spirituality, in turn, tends "towards feel-good and the superficial" (2002, p. 89), with the seriousness of ethical commitment supplanted by the mildly exhibitionistic concern with authenticity and a type of non-judgmental "soft relativism" (2002, p. 89).

By Rorty's lights, all of this is just as it should be, bringing us to the third group of criticisms: those which charge Rorty with a lack of social consciousness, which results in a narrow, aestheticist, view of spirituality oblivious to the socially enabling role of religious institutions. On these accounts, Rorty simply appears to be too postmodernist to care. Thus, Doak worries that Rorty's severing of "personal fulfillment and public obligation" (p. 151) will result in an abandonment of politics in favor of

[4] Taylor's analysis has nothing to do with Rorty; it just happens to fit him well.

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aestheticized private fulfillment (ibid., p. 153). This concern is echoed by Stout, who feels that Rorty's preoccupation with the search for a private perfection results in "a dangerously myopic moral vision" (p. 230) which remains oblivious to the suffering of the less fortunate and the obligations that we bear towards them. His approach, in this regard, is contrasted to that of Cornel West (Doak 2007, p. 151), who is simultaneously committed to a form of pragmatism that "keeps track of social misery" (West 1999, p. 185) and accords religion a significant role in trying to alleviate the pervasive suffering and injustice. On West's view, the idea that "intense conflicts of interest can be overcome by means of proper education and civil conversation" (ibid., p. 184) simply won't cut it. But that, of course, is precisely the kind of melioristic hope that, to Rorty's mind, should provide the exclusive foundation of enlightened secular discourse. His is what West designates as the "professional reformism for comfortable, cultivated, and concerned liberals" (ibid., p. 153).

All across the spectrum, Rorty's critics hasten to remind him of the kind of juncture between religion, politics, and social responsibility that was captured so well in the writings of his grandfather. For the most part, they feel that the public dialogue about the vexing questions that beset us would benefit from the inclusion of a religious perspective, despite the fact that many of the participants may not share it (Dann 2006, p. 175). After all we must be able to talk across intellectual contexts (Van Huyssteen 2007, p. 462). It's a poor excuse to say that the language game of religion is not shared by all members of the society, for neither are the language games of democracy or science, which are, nonetheless, not disenfranchised on that account (Reece 2001, p. 219). Different communities and different language games have different standards of justification and intellectual responsibility; and religious communities have their own (ibid., p. 213); that, however, doesn't entitle us to pretend that these differences render conversation impossible. As Jeffrey Robbins put it, "we had better learn to talk about religion" unless we are to be guilty of the very thing that Rorty had accused the religious of doing—namely, "cutting the conversation short" (2010, p. xviii).

2.

The publicity received by Rorty's post-modernist affectations often tends to eclipse some of his less flashy substantial commitments. Surely, when Rorty says that "hope for social justice is … the only basis for a worthwhile human life" (1999, p. 204) we are hearing more than an echo of his grandfather's concern with kindness and human dignity. His politics, however, are neither inspirational nor prophetic. Thus, while Stout (2001, p. 229) and West (p. 153) attribute our inability to imagine any full-blown credible alternatives to the present social order as a sign of spiritual crisis, Rorty is content to treat it as an adventitious cultural circumstance, rather than a political failure of nerve (1989, p. 182). His own recipe for change is bound up with localized piecemeal political engagement, and he is extremely suspicious of any attempts "to philosophize one's way into political relevance" (1998, p. 94). Attempting such a fit, on his view, results in the substitution of "cultural politics" for real politics, to the immense satisfaction of those in power (ibid., pp. 14, 139). To be effective, politics must be about challenging "a set of economic arrangements" rather than forming and

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reforming abstract philosophical mind-sets (ibid., p. 79). We have to begin in the present; and, on the side of consolation, the engrained tendencies of our present mindset may not be as lacking in promise as some may think.

Thus, according to Rorty, "the liberal societies of our century have produced more and more people who are able to recognize the contingency of the vocabulary in which they state their highest hopes," while simultaneously affirming the power of such contingent ideals to shape human existence for the better (1989, pp. 46, 189). In other words, some of us have come to recognize that the power of human convictions originates with concrete human beings, instead of merely flowing through them, while issuing from some religiously or philosophically certified higher source. The secular humanists of this ilk tend to believe that the origin of our species was a lucky accident (1999, p. xxxii); that its past and present have been shaped by the imagination and will of certain talented individuals (1989, p. 61); and that its future is currently in our hands, which are no worse and probably no better than the hands that have guided us thus far. Our continued happiness and prosperity depends on recognizing this—our human dignity—rather than on learning how to follow some preordained righteous path. And if we are raised under happy conditions then "we'll turn out quite fine" when it comes to sympathy and respect for other human beings (Dann 2006, p. 85).

Human existence, then, is a conversation with other human beings about how to live our lives (Rorty 2007b, p. 68). The conversation, in principle, is open to all: however, there is a hitch, since there is a good number of (frequently religious) people who do not share the humanist principles on which the very idea of such a conversation is premised. Here, we are encountering the same performative contradiction that the champions of democracy face when a population democratically chooses to live in a non-democratic way. One strategy is to try and disqualify the delinquents on epistemological grounds by claiming that they are either factually mistaken, or by citing the delinquents' failure to live up to the standards of rationality. Rorty dismisses the first line of argument by pointing out that there can be no empirical evidence either for or against most religious beliefs (2007b, p. 33; 2007c, p. 11) and winces at the second which, on his view, amounts to no more than a philosophical wish-fulfillment of our desire to have a stick with which to beat our reticent opponents (1991, p. 66). True to his pluralism, then, Rorty urges us to give up "even secular ways of trying to assure ourselves that there is something large and powerful on our side" (2008, p. 22).

There is, however, another notion of rationality waiting in the wings—namely, the rationality of the communicative sort. Thus, the reasoning goes, we may be entitled to refuse to talk to those who make conversation impossible. The difficult part, then, is to spell out the rules which one must abide by to deserve a hearing. The gist of Rorty's position on this score is captured in a quote from Dewey: "The method of intelligence is open and public. The doctrinal method is limited and private" (Dewey 1934, p. 39). When it comes to social cooperation, Rorty says, "the conjunction of the science and the common sense of your day is all you need" (2007b, p. 39). For everything else, there is the ample and unregulated realm of privatized romance. As we have already seen, the maneuver that privatizes religion out of the public realm, has hardly met with a good reception. Besides, by leaving science and common sense as a joint authority in the public square, Rorty seems to have come dangerously close to blurring the distinction between his own position and the more traditional view

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of rationality that he criticizes; his assurances to the effect that the private sphere of sentiment matters every bit as much notwithstanding. Thus, when we are told that a religious person is entitled to her "idiosyncratic devotion" but has to wonder whether she has a right to offer reasons that are "impossible for many, and perhaps all, of [her] fellow-humans to make sense of" (Rorty 2007c, p. 25), it is hard not too feel just a tinge of bias and prejudice. Especially since, sociologically, the statement is incontrovertibly false. Hence, a resort to the norms of communicative reason, in Rorty's case, would require some further elaboration which, in turn, is likely to require committing himself in ways that may not square well with his general laissez faire attitude. In any case, substituting the private/public distinction for the rational/irrational one does not appear to cut the knot.

There is a third strategy that one can make use of, although it is much weaker than the other two. It is the strategy that Rorty falls back upon when he declares that arguments against religion can not rely on some a priori conceptual strategy, but must cite, instead, specific concerns about the functioning of religion in our society (1991, p. 67). This "muddling through," as Rorty calls it (ibid.), accords well both with his view that the place of religion in public discourse is a matter of politics (2007b, p. 30), and with his ideas about how such political issues should be solved. Adopting this stance, however, suggests some concessions towards the believers, which Rorty, in fact, is prepared to make. For example, he concedes that, at some point in the conversation, we are all liable to invoke "unarguable first principles" or "conversation-stoppers" and that conversation-wise it makes no difference whether they are religious or secular (2003, p. 149). So the best we can do is try to avoid both as long as possible (ibid.) and try to be tolerant when it no longer is. Accordingly, arguments offered from a religious perspective are admissible in the public square, as long as those offering them take care to explain and defend their views, instead of merely appealing to an authority, "scriptural or otherwise" (ibid., p. 147).

When offering such arguments, the believers should be advised that those of us who are religiously "unmusical" (Rorty 2007b, p. 31), may harbor a deep and warranted suspicion towards any kind of God-talk, since it has been known in the past to open the doors to institutionally sanctioned cruelty (2007c, p. 4). This is simply a matter of practical risk-management—not of philosophical principle (ibid., p. 6). In fact, our worries on this score, should warrant, along with the inclusion of the believers, a simultaneous exclusion of all clerical institutions from the public sphere. The reason is, that such institutions are typically devoted "not to pastoral care but to promulgating orthodoxy and acquiring economical and political clout" (2003, p. 141) and have also been known, on many an occasion, "to encourage and excuse sadistic violence" (ibid., p. 146). Hence, as the price of being admitted into the public square, religion has to be "pruned back to the parish level" (ibid., p. 142). The distinction on which this compromise is founded—between a political and a spiritual community—seems intended to appease the critics who had accused Rorty of insensitivity to the communal aspects of religious experience while continuing to debar religious organizations from functioning overtly in the manner of political factions.

As reasonable and conciliatory as this may sound, unless offered as a note of surrender, this argument has little chance of being accepted. On the practical side, one cannot admit the religious community and exclude the clerical institutions, corrupt

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though they may be. The reason is simple: the clerical institutions are the political manifestation of an organized religious community. One cannot allow certain people to participate in the political life of a democratic society and deny them the right of assembly. And then, once they have assembled, one cannot deny them the right to organize and to follow the leadership of their choosing. One thing follows from another: one cannot get rid of the corrupt union bosses without disbanding the unions and without, thereby, disenfranchising the workers. And the same goes for religion.

On the side of philosophy, the argument is wobbly as well. Even if all the clerical organizations so far had been shown to be unmistakably evil, we would still need a cogent argument to suggest that, for the most part, they cannot be otherwise. The argument of this kind, moreover, is not likely to be forthcoming, for "church" is not a natural kind, and is therefore open, in principle to virtually unlimited permutations. What reason have we to conclude with Rorty that Christianity had indeed missed its chance? What stops us from believing, with Rauschenbusch, that church is yet capable of reforming itself into a force for good?

It is hard to speak definitively on Rorty's behalf, but one possible answer—one that rises above the contingencies of the church history, although not above the contingency of history as such—is that religion, seen as a conduit of the vital and humane impulses in culture, has been superseded by the newer forms, ones more modern, more adequate to their content. Clinging to religion, then, is like frequenting the house abandoned by those we loved: charmingly sentimental when done in good humor, and fetishistic (or worse) when suffused with a spirit of ardent devotion. From this perspective, genuine religious belief in modern times appears as a case of mistaken loyalties: wherein one hopes to attain to the spirit by adoring its garments of yesteryear. And, in the case of our particular story, it pays to remember that these garments have frequently been soaked in blood.

There are good reasons to think that this, at least, comes close to what Rorty had in mind. He speaks of secular democracy as a "civic religion" (1998, pp. 9, 101); one in which human beings take charge of shaping their own history, with no authority but themselves to show them the right path (ibid., p. 18). While this may sound like the usual message of self-reliance with which the religiously unmusical have been taunting their opponents for several hundred years, in Rorty's writing it receives a somewhat different twist: for he wants us not only to trust ourselves but to trust each other. His primary charge against religion is not that it makes us look for imaginary supports, but that it prompts us to invent allies in the skies. The invocation of something "powerful, and non-human," to his mind, is all too often an invocation against our fellow humans (2007c, p. 35) or an attempt to go over their head (ibid., p. 34). And such attempts, on his view, are objectionable, precisely because they constitute a "betrayal of the ideal of human fraternity that democracy inherits from the Judeo-Christian religious tradition" (ibid., p. 35). At the end of the day, Rorty is simply a humanist warring and worrying for his kin.

3.

Few things sound as promising as the theorist's claim that one cultural form has superseded another; and even fewer are equally hard to redeem in practical terms. By any

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ordinary sign of worldly prosperity religion appears to be well and thriving, contrary to the incessant reports of its imminent demise. If nothing else, the recent upsurges of the religious sentiment remind us that it doesn't pay to declare things prematurely dead—for they come back to haunt you. Religion is more than alive, its growing power attests to the fact that it is being fed by a powerful undercurrent. We can try to repress it, but repressing the urgent has historically proven to be an unadvisable tactic. We can declare it irrational; but this isn't likely to have any more effect than the petulant admonition that sex is sinful. Despite admonitions people ultimately do what they want.

Hence, on the side of politics, we may do well to heed Wolterstorff's opinion that the current outbursts of resentment are a "natural and predictable response of religious people to the silencing of religion in the public space" (1997, p. 178). On the side of decency, we can take a reminder from West that we have no right to be smug about the beliefs of those whose interests we are claiming to represent—for "the culture of the wretched of the earth is deeply religious" (1999, p. 171). There is also a practical consideration to add to these, for the very clerical institutions whose self-serving power secular humanists like Rorty are trying to oppose benefit immensely from the ambiguous status of religion in the public sphere. As long as organized religion is allowed to play the seductive role of the cultural subconscious, it remains publicly unaccountable for the exercise of its considerable political powers. As things stand now, the religious leaders feel free to offer political advice and guidance without bearing any responsibility for the resulting consequences. When things turn sour the exculpation is always near at hand: between the otherworldliness of religion, the incomprehensibility of god's ways, and the official policy assuring us that religion has been excluded from the public square—there's always a way as long as there is the will. If religious organizations are to become politically accountable they have to be treated like any other political faction. Saying that we need to politicize the church sounds like asking to get some venom in a snake-pit; but to counteract this venom what we may need to do is politicize religion.

Rorty advised us once to accept our inability to imagine a full blown alternative to our way of living simply as a contingent characteristic of our time, and not as a failure of nerve. Perhaps, the same attitude is appropriate with respect to the religious resurgence. Perhaps we could think of it fruitfully in connection with the "bottom-up populist revolt" resulting from the "proletarianizing" of bourgeoisie, which Rorty foresaw in the nineties (1998, p. 83). Among Rorty's cultural heroes it had always been a common-place that people often turn to religion because of the sense of helplessness (Freud 1970, p. 14)—to sustain us in "feebleness and failure" (Dewey 1934, op. cit. Hall 1997, p. 195). Rorty himself has pointed out that secular democratic humanism may be a living option only for those who were lucky enough to enjoy the material security and prosperity in this world (1999, pp. 162, 164). Democracy, as he says in his later writings, "only works if you spread the wealth around"; and the prospects for that are as bleak as they ever have been (2007b, p. 73). Religion, under the circumstances, may be the primary form of political engagement available to the underprivileged. It is our bad fortune that the privileged have learned to keep it so squarely under their thumb.

It is hardly a novelty that people are flocking to the churches with their grievances; it is hardly a secret that they generally feel more welcome there than they do in the

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hallways of learning or dens of power; it is hardly a mystery that once they congregate they become a political power—quite often a power without a proper direction. What appears to puzzle optimistic liberals like Rorty is the fact that these people seem unwilling to take up their cause with society instead of god. Perhaps the reason is that religion, pace one of Rorty's critics, is about making sense of suffering, not eliminating it; about "meaning rather than flourishing" (Smith 2005, pp. 87–88). Be that as it may, however, it seems reasonable to suppose that the majority of believers would rather have their suffering relieved than merely explained, and would not refuse an extra dash of flourishing to render meaning all the more satisfying. The willingness to settle for meaning, then, may be seen as a sign of a failure of nerve, of a tragic absence of confidence. In fact, one of Rorty's chief complaints against organized religion is that it encourages complaisance, encouraging believers to accept the existing state of things as necessary, turning their eyes away from the needs of this world and directing them instead towards the transcendent (1999, p. 208; 2007a, p. 347). But religion, of course, can also be militant. So the real question is, if the people can organize themselves in the name of the divine, why cannot they organize themselves to stand for their shared political interests, whatever these interests may happen to be. Lack of confidence, lack of self-trust is probably, ultimately, the right answer. However, it is not arbitrary and it isn't a failure of nerve. Attempts to participate in political life can be bound up with considerable risks, especially for those whose life is closer to that of sustenance than to that of privilege. On the most basic level, joining a church is simply safer than trying to organize a union; and in places and times where the opposite was true churches stood empty, even though religion was far from extinct.

Yet, beyond the fear, faith gives courage that secular causes have difficulty emulating. Thus Dewey, characteristically, defines as religious "any activity pursued in behalf of an ideal end against obstacles and in spite of threats of personal loss because of conviction of its general and enduring value" (Dewey 1934, p. 261). Rorty's proposal, then, is to live religiously in the service of secular aims; to assimilate "divine" to "ideal" (2007c, p. 29); to stop seeking the assurance that our ideals are backed up by some kind of supreme otherworldly authority; to stop grounding our utopian striving in pretended "theological knowledge" (1998, p. 38).

Rorty appears to agree with Dewey that appeals to supernatural power have as their counterpart a pessimistic belief in our own impotence before the challenges that we face (Dewey 1934, p. 46). In one way this is correct; yet, in another, it requires a correction. Many of those who come to seek consolation from an otherworldly power, when appraising their situation realistically, in common-sense worldly terms, end up with a well-justified conclusion that the power relationships which obtain in the world are so heavily leveraged against them as to make the struggle virtually pointless. Of course, one can "break through the system"; but, then, one can also defeat an orangutan at wrestling—in principle, that is. The invocation of the supernatural, among other things, is an attempt to assure oneself, on some level, that the determination to struggle and to endure—with things political or mundane—is not merely a sign of a foolhardy determination to remain in denial about how things really stand. It is, in its own way, more rational (or more rationalizing) than the secular commitment to an ideal which has virtually no chances of being realized. And ultimately, when people say things like "god, give me strength" they are usually poised to act with what strength they have got,

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without waiting for the divine reinforcements. Perhaps, when we have a society with a more equitable distribution of power such invocations will become obsolete; perhaps *then* religion will also recede from the public square and into the private quarters.

The idea of the sublation of traditional religion in a secular humanistic vision may provide us with a tenable reason to want to leave religion behind. However, when it comes to limning the outlines of this melioristic alternative, the most Rorty seems to give us is a sense of its defining tensions, which are given full play in his own philosophical work. Thus, the balance between the public and the private, between individual initiative and social responsibility, takes center-stage. It is a notable problem and is key to much of contemporary political theorizing; yet Rorty, confusingly, appears to try and have it both ways. On the one hand he decisively champions the rights of the individual, the idiosyncratic, the ultimately private, once and for all liberated from the pressure of all epistemic dogmas; and on the other, he readily defers to the authority of intersubjective agreement, the moral prestige of social solidarity, and a mixture of science and common sense as the lingua franca of public discussion. Can he juggle both without incurring the charge of self-contradiction? Perhaps he can, and he must, if the values of public and private that he valorizes turn out to be incommensurable; in which case, our best chance is to keep our eyes on both an to "muddle through" the best we can on a case-by-case basis. But if this is the recommended path then, at least at this juncture, it does not appear possible to give a conclusive argument about the public role of religion without invoking the traditional epistemological apparatus, the authority of which Rorty finds philosophically and socially problematic.

Meanwhile, our attempts to improve the state of affairs do not benefit from the determination to alienate the members of religious communities for reasons that, after all this time, we cannot quite spell out without reservations. In the end, even Rorty believes that reading the New Testament can still make people "morally better" by inspiring them "to be willing and able to treat the needs of all human beings with the respect and consideration with which we treat the needs of those closest to us, those whom we love" (1999, p. 203). And as for the unseemly aspects of the actual practices of religious organizations, past and present, we should not forget that religion is capable of self-reform (Smith 2005, p. 86). As a melioristic reformist elsewhere, it is not clear why Rorty would forgo the possibility of churches reforming themselves in favor of excluding them from the political sphere altogether. It is true, as West points out, that our present religious life, for the most part, "lacks a substantive social consciousness" (West 1999, p. 358); that the complexity of understanding and the clarity of vision among the religious citizenry are in decline (ibid., p. 358). But this problem is better addressed, perhaps, by heeding the voices of those who call for "a conscious, well-organized critical dialogue" (Vroom 1997, p. 341), in which one would be held accountable for his religious belief, first and foremost to those who share the same religious canon, i.e. those whose concerns cannot be simply dismissed on the grounds of their stubborn atheistic blindness. Religious lunacy and religious abuse of power are at least as much of a liability and embarrassment to the community of faith as they are to the laity. Secular humanists like Rorty tend to think that we would have less tensions with religion if it gave its adherents more autonomy in making up their mind with regard to political matters, if it taught them to be tolerant and self-critical, if it taught them to treat all people equally regardless of their faith or denomination, and if

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it abandoned the idea that religious leaders may posses infallible authority. There are plenty of those who could never accede to these demands; there are many believers who couldn't make do without radical sinfulness or a showy apocalyptic ending. But there are also those who find such demands to be sensible and desirable in the light of their own religious commitments. The reason that the secularist admonitions against religion often fall flat is also the reason why we can reasonably hope for a melioristic religious reform: there are many believers who are joined to the non-believers by a common commitment to humanism; and while they do not share a religion they may share a hope that, at some point in the future, religion may be capable of becoming an unequivocal force for human solidarity and kindness.

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