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THE PHILOSOPHY OF  
RICHARD RORTY

EDITED BY

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AND

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SOUTHERN ILLINOIS UNIVERSITY CARBONDALE

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## THE PHILOSOPHY OF RICHARD RORTY

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ernment. I do not see any tension between encouraging cosmopolitanism and serving the cause of liberal democratic politics.

More to the point, I do not see what philosophers, or political theorists, can do to help “drastically diminish American hegemony.” The heirs of the Truman-Acheson internationalists of 1945—the liberals who worked in Washington think-tanks and enclaves within government agencies in the interval between September 11, 2001 and March of 2003—did their best to prevent George W. Bush from adopting a unilateralist, hegemonic, policy. They failed to prevent the invasion of Iraq, and the consequent disastrous decline in American moral stature. Might they have been more successful if they had appreciated that, as McBride claims, Marx was a great philosopher as well as a great political economist? If they had read more Marx and Jameson and less Dewey and Habermas? If they had had better philosophical analyses to draw upon?

McBride apparently thinks that there is specifically philosophical work to be done that might make the next generation of liberal policy- and opinion-makers more effective. I do not. I can see ways in which economists and historians might be useful in this way, but not how “in-depth analysis of political concepts” would help. McBride rebukes me for being unwilling to offer such analyses. I wish that, instead of discussing features of my style, he had given concrete examples of the utility of such conceptual analysis to political initiatives.

R. R.

Jeffrey Stout

## RORTY ON RELIGION AND POLITICS

In the mid-1970s, shortly after I had joined the faculty of the department next door to his at Princeton, Richard Rorty was browsing in the University Store, and noticed Frederick L. Will's *Induction and Justification* among the books listed for one of my seminars. Curious about why someone might be assigning such a book in a course on religion and morality, Rorty contacted me. I explained that I was trying to dissolve the “is”-“ought” problem in ethics, using Will's approach to the problem of induction, Wilfrid Sellars's reflections on language games, and some of Rorty's writings on the linguistic turn as my models. He and I have been discussing pragmatism and its consequences ever since. It understates the matter to say that I am deeply indebted to him, but so is anyone who cares about modern philosophy and the fate of democracy. No one, since Dewey, has done more to give the American philosophical tradition a voice in the conversation of humankind. No one, since Heidegger and Wittgenstein, has done more to provoke thought about the path that led modern philosophy from Descartes to Nietzsche. No recent philosopher has addressed a broader audience with less cant on the problems facing democracy. No American intellectual in his generation has behaved with more grace in responding to critics.

My differences with Rorty fall into two main categories, pertaining, on the one hand, to the rhetoric of objectivity and, on the other, to what pragmatism implies concerning the role of religion in democratic politics. The goal of the present essay is to clarify the latter.<sup>1</sup> These differences presuppose a background of agreement. Rorty and I both describe ourselves as pragmatists, thereby acknowledging that a particular intellectual heritage continues to shape our thinking in important ways. In politics we stand in

a tradition of committed democrats that includes Whitman, Dewey, Addams, and Baldwin. We share a sense that democracy now faces a crisis of major proportions and that some of the forces threatening it are religious.

Neither of us would describe himself as a believer in God. Neither of us belongs to a religious organization of any sort. The passages in the Bible that proclaim the importance of love and justice or express hope for a future in which the lion lies down with the lamb strike us as wholesome, but many others, including long stretches of Leviticus, the ending of the Exodus story, and the New Testament's visions of hellfire, strike us as poisonous. We would of course be pleased if most of our fellow citizens attributed as little authority to the latter passages as we do.

Because Rorty and I have both been persuaded by our pragmatist forebears to treat rationality as a more permissive and context-sensitive notion than Victorian critics of religious superstition took it to be, we are inclined to agree with William James that some theists might well be rationally entitled to their religious commitments. Thus, we are not disposed to join Sam Harris and Peter Singer in impugning the rationality of theists *en masse*. Like Harris and Singer, we would like to say what worries us about militant Islamic theocracy, the new religious right, and church opposition to same-sex marriage, but we prefer to do so without using the concept of rationality as a club.

On what, then, do Rorty and I differ? It would be fair to say that Rorty's writings on the role of religion in politics often retain the spirit, if not the letter, of militant secularism. In many of those writings he treats religion *per se* as an unwelcome intruder in the political sphere, and is looking for ways, consistent with his own pragmatic philosophical commitments, to mobilize opposition to its influence. I, on the other hand, see religion, in its public as well as its private manifestations, as an ever-changing mixture of life-giving and malignant tendencies. I welcome into public conversation any fellow citizens who share the desire for justice and freedom, be they religious or not. Because my proximate goal is to befriend all such people, the only forms of religious ideology I am interested in denouncing are the ones that wittingly or unwittingly block the path to justice and peace. I have no critique to offer of religion as such, and have trouble seeing why a pragmatist would want to make sweeping remarks either for or against such a thing. It seems to me that such remarks are no more useful than saying that sports, politics, or art is, on the whole, a good or bad thing. None of these things is about to go away, and all of them provide ample opportunities for the expression of good and bad motives and for the production of good and bad consequences.

Rorty's vision of the future is a perfectly secular utopia. My dream is to revive the sort of coalition between religious groups and secular intel-

lectuals that I first experienced when I joined the civil rights movement as a teenager. Only by rebuilding such a coalition, it seems to me, are we likely to save American democracy from plutocrats and theocrats at home and abroad. Rorty's earliest political experiences came in a context where friendships between religious and secular citizens played a less significant role. When I am discussing the role of religion in politics, I am mainly thinking of Martin Luther King, Jr. When Rorty is discussing the same topic, he is mainly thinking of Jerry Falwell.

The most widely read of Rorty's essays on religion and politics is surely his strident critique of Stephen L. Carter's *The Culture of Disbelief: How American Law and Politics Trivialize Religious Devotion*. This essay, entitled "Religion as Conversation-stopper,"<sup>2</sup> is often denounced in religious circles as a paradigmatic expression of the secularist desire to dictate the terms of political discussion. While Rorty grants that there is no way to keep religious convictions from influencing the political conclusions that religious believers reach, he argues that we should all try to "enforce" the "Jeffersonian compromise that the Enlightenment reached with the religious. This compromise consists in privatizing 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."<sup>3</sup> Rorty does not claim, with Harris and company, that anyone who holds religious convictions in our age must be irrational. The trouble with bringing religion into the public square is that doing so causes the democratic discussion to break down.

In many other writings, Rorty looks forward to the day when our entire culture reaches "the point where we no longer worship *anything*, where we treat *nothing* as a quasi divinity, where we treat *everything*—our language, our conscience, our community—as a product of time and chance."<sup>4</sup> What is more, he sees this yearning as a central component of the philosophical pragmatist's vision:

A post-Philosophical culture, then, would be one in which men and women felt themselves alone, merely finite, with no links to something Beyond. On the pragmatist's account, positivism was only a halfway stage in the development of such a culture—the progress toward, as Sartre puts it, doing without God. For positivism preserved a god in its notion of Science (and in its notion of "scientific philosophy"), the notion of a portion of culture where we touched something not ourselves, where we found Truth naked, relative to no description. . . . Pragmatism, by contrast, does not erect Science as an idol to fill the place once held by God.<sup>5</sup>

I will return to Rorty's conception of pragmatism at the end of this essay.

For now, I simply want to ask whether we have any reason to think that human beings are going to stop being religious in the foreseeable future. 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.

The notion that history is moving, by fits and starts, toward the de-divinizing of the world coheres poorly with recent history. In the late 1960s, when I began taking courses on religion, de-divinization was widely thought to be an essential component of modernization. Democratic republics were established, economies became industrialized, governmental bureaucracies grew, a liberal schedule of rights became more widely recognized, science and technology came into their own, and a greater proportion of the population went to college. Meanwhile, it was thought, religious belief and practice were in the process of withering away. Things have not turned out that way, however. Mary Douglas announced the death of the secularization thesis in the early 1980s in an essay that began by declaring: "Events have taken religious studies by surprise." She explained that scholars had had their eyes

glued to those conditions of modern life identified by Weber as antipathetic to religion. Perhaps, also, their inclinations misled them . . . certain religious forms might have a natural appeal to intellectuals if they are going to be religious at all. People whose occupations do not require submission to authority or conformity to outward forms, and who are paid to ask searching questions and to take an independent stance, are likely to be more drawn to a personal style of religious worship than to a publicly conforming one. Their own religious preferences could conceivably dim their perception of what other people like.<sup>6</sup>

Before long, the reassertion of public forms of religiosity in such places as Africa, Lebanon, and Poland became hard to deny. In democracies like the United States and India, religious belief and practice are not only thriving, but exerting a strong influence on politics. The secularism of Western Europe increasingly looks like an exception to the rule, rather than like the future toward which all modern societies are tending. Even leading proponents of the secularization thesis, like Peter Berger, have abandoned it in the years since Douglas declared its demise.<sup>7</sup> Philosophy is one of the only precincts in the humanities to have barely caught wind of this development in social theory. Those of us who wish that our own societies more closely resembled Western Europe need to take a realistic view of what is happening. The hope that religion will wither away now looks as unrealistic to serious students of religion as the Marxist hope that the state will

wither away now looks to serious students of political economy.

It would be tempting to infer that secularist utopias are simply irrelevant to American politics, for the same reason that Marxist fantasies about a post-state communist society are irrelevant. But that is not quite true, for we now have considerable evidence suggesting that for every American institutional context in which secularism becomes dominant, such as the humanities divisions of the elite universities, there is an opposite and equal theocratic reaction somewhere else. Rather than nudging things along toward the realization of its vision, highbrow secularism seems to be feeding the very tendencies in religious life that it most fears. But if that is so, the secularist dream is relevant after all, because its promulgation has significant effects, albeit effects often contrary to the intentions of its promulgators. Far from persuading most religious people to confine their religious convictions to the private sphere, secularism gives them reason to conclude that liberal democracies are essentially inhospitable to their concerns. Many of them then either retreat from public life into communities of like-mindedness, or attempt to use the electoral process to advance theocratic ends. Both tendencies spell trouble for democracy.

It is hard to know whether the pursuit of secularism as a political strategy has been more successful at attracting followers to the cause or at driving religious people in the direction of theocracy. Secularism reinforces the idea that modern societies have only two choices: a political order in which everything is ideally to be decided in essentially secular terms and one in which a single religious vision dominates. The choice is between secularism and theocracy. Given these options, it is unsurprising that many religious people will opt for the second. Secularism and theocracy mirror one another, and feed one another's fears. The more power theocrats acquire at home and abroad, the stronger the wording of the secularist manifestoes becomes—and vice versa. Theocrats and secularists inspire fear in one another in part 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. Each side's proposed purity rules look to the opposite side like tools of domination.

Fortunately, secularism and theocracy are not our only options. It is interesting to note what they have in common. They are both monological in the sense that they propose to set the terms of public deliberation in advance. The democratic alternative to monologue is dialogue, an open-ended political culture in which citizens of various kinds hammer out their differences with one another as they go along.

One thing that democracies constantly haggle over is what sorts of reasons are good reasons, what the terms of public controversy are going to be. As far as I can tell, there has never been a settled compromise, of

the sort Rorty here urges us to honor, concerning what premises citizens may express in public.<sup>8</sup> Many of the reform movements that appear periodically in American history—from abolitionism to civil rights—emerged from revival tents and churches. By the same token, much of the resistance to such movements throughout American history has also been couched in religious language. The institutional separation of church and state has only rarely constrained any substantial group of American citizens from expressing its religious views in public or inferring political conclusions from those views. Jefferson himself referred not only to nature, but to nature's God, when declaring the reasons for independence from Britain. What he and his comrades pledged was their sacred honor. Lincoln's Second Inaugural Address was a sublime exercise in political theology. Woodrow Wilson, to take a more sobering example, was on a religious mission that has parallels in the thinking of George W. Bush.

Democratic deliberation tends to break down not when religious reasons are voiced in the public square, but rather when some group, religious or secular, starts behaving as if it intended to dominate others. The point of Lincoln's Second Inaugural was in part to warn his fellow citizens against harboring, expressing, or acting on that intention. What counts as domination is itself one of the main questions to be debated by each generation in a democratic republic. But the point of having a Bill of Rights, a system of checks and balances, and an extension of the franchise to the entire adult population is to minimize the opportunities for domination. Every time one faction tries to enforce a monological approach to decision making, other groups are entitled to accuse that faction of a desire to dominate, of trying to impose its views on the public. The spirit of democracy, being dialogical, is at odds with both secularism and theocracy.

Rorty comes closest to endorsing a genuinely dialogical vision of the future in a brief essay entitled "Failed Prophecies, Glorious Hopes."<sup>9</sup> In this piece he argues that the predictive failures of works like the Gospels and the *Communist Manifesto* should not prevent us from taking inspiration from some of the hopes those works express. Christianity and socialism at their best can be viewed as "appeals to what Lincoln called 'the better angels of our nature.'"<sup>10</sup> Both of these movements, Rorty writes,

may have inspired equal numbers of brave and self-sacrificing men and women to risk their lives and fortunes in order to prevent future generations from enduring needless suffering. There may already have been as many socialist martyrs as Christian martyrs. If human hope can survive the anthrax-laden warheads, the suitcase-sized nuclear devices, the overpopulation, the globalized labour market, and the environmental disasters of the coming century, if we have descendants who, a century from now, still have a historical record to consult and are still able to seek inspiration from the past, perhaps they will

think of Saint Agnes and Rosa Luxemburg, Saint Francis and Eugene Debs, Father Damien and Jean Jaurès, as members of a single movement.<sup>11</sup>

These conciliatory lines are wholly in keeping with my project of coalition-building. They do not only discuss what it means to appeal to the better angels of our nature, they also exemplify it. But they are in tension with most of Rorty's writings on the topic of religion and politics. In criticizing those writings, I am expressing a preference for the dialogical over the monological strand in his thinking.

In an article entitled "Religion in the Public Square: A Reconsideration," Rorty has withdrawn the central claim of "Religion as Conversation-stopper" as "hasty and insufficiently thoughtful."<sup>12</sup> He now concedes that "both law and custom should leave [a believer] free to say, in the public square, that his endorsement of redistributionist social legislation is a result of his belief that God, in such passages as Psalm 72, has commanded that the cause of the poor should be defended."<sup>13</sup> And he agrees "that attempts to find rules that are neutral between the two sides [of the *Kulturkampf*] are pretty hopeless. So is the attempt to say that one or another contribution to political discourse is illegitimate."<sup>14</sup>

These concessions to the critics of his essay on Carter do not, however, keep Rorty from objecting to anyone who claims that certain passages from Leviticus and the epistles of St. Paul "trump all the arguments in favor" of same-sex marriage.<sup>15</sup> Rorty would clearly like to have a way of making this objection into something more than an arbitrary expression of his own preferences. If we take him to be making a point about the ethics of public speech, not merely using such speech to reject premises and conclusions that others are putting forward, what might that point be? That citing a biblical passage aligned with Rorty's liberal sympathies is permissible, while citing a biblical passage that he dislikes is not? Surely not. That citing any biblical passage in support of a conclusion Rorty agrees with would be permissible, while citing any passages in support of contrary conclusions would not be? Again, surely not. On either of those interpretations, Rorty would be proposing himself as the arbiter of discursive legitimacy. Moreover, his point cannot be that appeals to Psalm 72 should be tolerated as exceptions to a general principle banning appeals to scriptural authority, because Rorty has ruled out the quest for such principles as hopeless.

Rorty's point appears to be that there is something out of whack in the unacknowledged *motives* of those who cite biblical passages when arguing against same-sex marriage:

Here I cannot help feeling that, though the law should not forbid someone from citing such texts in support of a political position, custom *should* for-

bid it. Citing such passages should be deemed not just in bad taste, but as heartlessly cruel, as reckless persecution, as incitement to violence. Religious people who claim a right to express their homophobia in public because it is a result of their religious convictions should, I think, be ashamed of themselves, and should be made to feel ashamed. Such citation should count as hate speech, and be treated as such.<sup>16</sup>

The point, then, appears to be that homophobia is not the sort of motive that anyone should either have in one's heart or express in public, regardless of its entanglement with religious attitudes. Homophobia, as Rorty understands it, is not merely a form of fear, but a form of hatred that typically expresses itself in sadism and cruelty. It therefore ought to be classified with such social maladies as racism and xenophobia, and treated with disdain.

People who quote Leviticus 18:22 with approval should be shunned and despised. Our attitude toward them should be the same as that toward people who remark that, though of course Hitler was a bad thing [*sic*], it cannot be denied that the Jews *did* kill Christ—or, to vary the example, people who urge that, although the lynch mobs went too far, it is a truly terrible thing for a white woman to have sex with a black man.<sup>17</sup>

It is certainly a bad thing for any citizen to befoul the public square with expressions of hatred or to use public policy as a vehicle for sadistic impulses. Citizens who do such things should expect to be rebuked as well as opposed by their fellow citizens. Of course, few people take themselves to be hateful or sadistic. Citizens of democratic republics apply the concepts of hate and sadism in different ways. The question of what ought to count as hateful or cruel is one of the things citizens debate. Publicly accusing someone of hatred or cruelty typically expresses anger and contempt, and calls into question either the sincerity or the self-understanding of that person. It thus raises the political stakes considerably. Our expressions of anger and contempt make clear where each faction comprising the body politic intends to locate the limits of cooperation. One function of political discourse is to negotiate those limits. It hardly needs pointing out, however, that expressions of anger and contempt are themselves intrinsically difficult to distinguish from hatred and cruelty—in the eyes of both accuser and accused. Questioning one another's motives in public is sometimes necessary, but it always has a price. Such is the social-psychology of the *Kulturkampf*.

In the end, Rorty does not claim to have done much more than express his contempt for homophobes who use the Bible to defend policies anti-

thetical to his liberal convictions:

[I]t would be nice if I could appeal to a principle which differentiated between citing Psalm 72 in favor 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. I wholeheartedly believe that religious people should trim their utterances to suit my utilitarian views, and that in citing Leviticus they are, whether they know it or not, finding a vent for their own sadistic impulses. But I do not know how to make either of these propositions plausible to them.<sup>18</sup>

That anyone should trim their utterances to suit Rorty's utilitarian views would be hard for me—let alone Rorty's religious and political opponents—to accept, because I am not a utilitarian. Even Rorty's fellow utilitarians might doubt that trimming the citizenry's utterances to suit Rorty's views would make for a sufficiently rich discussion to serve the greatest good for the greatest number. (Would the author of *On Liberty* have favored such trimming?) While I share Rorty's suspicion that some of the people citing Leviticus 18:22 are homophobic sadists, I suspect that others are sincere believers who are trying to figure out what the Bible, properly interpreted, teaches about homosexuality. Sincere believers are sometimes susceptible to persuasion if their interlocutors are prepared to take the details of the Bible seriously. Many people who now favor same-sex marriage started out as such believers.

The best way to persuade sincere believers that legalizing same-sex marriage would not be the end of the world, it seems to me, is to encourage them to have their say on what Leviticus 18:22 means and then challenge them on their own ground. It is not easy to explain how Leviticus 18:22, as interpreted by culturally conservative American Christians, can be made to cohere with the failure of such Christians to treat many other passages from the Old Testament—or from Paul's letters—as binding on the contemporary church, let alone on our society as a whole. A contemporary Christian father who cites Deuteronomy 13:7–11 as a reason for permitting him to kill his Wiccan daughter would be treated by nearly all cultural conservatives as either crazy or evil. A Christian candidate for the Senate who cites Leviticus 24:10–16 as a reason for legalizing the stoning of blasphemers would immediately be denounced by the vast majority of cultural conservatives as gravely in error.

There are hundreds of other passages that cause similar problems for the way in which the religious right uses the Bible to legitimate its positions. But the arbitrariness of these appeals can be exposed only if the appeals are first expressed openly and then subjected to rigorous public



scrutiny.<sup>19</sup> Given that these appeals are actually at work in the reasoning of many citizens, we are all better served by having these appeals expressed in public. How can the rest of us challenge premises that are left unexpressed? Responding to the appeals simply by arguing that religious premises have no place in public discussion has the effect, ironically, of *stopping the conversation* before the point at which the flimsiness of the reasoning is brought fully to light.

Only after people have been confronted with the flimsiness of their reasoning and nonetheless persist in clutching to their original conclusions are we in a position to know or to show that their acceptance of those conclusions has been motivated simply by hatred or fear. The only way that I can think of to be certain that their motives are base is to expose their reasoning as mere rationalization. This, in turn, necessarily involves applying the normative notion of rational entitlement. Rorty holds that it is not "helpful to say that homophobes are irrational."<sup>20</sup> But how would one go about discovering or showing that someone was homophobic, and thus motivated by fear and hatred, if not by determining that the person's stated reasoning is insufficiently coherent to be taken at face value? Assuming that rational entitlement to one's beliefs is a more permissive notion than old-fashioned critics of religion had thought, the burden of proof is on the accuser to show that a given person's motives are not as innocent as they are being made out to be. Given that rational entitlement is context-sensitive and that relevant features of context vary from person to person, this sort of criticism is bound to be complicated business. Criticizing the ideologies of large groups will be more hazardous and difficult than many practitioners of critical theory have supposed.

We can say, of course, that anything rightly described as homophobia should be counted as hateful in its motivation and cruel in its consequences. Like any bad thing, it would not be present in a perfect world. In that sense, it should not exist. Expressing it in one's public actions, including one's speech, is also bad. But all of this holds regardless of whether religious premises are at work in anyone's arguments. If the difference between the civil rights activist's appeal to Psalm 72 and the televangelist's appeal to Leviticus 18:22 is that the former is motivated by a love of justice, while the latter is motivated by cruelty, what does the issue have to do with religion? A person's love of justice can be expressed in his or her political acts, sexual relationships, selection of friends, works of art, behavior as a sports fan, interpretation of scripture, or vision of the eschaton. The same is true of a person's sadistic impulses. There is no area of human life that *cannot* be corrupted by sadism—that *has not* been corrupted by it.

That religion shares this fate with other areas of life should hardly

lessen our vigilance as critics of religion. Indeed, it should do just the opposite. Because people do often use religion as a witting or unwitting cover for the expression of hateful motives and sadistic impulses, and given that these motives often achieve political expression, we had better subject the religious manifestations of sadism to relentless criticism. People who use religion as a cover for homophobic cruelty are rightly described as "merely hiding sadistic grins behind sanctimonious masks."<sup>21</sup> People who do this wittingly—who are at least vaguely aware that their motives are base and that their arguments for their political proposals are mere rationalizations—are about as vicious as anyone you are likely to meet. You are unlikely to persuade them by any form of reasoning. On the other hand, people who use religious rationalizations unawares are at least somewhat more likely to allow the scales to fall from their eyes when presented with criticism of the right sort. These are people who harbor hateful motives, but think of themselves as loving and decent human beings. Picking apart their rationalizations can sometimes give them insight into their own motives and cause them the kind of shame that can initiate a change of mind and heart.

And then there are the people who oppose same-sex marriage simply because they were raised to accept the arguments made against it, and not because they harbor homophobic sentiments. They are not afraid of gays or lesbians, nor do they hate them, but many of them do find the thought of same-sex coupling repulsive, and they take their church's teachings as a plausible explanation for why they feel that way. Such people are much more likely than either sort of homophobe to change their minds on same-sex marriage as a result of an exchange of reasons, because reasons are playing a greater role in the formation of their political position in the first place. If you can show them that their scriptural reasons for opposing same-sex marriage fail to cohere with other commitments they hold with equal or greater confidence, you might be able to push the conversation along. Your arguments might acquire considerably more traction if the person you are trying to persuade discovers that a close relative or friend is actually a homosexual.

It seems likely that the underlying revulsion is itself a manifestation of social structure—specifically, the sharpness of the line distinguishing male from female roles in some community and the load carried by that distinction in the division of labor and the rules of inheritance.<sup>22</sup> If this hypothesis is correct, then the revulsion itself is subject to change, because the relevant features of social structure are themselves changing rather rapidly. The attitudes Americans have toward homosexuality have changed a great deal in recent years, but the changes have occurred primarily, as far as I can tell, in areas where the economy has shifted from an agricultural or



heavy-industrial basis to a focus on information and silicon-chip technology. The social structure one finds in areas where gays and lesbians are relatively well treated differs from the social structure one finds in areas that voted heavily for George W. Bush. That, at any rate, is my educated hunch.

The intuitions from which moral reasoning proceeds are not the same in these two sorts of social structure. And, crucially, people living in rural communities, small mid-Western towns, and deteriorating inner city neighborhoods are experiencing their way of life as threatened. These are precisely the social circumstances in which one would expect to find a good deal of scapegoating and a heightened symbolic concern for the inner purity of the group.<sup>23</sup> The resulting behavior is often cruel; of that I have no doubt. But vilifying the people living under these conditions as sadists is unlikely to do much good. If the global economy is in the process of restructuring society everywhere, we need to find effective ways of minimizing the anomie, cruelty, and enmity that will be generated in communities that take themselves, quite rightly, to be crumbling.

No one knows how many of the people opposing same-sex marriage are self-consciously sadistic homophobes, how many are unwitting homophobes, and how many are honestly trying to make sense of their own moral intuitions and religious traditions under trying circumstances. It would be a mistake to underestimate either the size of the last two groups or the extent to which it might prove fruitful to discuss their religious premises (as well as their actual social conditions) with them. As far as I can tell, pressing forward with this discussion and spreading the benefits of the information economy more widely are the two things most likely to improve the chances of legalizing same-sex marriage throughout the United States in time for most homosexuals now between the ages of 20 and 80 to benefit from the change. In any event, we had better keep in mind that legislative and judicial victories of this sort do not always correlate with a lessening of cruelty and hatred in the background culture.

In "Religion in the Public Square," Rorty seems to be trying to make the smallest possible adjustment in his original secularism that will yield a position he can defend without sacrificing his pragmatic conception of rational entitlement. In the passages considered so far, he focuses on the bad motives and consequences associated with some forms of religious speech. We have seen that this move tends to shift attention away from religion *per se*. If religious speech in the public square includes the civil rights activist's appeal to Psalm 72 as well as the televangelist's appeal to Leviticus 18:22, and the problem with the latter is the underlying motives it expresses and the poisonous effects those motives have when allowed to influence public policy, then why not attack the motives and effects

directly, without seeing religion itself as the issue? Rorty's answer to this question appears to be that while religion at the level of the local congregation might often be a source of consolation in the lives of individuals who participate in it, religion above that level is on the whole a bad thing. It is "ecclesiastical organizations," institutions designed to "accredit pastors" and to offer "authoritative guidance to believers," that are the problem. In Rorty's eyes, such organizations have a tendency to produce hateful motives and cruel behavior in the believers they are intended to benefit. For they "typically maintain their existence by deliberately creating ill-will toward people who belong to other such organizations, and toward people whose behavior they presume to call immoral."<sup>24</sup>

Ecclesiastical organizations as such "typically" do this? Rorty grants that such organizations "have sometimes been on the right side," but from his point of view "the occasional Gustavo Gutierrez or Martin Luther King does not compensate for the ubiquitous Joseph Ratzingers and Jerry Falwells. History suggests . . . that such organizations will always, on balance, do more harm than good."<sup>25</sup> Always? Rorty says that he is targeting "the Catholic Bishops, the Mormon General Authorities, the televangelists, and all other religious professionals who devote themselves not to pastoral care but to promulgating orthodoxy and acquiring economic and political clout."<sup>26</sup>

But surely, history does not show that each and every ecclesiastical organization has done more harm than good. King led the Southern Christian Leadership Conference, an ecclesiastical organization that certainly desired to have political clout, raised a lot of money to support the cause of civil rights, and seems in retrospect to have done much more good than harm. Even if we knew that *most* ecclesiastical organizations have caused more harm than good, the reasonable policy would still be to evaluate them one by one and to offer encouragement to the good ones.

Neither does history show that we would be well served by banning from the political sphere all ecclesiastical organizations that have sometimes been on what Rorty calls the wrong side. What Karol Wojtila did, with Ratzinger's help, to Gutierrez and other liberation theologians was in my view a tragedy. I feel the same way about his stands on birth control and same-sex marriage. But the movement in Poland that became known as Solidarity in the early 1980s benefited enormously when the Cardinal from Kraków became Pope. What would have become of Solidarity if secular intellectuals had insisted on treating the pro-Solidarity homily that Archbishop Glemp delivered at the shrine of Jasna Góra as an unwelcome intrusion in the political sphere? I have trouble believing that Rorty, had he been contacted for advice at the time, would have advised them to reject Glemp's assistance. There is no point in trying to answer the question of

whether ecclesiastical organizations in general, or even people like Wojtila and Ratzinger in particular, have done more harm than good.

It seems likely that ecclesiastical organizations in South Africa have done more harm than good on the whole, given the support many of them once gave to apartheid. But what would have become of the struggle against apartheid in South Africa if Nelson Mandela had spurned the political efforts of Archbishop Desmond Tutu on behalf of the South African Council of Churches and of Allan Boesak on behalf of the World Alliance of Reformed Churches? Mandela would at least have had a harder time. In real politics, it is *often* wise for secular leaders and intellectuals to offer encouragement to ecclesiastical organizations that are disposed, under the circumstances, to promote freedom and justice.

Rorty's generalized anticlericalism seems to be in tension with his anti-essentialism. Just as the original version of his secularism appeared to presuppose that religion is *essentially* a conversation-stopper, his current anticlericalism appears to presuppose that ecclesiastical organizations and the professionals associated with them are *essentially* disposed to create ill-will. He dismisses counterexamples as beside the point. He wants to say what such organizations "typically" do and then to oppose the involvement of *any* such organization in politics. We have no need, however, to frame our options in such a general and abstract way; we can easily take one case, or one class of cases, at a time.

In remarks given at the 2003 Annual Meeting of the American Academy of Religion (AAR) in Atlanta,<sup>27</sup> Rorty reasserts the anticlericalism of "Religion in the Public Square," but also says that he "persist[s] in thinking that non-theists make better citizens than theists," a view that hardly limits itself to criticizing the behavior of organizations. Again, it is hard to see why Rorty should not be taken to be assuming that the right way to approach the question of religion and politics is to think in terms of essential traits or tendencies: in the realm of citizenship, nontheists are *essentially* disposed to behave in a relatively good way, whereas theists are *essentially* disposed to behave relatively poorly.

Rorty is a holist in the philosophy of language. That is, he holds, roughly, that what someone believes or asserts when undertaking commitment to a given claim, such as the existence of God, is determined in large part by inferential connections between that claim and various other things that the person and his or her interlocutors believe, desire, and intend. Furthermore, Rorty holds, as I have already suggested, that being rationally entitled to believe this or that is a context-sensitive matter. What a person is rationally entitled to believe depends in large part on what else the person has come to believe as a result of being raised in a particular community and moving through life in a particular way. Rational entitlement and

meaning are both holistic rather than atomistic. A theist is someone who believes that God exists. According to Rorty's pragmatic holism, however, the significance of a given theist's belief in God can be determined only against a background of other commitments held by the same person. Similarly, what that person is entitled to infer from that belief depends on what those other commitments are, how they were acquired, and so on. A person who believes that God exists and also that God wants us to do everything in our power to alleviate the condition of the poor among us might well be disposed to behave in a way that Rorty and I would find to our liking. A person who believes that God exists and also that God intends to punish with hellfire anyone who breaks the purity code of Leviticus will be disposed to behave in a way that Rorty and I would want to oppose.

From the vantage point of pragmatic holism, it would seem that the notion of a theist, defined simply in terms of belief in God, in abstraction from other commitments, is largely indeterminate in its implications. Theism, taken in this bare sense, involves no political implications whatsoever. The same holds for atheism, understood as the bare denial that God exists, and for nontheism, understood as a lack of commitment to God's existence. To see whether someone taking one or another of these stances with respect to the existence of God is likely to make a better citizen than someone else, we are going to have to learn much more about that person than these thin designations tell us.

Rorty might want to argue that the problem with theism as such is that it presupposes a distinction between the natural and the supernatural. In drawing this distinction, theists open the door to a spectatorial conception of knowledge, according to which the really real is a matter of how things look from the supernatural vantage point of divine omniscience. They also open the door to attempts on the part of particular individuals or groups to claim privileged access to what God alone knows in full. The distinction between natural and supernatural tends to give rise, then, to a distinction between priests and the rest of us. The latter distinction, Rorty might then conclude, is bound to cause trouble for political equality in a democracy.

This argument, which echoes passages from Dewey, is suspiciously similar to the passages in which Hegel claims that one stage of the dialectic follows from another by necessity. To my mind, these are among the least persuasive passages in Dewey and Hegel. In the present case, the presentation of the dialectical progression obscures the fact that the unwelcome implications of belief in God's existence follow only if certain other commitments are brought into play. The argument does not show that theism as such has a tendency to move in any particular dialectical direction. For bare theism, almost all doors are open. What pushes theism through one or another door is combining bare theism with other commitments.

The moral of the story ought, therefore, to be that it is unwise to pass judgment as Rorty does on theists as such. What needs to be evaluated is theism of this or that particular sort—bare theism combined with various other commitments.

Rorty comes close to acknowledging all this in those moments when he praises thinkers like Gianni Vattimo for adopting a form of theism that adds to bare theism little more than the notion that God is love.<sup>28</sup> If Vattimo is worthy of praise, then it would seem that theism as such is not *inherently* prone to violate Rorty's anticlericalist political scruples. But Rorty tries to sidestep this conclusion by advising Vattimo to say: "I am becoming more and more religious, and so coming to have what many people would call a belief in God, but I am not sure that the term 'belief' is the right description of what I have."<sup>29</sup> My advice to Rorty would be to grant that the political benefits and dangers of each package of commitments will have to be assessed on a case-by-case basis. If pragmatic holism is preferable to atomism in semantics and epistemology, then a critical assessment of theism will have to involve inquiry into what happens when belief in God's existence gets linked to this or that set of collateral commitments. It is not theists as such who make worse citizens than nontheists. We have every reason to complain about hateful theists, cruel theists, theists who take God to be a jealous commander of vengeful cruelties, and so on. But one should also have the same problem with hateful nontheists, cruel nontheists, and nontheists who take the historical dialectic to justify mass murder and the crushing of dissent. "Do theists or nontheists make the better citizens?" is a bad question, the sort of question a pragmatist would be expected to undermine rather than answer.

I promised to return to Rorty's claim that pragmatism, being devoted to de-divinizing the world, is incompatible with theism. There are two relatively uninteresting ways of taking this claim. We can make it turn out to be trivially true by interpreting "pragmatism" simply as the name for Rorty's own philosophical commitments. Rorty often uses expressions like "pragmatism" and "we pragmatists" when delineating his own distinctive positions, and he is a de-divinizer, so pragmatism in this sense is incompatible with theism. But we already knew that. We can make the claim turn out to be obviously false if we count any position as compatible with pragmatism if that position was adopted by one of the classical pragmatists: C. S. Peirce, John Dewey, or William James. Dewey was a de-divinizing naturalist, but Peirce and James were theists. Hence, pragmatism in this sense is compatible with theism; but again, we knew that already.

Rorty could try to turn the claim of incompatibility into something more interesting by telling a story. He could describe the development

of pragmatism from the canonical period to the present, arguing that the theme of de-divinization succeeds in explaining what is most interesting about the movement from a contemporary point of view. Such a story would cast Dewey as the central figure from the classical stage of the movement, while emphasizing the extent to which all of the canonical figures were responding to such de-divinizing influences as Charles Darwin's evolutionary biology and John Stuart Mill's utilitarianism. A story constructed along these lines could acknowledge the theistic commitments of Peirce and James without viewing those commitments as central to the unfolding of the movement, perhaps even treating them as encumbrances that delayed the clear emergence of the movement's most important and distinctive contribution to culture.

This is, of course, exactly the story Rorty wishes to tell about the development of pragmatism. The trouble with it is that Rorty is hardly the only prominent thinker nowadays identified as a pragmatist. Rebecca Chopp, William Stacy Johnson, Henry Levinson, Hilary Putnam, Peter Ochs, Bas van Fraassen, and Cornel West all align themselves with both pragmatism and some form of Jewish or Christian theism. So there remains something arbitrary about treating Rorty's project as definitive of pragmatism as such. Each of these thinkers is free to tell the story of pragmatism's development from his or her own point of view, and when they do, we should not find it either surprising or improper that each of the stories culminates in a position that the story-teller endorses as pragmatism rightly understood.<sup>30</sup>

There is another way to add interest and plausibility to Rorty's identification of pragmatism with a de-divinizing project. It is to show that some doctrine which is recognizably central to pragmatism is at odds with theism. One doctrine that would be central to pragmatism on any plausible retelling of the movement's history is the permissive, context-sensitive conception of rational entitlement that we have already touched on a number of times in this essay. A second doctrine of this sort is a holistic conception of meaning as use or conceptual role. But we have seen that these doctrines have had favorable consequences for theism, for they have made it much harder for critics of theism to show that theists as such must lack rational entitlement to their religious commitments or that believing in God tends in itself to make someone a worse citizen than he or she would otherwise be. Rorty himself acknowledges the first of these consequences when he expresses appreciation for James's arguments in "The Will to Believe" and when he refuses to join people like Harris and Singer in declaring all modern theists irrational.<sup>31</sup> I have been arguing that Rorty should acknowledge the second consequence.

What, then, might Rorty have in mind as a doctrine that implicitly commits pragmatists to de-divinizing the world? The answer becomes

clear in his AAR remarks. A central doctrine in pragmatism is the social-practical conception of norms that the classical pragmatists took over from Hegel. In an excellent overview of Rorty's pragmatism, Robert Brandom shows that this doctrine is the idea that ties together nearly all of Rorty's major contributions to philosophy since the late 1960s. "Pragmatism about norms," Brandom explains, is "the thought that any normative matter of epistemic authority or privilege . . . is ultimately intelligible only in terms of the social practices that involve implicitly recognizing or acknowledging such authority."<sup>32</sup> As Rorty glosses this thought in his AAR remarks, it is the notion "that social agreement among human beings is the source of all norms."<sup>33</sup> If pragmatism in this sense "is indeed the philosophical view best suited to democracy, and if theism cannot be brought within the ambit of that sort of pragmatism, then theism and democracy remain at odds." Why? The reason is that theism involves "acknowledgement of a non-human authority, and such acknowledgement is incompatible" with pragmatism about norms. If pragmatism (about norms) entails that epistemic authority or privilege is always and only a matter of social agreement *among human beings*, then theism, with its characteristic acknowledgement of an ultimate, nonhuman source of authority, is incompatible with pragmatism—and perhaps also with democracy (though here the reasoning is less persuasive).

As Rorty tells the story of pragmatism, Dewey is the classical pragmatist who most fully grasped the broader cultural significance of pragmatism about norms, thereby setting the pragmatic tradition free to become a wide-ranging program of cultural criticism in the service of self-reliance. Self-reliance, for Rorty, is a de-divinizing project in all matters that pertain to normative authority. It is a project that can be turned toward democratic ends, because it locates the source of all authority in human hands. It is the epistemological counterpart to the democratic doctrine of popular sovereignty: rulers derive their authority from the consent of the people. But pragmatic self-reliance cannot, he thinks, be made compatible with the theist's insistence that God is the ultimate source of all authority.

Because I am no less a proponent of humanistic self-reliance than Rorty is, there is much in his story that I find attractive. It is the version of pragmatism's history that one would want to include as a chapter in a wide-ranging history of the modern quest for self-reliance, because it explains the many ways in which pragmatism has assisted in that quest. Rorty's importance as a philosopher largely consists in showing that the pragmatist conception of self-reliance stands among the most profound episodes in the story of modern thought.

Once again, however, I find it ironic and unfortunate that Rorty, the antiessentialist, appears to have a strong interest in debating the question

whether this or that "ism" is inherently compatible or incompatible with some other "ism." Is pragmatism incompatible with theism? That obviously depends on what we take "pragmatism" to mean, and 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. Rorty makes clear in his AAR remarks that in this context he takes "pragmatism" to mean what Brandom means by "pragmatism about norms," and Rorty glosses this in turn as the self-reliant claim that all authority rests ultimately in human hands. But thinkers like Ochs or West can respond to this move, if they wish, by glossing "pragmatism about norms" simply as the claim that all authority derives from social practices of mutual accountability among persons, leaving open what sorts of persons there are. If one of the existing persons is God, then authority can still be something that arises only within social practices.

What might these social practices be? A theistic pragmatist could argue that they include the very activities that the Bible represents as involving human beings and God in partnership, such as promise making, promise keeping, agreeing to enter a covenant, and holding one another responsible in terms of a covenant. In one passage, Rorty says that

when we start thinking of the acquisition of knowledge . . . as a matter of acquiring social status in our community by producing assertions that are reliable guides for action, it is not clear that analogies are available that can be used to explain what it would be like to be a non-human knower. This is because it is not clear how somebody we cannot talk things over with could acquire social status.<sup>34</sup>

Theists who are not deists will be quick to point out that their outlook does not take God to be someone uninvolved in human social practices, someone with whom human beings are not in a position to talk.

From the vantage point of theistic pragmatists, then, what Dewey and Rorty have done is to show us what pragmatism about norms looks like *when construed anthropocentrically*. One possibly illuminating version of the story of pragmatism would take pragmatism about norms to be central to the pragmatic tradition, while leaving this doctrine open to both theistic and anthropocentric interpretations. Telling the story in this way would highlight the influence of Scottish philosophy on Peirce—and thus allow us to see his Christian pragmatism as a reworking, in a secular philosophical context, of insights that were already implicit in the Scottish Calvinist accounts of the covenant and promise. We could then see pragmatism as a philosophical tradition in which theists and nontheists have kept a conversation going on the social-practical sources of authority, making use of



their somewhat different assumptions about what sorts of persons there are.

While my own contributions to that conversation come from a non-theistic perspective, just as Rorty's do, I have no stake in privileging either his use of "pragmatism" or the less restrictive use employed in the alternative story I have just sketched. When these two uses of the term begin to get in each other's way, we can always employ the method recommended by James in "What Pragmatism Means,"<sup>35</sup> and substitute less troublesome terms for the one causing the trouble. Is pragmatism (about norms) incompatible with theism? Yes, if the "ism" is glossed in an anthropocentric way; no, if the "ism" is glossed without building anthropocentric assumptions into it. But again, we knew all that already. In the end, which labels we use to identify our positions matters little. A more important question is whether we take authority to be a social-practical affair. More important still is whether we believe some of the persons caught up in our social practices to be divine and, if so, what, if anything, we take those persons to be requiring of us. That it would simplify political life if people stopped believing in divinities of any kind goes without saying. Politics, however, is not simple, and it is unlikely to become less entangled with religious concerns anytime soon.

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#### NOTES

I have received helpful comments on a draft of this paper from Stephen Bush, David Decosimo, Kevin Hector, Joseph Margolis, Mairaj Syed, Paul Taylor, and Ian Ward.

1. I discuss the former differences in "On Our Interest in Getting Things Right: Pragmatism without Narcissism," in *The New Pragmatists*, ed. Cheryl Misak (Oxford: Oxford Univ. Press, 2007).

2. Richard Rorty, "Religion as Conversation-stopper," in *Philosophy and Social Hope* (New York: Penguin Books, 1999), 168–74; this essay will be cited hereafter as "RCS."

3. Rorty, "RCS," 169.

4. Richard Rorty, *Contingency, Irony, and Solidarity* (Cambridge: Cambridge Univ. Press, 1989), 22.

5. Richard Rorty, *Consequences of Pragmatism: Essays 1972–1980* (Min-

neapolis: Univ. of Minnesota Press, 1982), xlii–xliii.

6. Mary Douglas, "The Effects of Modernization on Religious Change," in *Religion and America: Spirituality in a Secular Age*, ed. Mary Douglas and Steven M. Tipton (Boston: Beacon Press, 1983), 25–43, 25–26.

7. Peter Berger, "The Desecularization of the World: A Global Overview," in *The Desecularization of the World: Resurgent Religion and World Politics*, ed. Peter Berger (Grand Rapids, MI: William B. Eerdmans Publishing, 1999), 1–18.

8. There has, however, been a compromise concerning tax-free status for religious institutions, freedom of worship, and the prohibition of laws establishing a particular religion as that of the nation as a whole. But this is a different matter.

9. Richard Rorty, "Failed Prophecies, Glorious Hopes," in *Philosophy and Social Hope*, 201–9. Hereafter I shall cite this essay as "FPGH."

10. Rorty, "FPGH," 205.

11. *Ibid.*, 203.

12. Richard Rorty, "Religion in the Public Square: A Reconsideration," *Journal of Religious Ethics* 31, no.1 (2003): 141–49, 141. Hereafter I shall cite this essay as "RPS." The essay responds to Nicholas Wolterstorff, "An Engagement with Rorty," *Journal of Religious Ethics* 31, no.1 (2003): 129–39. Rorty also refers to arguments eventually published in Jeffrey Stout, *Democracy and Tradition* (Princeton: Princeton Univ. Press, 2004), ch. 3.

13. Rorty, "RPS," 142–43.

14. *Ibid.*, 146–47.

15. *Ibid.*, "RPS," 143.

16. *Ibid.*

17. *Ibid.*

18. Rorty, "RPS," 143–44.

19. It is a pity that most center-left politicians in America have in recent decades either been biblical illiterates or squeamish about discussing the Bible in public. The character of the president in NBC's television program *The West Wing* is in this respect, as in so many others, meant to show what a competent center-left leader would look like. In the October 18, 2000 episode, "The Midterms," President Josiah Bartlett, a theologically serious but open-minded Roman Catholic, delivers the following diatribe to a radio talk-show host who happens to be visiting the White House. The talk-show host is a Protestant biblical literalist, and happens to be seated when the President unexpectedly arrives.

Bartlett: I like your show. I like how you call homosexuality an abomination.

Talk-show host: I don't say homosexuality is an abomination, Mr. President, the Bible does.

Bartlett: Yes, it does. Leviticus.

Talk-show host: 18:22.

Bartlett: Chapter and verse. I wanted to ask you a couple of questions while I had you here. I'm interested in selling my youngest daughter into slavery

as sanctioned in Exodus 21:7. She's a Georgetown sophomore, speaks fluent Italian, always cleared the table when it was her turn. What would a good price for her be? While you're thinking about that, can I ask another? My chief of staff, Leo McGarry, insists on working on the Sabbath. Exodus 35:2 clearly says he should be put to death. Am I morally obligated to kill him myself, or is it okay to call the police? Here's one that's really important because we've got a lot of sports fans in this town. Touching the skin of a dead pig makes one unclean. Leviticus 11:7. If they promise to wear gloves, can the Washington Redskins still play football? Can Notre Dame? Can West Point? Does the whole town really have to be together to stone my brother John for planting different crops side-by-side? Can I burn my mother in a small family gathering for wearing garments made from two different threads? Think about those questions, would you? One last thing, while you may be mistaking this for your monthly meeting of the Ignorant Tight-Ass Club, in this building, when the President stands, nobody sits.

This dialogue was based on an open letter to the real-life talk-show host, Dr. Laura, by Kent Ashcraft.

20. Rorty, "RPS," 144.

21. *Ibid.*, 146.

22. See Jeffrey Stout, *Ethics after Babel: The Languages of Morals and Their Discontents*, expanded edition (Princeton: Princeton Univ. Press, 2001), ch. 7.

23. I am here employing a type of sociological analysis first developed by Mary Douglas in *Natural Symbols* (New York: Pantheon Books, 1970), and later developed by her and others in many other works. In Douglas's terms, the communities I am describing would be classified as "strong group, weak grid," a type associated with witchcraft accusations and similar phenomena. I am saying that in such places as prairie towns, gays and lesbians are now being treated as if they were witches because they symbolize the corruption of the community's purity by outside forces. The unborn baby symbolizes the purity that is being corrupted. The vehement passions that are expressed in political debates over same-sex marriage and abortion have everything to do with purity preoccupations unleashed by the weakening of grid. Similar preoccupations are expressed at the level of academic theology by theories of the church as a community of virtue threatened by liberalism, where the church itself takes over the symbolic role played by the unborn in popular culture. These preoccupations do indeed endanger democratic values, but they are associated with one particular religious style, not with religion as such. Trying to insulate public space from the expression of such preoccupations is best viewed as an expression of *another threatened community's purity concerns*.

24. Rorty, "RPS," 141–42.

25. Rorty, "RPS," 142.

26. Rorty, "RPS," 141.

27. Richard Rorty, "Comments on Jeffrey Stout's *Democracy and Tradition*," delivered on November 23, 2003. I will be quoting from the unpublished manuscript of these remarks, referred to hereafter as "AAR." I discuss other passages from this paper in "On Our Interest in Getting Things Right," in *The New Pragmatists*, 7–31.

28. See especially Richard Rorty, "Anticlericalism and Atheism," in Rorty and Gianni Vattimo, *The Future of Religion*, ed. Santiago Zabala (New York: Columbia Univ. Press, 2005), 29–41.

29. *Ibid.*, 34.

30. If Hegel was right, the telling of such Whiggish stories is indispensably important in our exercise of critical rationality. "One of Hegel's deepest and most important insights, I think, is that the determinate contentfulness of any universal . . . can be understood only in terms of the process by which it incorporates the contingencies of the particulars to which it has actually been applied. But he goes on from there to insist that those of us who are heirs to such a conceptual tradition must ensure that it is a *rational* tradition—that the distinction it embodies and enforces between correct and incorrect applications of a concept can be *justified*, that applying it in one case and withholding application in another is something for which we can give *reasons*. . . . We fulfill our obligation by rationally reconstructing the tradition: by finding a coherent, cumulative trajectory through it that reveals it as expressively progressive, as the gradual unfolding into greater explicitness of commitments that can be seen retrospectively as always already having been implicit in it." Robert Brandom, "Reason, Expression, and the Philosophic Enterprise," in *What Is Philosophy?* ed. C. P. Ragland and Sarah Heidt (New Haven, CN: Yale Univ. Press, 2001), 74–95, 75.

31. For Rorty's treatment of James, see "Religious Faith, Intellectual Responsibility and Romance," in *Philosophy and Social Hope*, ch. 10.

32. Robert B. Brandom, "Vocabularies of Pragmatism: Synthesizing Naturalism and Historicism," in *Rorty and His Critics*, ed. Robert B. Brandom (Oxford: Blackwell Publishers, 2000), 156–83, 159.

33. Rorty, "AAR," 2.

34. Rorty, "AAR," 4.

35. William James, "What Pragmatism Means," in *Pragmatism and Other Writings*, ed. Giles Gunn (New York: Penguin Books, 2000), 24–40. See also Willard Van Orman Quine, *Word and Object* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1960), 258–66.



## REPLY TO JEFFREY STOUT

Jeffrey Stout contrasts my dream of a perfectly secular utopia with his own dream of reviving “the sort of coalition between religious groups and secular intellectuals” that was a conspicuous feature of the civil rights movement. I agree with Stout that such a coalition is needed to “save American democracy from plutocrats and theocrats at home and abroad.” So I agree that the revival he hopes for is an urgent short-range goal. But I persist in thinking that a perfectly secular utopia is an important long-range one.

Stout sees “religion, in its public manifestations, as an ever-changing mixture of life-giving and malignant tendencies.” A similar description might have been given, between 1848 and 1989, of Marxism. Most young people who became Marxist revolutionaries did so out of generosity of spirit. Although most postrevolutionary Marxist governments metamorphosed into gangs of murderous thugs, not all of them did so. At various times and places, the social democrats were able to form coalitions with Marxists, and occasionally these coalitions achieved some good results. Still, the cause of social justice would have been better served if Marx’s polemics against “bourgeois democracy” and “mere reformism” had gone unheard. Marxism was a ladder that should have been thrown away much sooner than it actually was.

Just as it would have been better if the Bolshevik Revolution had failed, and if the only version of leftism on the market after 1918 had been social democracy, so it would have been better if the evangelical revolution in the US had failed—if the televangelists had been unable to acquire the political power they presently enjoy. It would have been better if the decline in church attendance in Western Europe had been mirrored in the United States, and if the Social Gospel had remained the dominant interpretation of the Christian message among the Protestant clergy.

I agree with Stout that “the secularism of Western Europe increasingly looks like an exception to the rule, rather than like the future toward which all modern societies are tending.” But we can grant that Weber was wrong

about the inevitability of secularism without conceding the inevitability of a return to religion. Religion does indeed seem unlikely to wither away, but it is important to insist that we would be better off if it did.

So I disagree with Stout’s claim that “there is no point in trying to answer the question of whether ecclesiastical organizations in general, or even people like Wojtila and Ratzinger in particular, did more harm than good.” Gustavo Gutierrez, I imagine, thinks it perfectly obvious that Ratzinger did more harm than good, just as Václav Havel thinks it perfectly obvious that Lenin did. There is as much point in discussing whether Gutierrez is right as in discussing whether Havel is. Debating such questions is one of the ways we learn from history.

Stout says that he himself “has no critique to offer of religion as such,” and that he has trouble seeing why an antiessentialist pragmatist like myself would want to make “sweeping remarks either for or against such a thing.” I agree that there is no point in making criticisms of “religion as such” if that term is used to denote any and all forms of life that somehow involve belief in, or at least tacit reliance upon, the supernatural. In that sense of the term, religion is as unlikely to go away as (to use Stout’s examples) sports, politics, or art. If “religion” is construed broadly enough to cover Tennyson’s faint trust in the larger hope, then I agree with Stout that religion will never wither away. In any future society there will be an area of culture that has some sort of continuity with the one we now call “religion,” just as there will be one more or less continuous with the one we now call “art.” But what counts as religious may then be as different from what we call religious as Proust is from Dante or Warhol from Fra Angelico.

Nevertheless, there is something that the great prophets of secularism have hoped would go away, and that might someday do so (though not, alas, in the foreseeable future): belief in post-mortem rewards and punishments meted out by a nonhuman person on the basis of conduct in this mortal life. In my “perfect secular utopia” neither hopes of such rewards nor fears of such punishments would play any role in moral or political deliberation. There would still be theists of the sort Stout and I both admire, but none of the kind we fear. There would be room for the sort of God worshipped by James, Whitehead, Tillich, and West (and, I suspect, by Rauschenbush, Gutierrez, and King), but none for the sort worshipped by St. Paul, Wojtila, Ratzinger, Falwell, and Khomeini.

I agree with Stout that arguments, including my own, for keeping the public square free of Scriptural references have been failures. I also agree that, in the present situation in the US, coalition-building is the way to go. So I can agree that it might be prudent to stop comparing people who cite Leviticus 18:22 to those who justified chattel slavery and anti-misce-

genation laws by references to the destiny of the sons of Ham. I do not, however, share Stout's belief that "picking apart their rationalizations" is likely to give Leviticus-citers "insight into their own motives." I suspect that works of art illustrating how these homosexuals love one another are more likely to change minds than rhetorical questions such as "So why don't you obey the dietary injunctions in Leviticus too?" Just as the books of Harriet Beecher Stowe and James Baldwin helped enlarge the imagination of racists, so gay-themed movies are enlarging those of homophobes. I have less faith than Stout does in the acquisition of greater rationality through Socratic questioning. I pin my (admittedly faint) hopes on the power of dramatic narrative.

Stout concludes his contribution to this volume by saying that pragmatism about norms (i.e., the doctrine that "all authority derives from social practices of mutual accountability among persons") is only incompatible with theism if "construed anthropocentrically." He writes as if one might first decide to be a pragmatist about norms and only then turn to questions concerning the role in human life of contact with supernatural beings. But I suspect people become pragmatists only because they are first secularists: I cannot imagine anyone adopting James's view of truth who was not already convinced that human beings are responsible only to one another. Pragmatism stands on the shoulders of the Enlightenment.

Criticisms of representationalist theories of mind and language (of the sort in which I have specialized) remain sterile scholastic exercises until they are tied in with attempts to get rid of the notion of appeal to a non-human authority—the common element in the idea that we can appeal to the Divine Will and the idea that we should attempt to represent Reality accurately. We should remember that James initially wanted to use "humanism" as a label for the movement he thought of as led by himself and F. C. S. Schiller. (Schiller retained that label, but James dropped it in favor of "pragmatism" in order to give Peirce a bit of favorable publicity.)

Stout also writes as if there might be some supernatural beings who are tolerant, conversable, and eager to engage with humans in practices of mutual accountability. Maybe there are, but they are very different from most of the deities who, in the course of human history, have actually been adored. Most religious communities relish the thought that the deity before whom they bend their knees has zero tolerance for disagreement. The recent "return to religion" that has falsified Weber's optimistic predictions is driven, at least in part, by a yearning for the sort of conversation-stopping certainty that pragmatists hope human beings will someday cease to want. The last thing that the followers of Falwell and Khomeini are interested in is a tolerant and conversable deity. There are certainly passages here and there in the Christian Scriptures that suggest that accountability between

the divine and the human goes both ways, but these passages are taken seriously only by a few liberal theologians.

I conclude by reemphasizing the distinction I drew at the outset between the necessity for short-term political compromises (where "short-term" means something like "for the next couple of centuries, at least") and the need for long-term dreaming about what human life might be like a thousand years down the road. I agree with Stout about the unfeasibility, at the present juncture, of pursuing what he calls "a secularist political agenda." But I still think it important to pursue a long-term, militantly secularist, *philosophical* agenda. Stout is of course right that lots of theists are as good citizens of democratic polities as are any of their nonbelieving neighbors. But the inhabitants of my perfect secularist utopia will nevertheless be puzzled about how democracy managed to survive in a time when a majority of citizens still professed to believe that the wrong political choices might doom them to the fires of hell and the right ones entitle them to the joys of paradise. They will be as glad not to have been born in those dangerous times as we are not to have lived under the Inquisition.

R. R.