Faith and Conversation: The Politics and Epistemology of Religion in Richard Rorty's Philosophy

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One of the most recurrent themes in Richard Rorty's recent political philosophy is the role of religion in modern liberal democracies. Rorty has consistently held the view that religious belief is an irreducibly private matter, and as such irrelevant to public political practices. Although his commendation of a privatized religion founders on the premise that it is an inalienable right of everyone in a liberal democracy to hold any religious faith without the compulsion to justify it in terms acceptable to a secular community, religious believers could well regard his proposal as an undemocratic attempt at their exclusion from the political sphere. Given Rorty's staunch commitment to liberal democratic values, it would certainly be unwarranted to accuse him of political exclusionism, yet I contend in what follows that his uncompromising antifoundationalism leaves him no other avenue of approach to religion but that of criticism, which he seems willing to undertake in politically conceived discussions. His overt political skepticism, however, is mitigated, as it were, by an apparent tolerance when he construes religion on an epistemological basis. In two sections below, I will investigate this dichotomous interplay between Rorty's epistemological and political interpretations of religion, arguing that—despite his attempt to set them apart—the two are inextricably intertwined. In the second, I will concentrate on Rorty's reading of William James's "The Will to Believe," in which Rorty discusses religious faith as "unjustifiable." My contention is that his claim is plausible only if we reinstate the distinction between faith and reason, which Rorty, due to his skepticism about foundational epistemology, wholeheartedly opposes.

Religion as politics and as epistemology

In the past two decades, Richard Rorty has shown a growing interest in issues related to religion, which is evidenced by the publication of several essays and a recent book,[1] despite the fact that throughout his oeuvre he has repeatedly professed himself an "atheist," a "militant secularist" (Boffetti 24), an "anticlericalist" ("Anticlericalism" 33), or, at his blandest, "religiously unmusical" ("Anticlericalism" 30). In fact, Rorty's skepticism about religion is fueled by the same distrust that he bears against foundationalist epistemology and, by implication, professional philosophy. Religion, much like foundationalist epistemology in terms of human knowledge, promises to provide ultimate answers to perennial questions of human existence in an attempt to render all further human inquiries superfluous. Analogously, traditional philosophy, in Rorty's view, "sees itself [...] [as] foundational in respect to the rest of culture because culture is the assemblage of claims to knowledge, and philosophy adjudicates such claims" (*Mirror* 3). The belief that philosophy is able to adjudicate all claims to knowledge can easily be mapped onto the religious believer's faith in the omnipotence of the deity s/he believes in.

Rorty's antiessentialist view of philosophy dovetails with his political inclinations, for he holds that the dismantling of foundationalism paves the way for a democratized and solidary culture whose members are sufficiently "nominalist and historicist" to believe that "nothing has an intrinsic nature, a real essence," thus being more willing to abandon essentialism and pernicious forms of ahistorical thinking (*Contingency* 74). Envisaging his liberal utopia, Rorty casts his large-scale antiessentialism in explicitly *antireligious* terms when he urges that "we try to get to 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" (*Contingency* 22). He also infers the desirability and plausibility of the deposal of metaphysics from the post-Enlightenment dethronement of religion: he argues that the idea of a culture without religion before the Enlightenment must have appeared no less utopian than the idea of a postmetaphysical culture might appear in contemporary liberal democracies. The decline of religious faith, he contends, "and specifically

[1] *The Future of Religion* (2005), which comprises his conversation with Gianni Vattimo.

the decline of people's ability to take the idea of postmortem rewards seriously, has not weakened liberal societies, and indeed has strengthened them" (*Contingency* 85). Moreover, in order for the utopian liberal culture to function properly, it has to be fully "de-divinized." As he argues:

> [I]n its ideal form, the culture of liberalism would be one which was enlightened, secular, through and through. It would be one in which no trace of divinity remained, either in the form of a divinized world or a divinized self. Such a culture would have no room for the notion that there are nonhuman forces to which human beings should be responsible. [...] The process of de-divinization [...] should, ideally, culminate in our no longer being able to see any use for the notion that finite, mortal, contingently existing human beings might derive the meanings of their lives from anything except other finite, mortal, contingently existing human beings. (*Contingency* 45)

Rorty, however, is known to have made even more poignant remarks to the detriment of religion. As Jason Boffetti reports, he bluntly stated in a public lecture that the Enlightenment was "right to suggest that religion is something that the human species would be better if it could outgrow" (24). Boffetti also quotes Rorty as reminding his audience of Diderot's notorious claim that "the last king should be strangled with the entrails of the last priest," adding that "even though some of my best friends are priests, I feel some sympathy with all these critics of religious institutions" (24).

In Rorty's more recent texts, the militant rhetoric is somewhat softened, though his critique has become no less severe. He stipulates, nonetheless, that his criticism is motivated by "anticlericalistic" rather than "atheistic" impulses, to stress its distinctively political edge, in that it is directed at "ecclesiastical institutions," not at individual believers ("Anticlericalism" 33). He outright claims that despite "all the comfort they provide to those in need or in despair," these institutions "are dangerous to the health of democratic societies" ("Anticlericalism" 33). Religion, he continues this line of thought, "is unobjectionable as long as it is privatized—as long as ecclesiastical institutions do not attempt to rally the faithful behind political proposals and as long as believers and unbelievers agree to follow a policy of live and let live" ("Anticlericalism" 33).

Rorty traces this line of political reasoning back to Thomas Jefferson, quoting his famous maxim in approval: "it does me no injury for my neighbor to say that there are twenty Gods or no God" ("Priority"

175). Nevertheless, in a society whose political practices are thoroughly secularized, it is imperative to find a way of "privatizing religion—keeping it out of [...] 'the public square,' making it seem bad taste to bring religion into discussions of public policy" ("Conversation-Stopper" 169). The democratic tolerance towards religion comes at the price of what Rorty dubs the "Jeffersonian compromise," according to which religious believers should "remain willing to trade privatization for a guarantee of religious liberty" ("Conversation-Stopper" 171). Thus, the religious "must abandon or modify opinions on matters of ultimate importance [...] if these opinions entail public actions that cannot be justified to most of their fellow citizens" ("Priority" 175).

While privatization appears to be a reasonable price to pay for religious freedom from an atheist's point of view, religious advocates might well look upon it as the curtailment of that very freedom. Stephen Carter's *The Culture of Disbelief* is certainly s case in point, which provoked a response from Rorty with the telling title, "Religion As Conversation-Stopper," in which he argues that the "main reason religion needs to be privatized is that, in political discussion with those outside the relevant religious community, it is a conversation-stopper" (171). Carter, however, finds it objectionable that the relegation of religion to the private sphere leaves such a narrow discursive space to the faithful that their religion-specific arguments become inconsequential outside that limited space. Rorty quotes Carter as saying:

> [T]he effort by contemporary liberal philosophers to create a conversational space in which individuals of very different viewpoints can join [in] dialogic battle, in accord with a set of dialogic conventions that all can accept. The philosophical idea is that even though all of us have differing personal backgrounds and biases, we nevertheless share certain moral principles in common. [...] [The problem is that] all these efforts to limit the conversation to premises held in common would exclude religion from the mix. [...] [The solution would be to form] a public square that does not restrict its access to citizens willing to speak in a purely secular language, but instead is equally open to religious and nonreligious argument. (qtd in Rorty, "Conversation-Stopper" 170–71)

Carter, from his own vantage point, makes a convincing case: in his view, what he is asked to do is disparage his faith by declaring it politically insubstantial. Rorty's statement to the effect that religion needs to be excluded from the public square *because* it is a conversation-stopper must strike him as merely a question-begging attempt at silencing

religious voices in political debates. To Carter, it seems highly paradoxical that liberal democracies are founded on the ideal of an open and inclusive discursive space, capable of accommodating several conflicting viewpoints, whereas the religious find themselves excluded and trivialized by the champions of this very ideal.

This contradiction can be seen to inhabit Rorty's argument, in that the success of his democratically conceived attempt to accommodate religious faith within the discursive space of a secularist society is predicated on the extent to which he is capable of proving religion to be antithetical, if not outright detrimental, to liberal democratic values. Rorty seems to be well aware of this tension, which is why he tries to blunt the exclusionist edge of his rhetoric by arguing that the privatization of religion is in the best interest of the religious themselves. His rejoinder to Carter is that the fear of being excluded is founded on "the [false] premise that the nonpolitical is always trivial" (170). Rorty urges that religion be treated like poetry: nonpolitical, yet having the potential of being a matter of vital importance for certain individuals—a private pursuit that "both give[s] meaning to individual human lives and [...] [is] such that mature, public-spirited adults are quite right in not attempting to use them as a basis for politics" (170). This analogy makes Rorty's argument no less problematic, for it implicitly raises doubts as to whether religion is capable of providing the believer with a *Weltanschauung* as comprehensive as to accommodate politics. He seems to suggest, thereby, that one's religion cannot constitute an acceptable set of beliefs to rely on in a public conversation unless it is purged of its specifically religious content. Furthermore, Rorty's insistence on a depoliticized religion gains relevance only within a politicized discursive space: despite his intention to the contrary, his argument cannot escape being articulated in political terms.

There is, however, a notable change of heart to be observed in writings where Rorty construes religion in *epistemological*, rather than in political terms. He endorses the classical pragmatist view of religion, which rests on Charles Sanders Peirce's redefinition of beliefs as "habits of action" as opposed to representations. Antirepresentationalism in this context consists in the view that religion can be construed as a set of social and discursive practices (adopted with or without reflection), which constitute, rather than represent, one's faith. This is, in fact, the reversal of the traditional metaphysical model which posits belief as an essentially internal property, and treats any linguistic utterance of religious content as

the expression—externalization—of one's faith. The reversal consists in the claim that faith is not a property one can *de facto* internalize or externalize, but, rather, one claims oneself a believer from within a certain set of discursive practices. It is due to the assumptions resulting from these practices that, for instance, the believer sees providence where the nonbeliever sees mere contingency. Thus, one's actions and utterances are not merely representations of faith, but its very abode. This anti-foundationalist approach to religious faith is cogently phrased by Gary Wihl in his discussion of the broader issue of conviction: "Convictions do not appear as representable things in and of themselves, separate from their concrete embodiment. The language of convictions, therefore, does not function like a representational medium" (10).

We can take Wihl's account of conviction to be applicable to religious faith, in that his formulation argues against the existence of a nondiscursive object of representation to which faith can be shown to correspond. It also implies that any faith or conviction can be firmly held inasmuch as certain assumptions constitutive of that faith remain unexamined, or even inaccessible. For this reason, if a religious believer—given that s/he is sufficiently aware of the distinctively philosophical sense of "representation"—were consciously to reflect on his/her language when involved in some kind of religious practice (such as praying), s/he would be unlikely to differentiate between his/her words being *representations* and those being *constituents* of his/her faith. Moreover, the ability to make this differentiation might undercut the distinctively religious content of one's faith simply on account of the epistemological (or rationalizing) nature of the reflection. Thus, for very different reasons, "the language of convictions" can be accepted as being nonrepresentational by the pragmatist antifoundationalist and by the religious believer alike: to the former, this fact is a logical corollary of discarding traditional epistemological distinctions, while to the latter, his/her religious conviction constitutes a foundation firm enough to be sustained without epistemological underpinnings.

This curious affinity seems to account for Rorty's conciliatory attitude toward religion, not least because once he resolutely turns his back on foundational epistemology, he cannot appeal to classical distinctions between faith as an epistemologically dubious form of thought, and something less dubious like rationality. As he outright states at one point: the "claim that [...] we [atheists] are appealing to reason, whereas the religious are being irrational, is hokum" ("Religious Faith"

172). At another point, he criticizes Sidney J. Hook for championing science as a model for pragmatist thought, and for debunking faith in the face of rationality. Hook antagonizes science and theology by reference to their differing attitudes toward "the mysterious:" "one tries to solve mysteries," Hook says, "the other worships them [...] [and] believes that some specific mysteries are final" (181). Rorty, by contrast, claims that the "anti-scientific, holistic pragmatist [which he considers himself to be] [...] wants us to adopt naturalism without thinking of ourselves as more rational than our theistic friends" ("Without Method" 66). Pragmatists, Rorty adds, should settle for "the laissez-faire attitude that sees religion and science as alternative ways of solving life's problems, to be distinguished by success or failure, rather than rationality or irrationality" ("Without Method" 66). In short, religion and science can, at best, be demarcated by reference to the different purposes they serve as social and discursive practices, not along illusory epistemological lines.

This pragmatist argument revolves around the assumption that appealing to reason when justifying a knowledge claim yields no more foundational validity (in an epistemological sense)l than appealing to faith. This insight, however, does not exempt us from the necessity to be able to tell the "right" sort of justification from the "wrong" one, since, as we can surmise from Rorty's foregoing politically-charged argument, there is much at stake when it is to be decided whether a certain justification does or does not fall in with the discursive norms of a community. In this specific context, marking out the right kind of justification is of crucial importance, if one is to argue convincingly either for the inclusion, or for the exclusion of religion in/from the public square. Further, the ability to make a differentiation between religion conceived in political terms, and religion conceived in epistemological terms presupposes a method of some sort whereby one can isolate the "purely" epistemological from the "purely" political content in the argument of one's religious interlocutor. Nonetheless, once the distinctions between faith and reason (neither being more or less epistemologically sound than the other), or between truth and justifiability (both being functions of social and discursive practices) have been blurred, there is no reason to retain the dividing line between the political and the epistemological either—in other words, there is no such thing as "pure content" (epistemological or political) to be isolated. For this reason, it is misleading to construe Rorty's attitude toward religion as oscillating between "epistemic acceptance" and "political dismissal," for

that would presuppose two essentially distinct antithetical poles, which allow one to switch back and forth between them at will. Rather, the two kinds of attitude can be seen as intertwined, amounting to a critique of religion that is more tangled than to admit of the neat economy of binaries.

What obfuscates the binary pattern is the fact that Rorty's criticism of religion stems from his thoroughgoing antiepistemological persuasion. His dismissal of foundational epistemology, in its turn, can be seen as the prerequisite of his defense of religion in the face of rationality. Rorty's comprehensive argument against foundationalist epistemology, in turn, extends to include religion as one possible form of thought which posits a putatively ultimate foundation which is instrumental in adjudicating knowledge claims. Nonetheless, it is only from the premise of the vacuity of such epistemological foundations that Rorty's endorsement of religion can be plausibly argued for. Thus, ironically enough, the platform on which Rorty is willing to grant the practical use of religious faith is predicated upon the insight that religion, as subsumed under the notion of foundationalist epistemology, is a redundant nonsubject, and, as such, due to be disposed of. In other words, once we concede Rorty's argument that epistemological foundationalism is to be overthrown, it becomes impossible to ascribe even a deflated (private) significance to religion.

In the section below, I will probe Rorty's claim that religious faith is virtually unjustifiable in the context of William James's related arguments. I contend that "unjustifiability" yields the same political verdict for religion as "privatization" does.

Faith and justification: reading Rorty via James

In classical pragmatism, the dismissal of the faith-reason dichotomy is arguably most emphatic in William James's "The Will to Believe." In his seminal essay, James bluntly claims to be "defending the legitimacy of religious faith" in the face of "some rationalizing readers" (449), being represented in the essay by the British mathematician and philosopher, William Kingdon Clifford. Clifford held the rigidly rationalist view that "[b]elief is desecrated when given to unproved and unquestioned statements, for the solace of the private pleasure of the believer. [...] It is wrong always, everywhere, and for anyone, to believe anything upon insufficient evidence" (qtd in "The Will" 461-62). James argues that if

one were to agree with Clifford on the wrongness of holding religious beliefs on insufficient evidence, one might be withheld from the hope of having something greater than oneself to hold onto: "one who should shut himself up in snarling logicality," James contends, "and try to make the gods extort his recognition willy-nilly [...] might cut himself off forever from his only opportunity to make the gods' acquaintance" (476). James identifies the difference between religious belief and other kinds of belief by relating the former to one's "passional nature," the latter to one's "intellect" (rationality). He states his thesis as follows: "*Our passional nature not only lawfully may, but must decide an option between propositions whenever it is a genuine option that cannot by its nature be decided on intellectual grounds*" (464). This thesis is indicative of James' attempt to blur the distinction between faith and reason in repudiation of the metaphysical notion of an all-encompassing epistemology, but he still does not seem to break entirely with epistemologically-conceived distinctions.

Despite the apparent affinities between their positions, Rorty severely criticizes James for his equivocation, which he takes to be an undesirable (and avoidable) relapse into the paradigm of foundational epistemology ("Religious Faith" 154). In critique of James' above-quoted thesis, Rorty objects that "James accepts exactly what he should reject: the idea that the mind is divided neatly down the middle into intellect and passion, and the idea that possible topics of discussion are divided neatly into the cognitive and the noncognitive ones" ("Religious Faith" 155). Rorty thinks that James should not have drawn a distinction between "intellect" and "emotion," but, rather, he should have "distinguish[ed] issues that you must resolve cooperatively with others and issues that you are entitled to resolve on your own" ("Polytheism" 37). Religion, according to Rorty, is clearly the latter sort of issue: like Romantic art, he argues, religion is a "paradigmatic project of individual self-development," in that it does not require intersubjective agreement like natural sciences or law, which are "paradigmatic projects of social cooperation" ("Polytheism" 35). Rorty, however, does not so much blur the cognitive-noncognitive distinction as reformulates it in terms more congenial to his neopragmatist discourse by substituting the socially-conceived dichotomy of public and private for the invidious epistemological dualism. The new distinction certainly makes it more difficult to dismiss religion with the offhand gesture of rendering it "irrational," but it also makes it vulnerable to an alternative form of

dismissal: one that is based on the thoroughly pragmaticized view of religious faith as a dispensable add-on to culture.

To spell out what is at stake in Rorty's argument, it is worthwhile to examine how he reiterates the rationale for the socially-conceived split in his recent work. He contends: "If social cooperation is what you want, the conjunction of the science and common sense of your day is all you need. But if you want something else, then a religion that has been taken out of the epistemic arena, a religion that finds the question of theism versus atheism uninteresting, may be what suits your solitude" (*Future* 39). Using the word "solitude"[2] points up yet another affinity between Rorty and James. In *The Varieties of Religious Experience* (1902), James defines the object of his inquiry as follows: "Religion [...] shall mean for us *the feelings, acts, and experiences of individual men in their solitude, so far as they apprehend themselves to stand in relation to whatever they may consider the divine*" (36). "Solitude" in both James and Rorty signifies the nonepistemic nature of religious experience, which entails that shared norms of commensuration may not be applied to explicate it. James also contends that science—the paradigmatic discourse of epistemic commensuration—merely "catalogues her elements and records her laws indifferent as to what purpose may be set forth by them, and constructs her theories quite careless of their bearing on human anxieties and fates" (*Varieties* 440). Human anxieties and fates are to be tackled at an individual level, which, according to James, is the very purpose religion serves. As he goes on to add:

> The pivot round which [...] religious life [...] revolves, is the interest of the individual in his private personal destiny. Religion, in short, is a monumental chapter in the history of human egotism. The gods believed in [...] agree with each other in recognizing personal calls. Religious thought is carried on in terms of personality, this being, in the world of religion, a fundamental fact. Today, quite as much as at any previous age, the religious individual tells you that the divine meets him on the basis of his personal concerns. (440)

James's claim for the individualization of religion would, in principle, explain away the need for the common ground of epistemology. With faith having become an irreducibly private matter, religious

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[2] See also "Religion As Conversation-Stopper," where Rorty, in reference to Whitehead, defines religion in pragmatic terms as "'what we do with our solitude,' rather than something people do together in churches" (169).

experience takes singular forms not translatable into communal terms, which, however, has anomalous consequences regarding the cultural sustainability of religion. By positing the radical privacy of religious faith, one undercuts the status of religion as a discursive practice, or as a language game whose rules can be mastered (or, at least, observed) on account of which it would be capable of being publicly shared. As a consequence, religion can be saved only at the expense of demotion: once we acknowledge that the singularity of one's religious experience is exempt from communal accountability, religious discourse gets inevitably isolated from the secular public discourses of the given community, whereby its cultural impact gets drastically reduced. Radically private experience presupposes a radically private language which, constituting an incommensurable conceptual scheme, makes conversation between the religious and the nonreligious next to impossible.

Nevertheless, conceding the privacy of various forms and instances of religious experience serves very different purposes for James and Rorty. James' aim in *Varieties* is to chart out the psychology, or, one might say, phenomenology of religious faith based on numerous case studies whose specific content, though connected by various intracultural elements, proved to be singular to the individual case being investigated. In Rorty's usage, however, "solitude" assumes a function analogous to his notion of "private irony": it serves to argue that religion, being nonepistemic, can and should retreat from public discourse ("Anti-clericalism" 36), but this retreat is one that religion can only benefit from. For this retreat to occur, Rorty argues, not only the notion of rationality, but also the "pursuit of universal intersubjective agreement" should be abandoned by religious people ("Anticlericalism" 36). His explanation runs as follows:

> [I]f you identify rationality with the pursuit of universal intersubjective agreement and truth with the outcome of such a pursuit, and if you also claim that nothing should take precedence over that pursuit, then you will squeeze religion not only out of public life but out of intellectual life. This is because you will have made natural science the paradigm of rationality and truth. Then religion will have to be thought of either as an unsuccessful competitor with empirical inquiry or as "merely" a vehicle of emotional satisfaction. ("Anticlericalism" 36–37)

The force of the argument is contingent on accepting Rorty's hypothesis that "rationality" and "universal intersubjective agreement" are interchangeable terms. It is hard to see, however, the compelling

reason for conceding the validity, let alone the inevitability, of the hypothesis. Intersubjective agreement is highly conceivable within and among religious communities, whose members might even make a point of avoiding the semblance of "rationality" in discourses on matters of faith. Conversely, it is also possible that a religious believer wittingly appeals to rational reasoning when devising a religious argument for fellow-believers or when justifying his/her faith to nonbelievers. Rorty does not explicitly deny the plausibility of these options, but he does hold the view that refraining from rationality and thereby from participating in conversations in the "public space" of the "epistemic arena" ("Anti-clericalism" 36) is an opportunity that religious believers would do well to act upon. As he contends:

> [T]o say that religion should be privatized is to say that religious people are *entitled* to opt out of this [epistemological or political] game. They are entitled to disconnect their assertions from the network of socially acceptable inferences that provide justifications for making these assertions and draw practical consequences from having made them. ("Anticlericalism" 37–38; emphasis added)

By saying that "religious people are *entitled* to" choose to stop playing their language game by publicly acceptable rules, Rorty seems to suggest that it is to their *privilege* that they can do so, while participants in scientific, political, or philosophical conversations are required, willy-nilly, to abide by the consensual discursive norms of their respective discourses. In the rest of this section, I will argue that that not only are the religious required to keep to communally acceptable discursive rules when devising arguments for their faith, but it might well be a prerequisite of articulating the distinctively religious content of their beliefs.

To unfold the argument, we need to revisit James' above-quoted thesis in "The Will to Believe," which can be read as advancing the central antifoundationalist claim that "evidence" as the token of "truth" is just as much a matter of belief as religious faith, for there is no ultimate court of appeal which could conclusively adjudicate among various knowledge-claims: "The desire for a certain kind of truth [...]," James observes, "brings about that special truth's existence" ("The Will" 473). What James is articulating here is by no means a paradigmatic idealist statement: instead, he argues that "evidence" and "truth," just like faith, are intersubjectively formulated social/cultural constructions. As he puts

it: "Our faith is faith in someone else's faith, and in the greatest matters this is most the case. Our belief in truth itself, for instance, that there is a truth, and that our minds and it are made for each other—what is it but a passionate affirmation of desire, in which our social system backs us up?" ("The Will" 463).

The Rortyan claim that religion is what one does in one's solitude may be seen as a corollary to James's implicit suggestion that becoming religious means taking up a certain habit of action (rather than, say, that of epiphany), so the primary question to be raised is not how this habit squares with the social/political climate or the scientific findings of the day, but how the religious believer can benefit from his/her faith. James's genuinely pragmatic insight is that the legitimacy of one's religious faith is not determined by epistemological validity or communal arbitration, but solely by its utility: "On pragmatic principles, if the hypothesis of God works satisfactorily in the widest sense of the word, [it] is true" (*Pragmatism* 618). Rorty endorses this Jamesian view, which he restates as follows: "Do not worry too much about whether what you have is a belief, a desire or a mood. Just insofar as such states as hope, love and faith promote only [...] private projects, you need not worry about whether you have the right to have them" ("Religious Faith" 155). In other words, you are under no compulsion to justify your religious beliefs (desires, moods) to your (nonreligious) peers as long as you keep them private.

This, however, is not quite what James suggests. Following right after the above-quoted sentence about utility being the only test of one's faith, James goes on to add: "Now whatever its residual difficulties may be, experience shows that it [the hypothesis of God] certainly does work, and that the problem is to build it out and determine it so that it will combine satisfactorily with all the other working truths" (*Pragmatism* 618). It would be wrong to surmise, however, that the acts of "building out" and "determining" the "hypothesis of God" are solely matters of individual volition: what James designates as "all the other working truths" can be taken to mean "justified" beliefs shared by a certain community.

For the "hypothesis of God" to combine satisfactorily with the shared beliefs of a thoroughly secularized community, however, either the communally defined discursive practices and processes of justification, or the hypothesis needs to be so radically modified that neither could be recognized as bearing out its original function. On the one hand, if

communal agreement on justificatory processes is adjusted to apply to religious beliefs, certain entrenched (because hitherto justifiable) beliefs are bound to be discarded as being incompatible with the newly acquired (hereupon justifiable) ones. In this case, however, the justificatory processes themselves are in danger of getting distorted to the point of losing their capability of yielding epistemic consensus (unless the very concept of justification is radically altered). On the other hand, if the "religious hypothesis" is to be made plausible even to atheists, the hypothesis itself, while leaving justificatory processes intact, gets deflated to such an extent that its distinctively religious content is likely to evaporate. This seems to imply that the justification of one's religious faith in the face of a secular community (like the secularized institutions of contemporary liberal democracies) can be spelled out in terms acceptable for that community, or the very need to justify religious faith is to be abandoned altogether.

To be able to argue coherently for beliefs which do not stand in need of justification, Rorty makes a distinction between religious belief and other kinds of belief, asserting that "pragmatist philosophy of religion must follow [Paul] Tillich and others in distinguishing quite sharply between faith and belief" ("Religious Faith" 158). "Belief," in this pragmatist sense, is a habit of action that one might be called upon to justify when involved in a "common project" which requires a responsibility "to ourselves to make our beliefs cohere with one another, and to our fellow humans to make them cohere with theirs" ("Religious Faith" 149). According to Rorty, one should not expect this kind of coherence from religious believers, which implies that they are free to go without justifying their faith to others:

> Liberal Protestants, to whom Tillich sounds plausible, are quite willing to talk about their faith in God, but demur at spelling out what beliefs that faith includes. Fundamentalist Catholics, to whom Tillich sounds blasphemous, are happy to enumerate their beliefs by reciting the Creed, and to identify their faith with those beliefs. The reason the Tillichians think they can get along either without creeds, or with a blessedly vague symbolic interpretation of creedal statements, is that they think the point of religion is not to produce any *specific* habit of action, but rather to make the sort of difference to a human life which is made by the presence or absence of love. ("Religious Faith" 158)

By referring to love, Rorty seems to be making the case that not only is faith exempt—by subjective volition—from having to be justified

to others, but it is virtually inexplicable. Rorty cites as an example a parent's or spouse's love, which "often seems inexplicable to people acquainted with those spouses and children" ("Religious Faith" 158). By implication, we can infer from the inexplicability of faith to the explicability of belief, but this inference runs the danger of reinstating the epistemological dichotomy of the cognitive and the noncognitive (rationality and irrationality), which Rorty is ever so eager to discard. Furthermore, Rorty does not make a convincing case for his allegation that one's religious faith can be enclosed in a putatively private sphere, insulated from the beliefs of others as well as from one's own different kinds of beliefs.

He seems to be aware of how problematic his claim is, as he poses the question at one point: "Can we disengage religious beliefs from inferential links with other beliefs by making them too vague to be caught in a creed [...] and still be faithful to the familiar pragmatist doctrine that beliefs have content only by virtue of inferential links to other beliefs?" ("Religious Faith" 159). For, he goes on to ask, "what becomes of inter-subjectivity once we admit that there is no communal practice of justification—no shared language game—which gives religious statements their content?" ("Religious Faith" 159). Rorty's answer is that we can still make sense of utterances of religious content by correlating them with certain "patterns of behavior, even when we cannot do so by fixing the place of such utterances in a network of inferential relations" (160).

What Rorty seems to be suggesting is that the atheist and the religious believer are speaking different languages proper, as if they were communicating from within remote cultures. He fails, however, to take into consideration the possibility that the religious believer *can* appeal to his/her secularist interlocutor's language game to argue for his/her faith. This assumption could be valid only if religious faith, like any other belief, were not always already contextualized in an epistemologically and politically constrained conversational space, without which it would not be possible to ascribe any cultural value to religion in the first place. As a consequence, not only are religious believers under constant compulsion to justify their faith to those who do not share it, but they are also compelled to rely on a publicly accepted language game for them to be taken seriously in the given debate.

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