What’s Richard Rorty’s problem with religion? He is an atheist, but he has no interest in attacking religious belief for being demonstrably false or irrational. His commitment to pragmatism, with its Jamesian roots, prevents this response. Rorty is instead a “boring atheist,” whose position on religion can be distinguished from the more militant atheism of his strident contemporaries, the “New Atheists,” whose company includes intellectual provocateurs like Richard Dawkins, Sam Harris, and Daniel Dennett. According to Anthony Appiah, boring atheists find religious claims “too obviously unconvincing to merit a great deal of intellectual energy: the question of the existence of God simply doesn’t register as a serious matter of philosophical dispute anymore.”¹ Affirming this characterization of him, Rorty cribs a phrase from Weber and labels himself “religiously unmusical.”² When discussing history, of course, whether of philosophy, politics, or culture, Rorty has no qualms about recognizing the crucial importance of religious ideas and institutions, and has genuine admiration for much of the art and the many moral acts that religious devotion has inspired. Otherwise, however, one senses that traditional religion is a topic that he would just as soon avoid. He has no time for the bestselling polemics of the New Atheists, or for the commercially less successful responses to these polemics (or for Christian apologetics more generally).

¹ Danny Postel, “High Flyer: Richard Rorty Obituary,” New Humanist 122, 4 (July/August 2007). According to Postel, Anthony Appiah coined the term “boring atheist” to describe himself.
Instead, Rorty proposes a truce: “People who find themselves quite unable to take an interest in the question of whether God exists have no right to be contemptuous of people who believe passionately in his existence or people who deny it with equal passion. Nor do either of the latter have a right to be contemptuous of those [i.e., him] to whom the dispute seems pointless.”

Nevertheless, because he sees his intellectual role as a calling to practice cultural politics in the service of his liberal ideals, Rorty cannot avoid the topic of religion. His proposed truce – a short-term modus vivendi even in his own thought – is clearly not in the offing: in spite of the Enlightenment longings for its demise that Rorty shares with many atheistic intellectuals, religion is, alas, deeply implicated in contemporary cultural politics. Thus, religion emerges frequently, if somewhat reluctantly, in Rorty’s writings, particularly in the last couple decades of his career as he wrote more about cultural politics. As one would expect of the work of an avowed atheist (even a “boring” one), one finds in Rorty’s writings sentiments that are skeptical and wary of religion. In his 1989 volume, *Contingency, Irony, and Solidarity*, for example, Rorty expresses his hope for an ideal liberal culture that would be “secular through and through,” in which “no trace of divinity remained.”

Such rhetoric, arguably, marks Rorty as more than merely a boring atheist, but rather as one of the more militant variety after all. Yet, as Rorty engaged more deeply with the “problem” of religion in his work, some observers have identified a shift in his thinking about it that resembles a rapprochement.

Jason Boffetti, for example, charts Rorty’s evolution from a self-described “militant secularist,” who endorses the Enlightenment idea that religion is something that

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3 Ibid., 30-31.
human beings should outgrow, to a “romantic polytheist,” who proposes an identifiably religious conception of American liberal democracy.⁵ Evidence of this shift includes what Boffetti describes as a “long overdue me culpa” by Rorty for his criticisms of Stephen Carter’s defense of religious argument in democratic politics.⁶ In his “reconsideration” of Carter’s work, Rorty concedes that his initial critique was “hasty and insufficiently thoughtful.”⁷ He explains that his exchanges with interlocutors like Nicholas Wolterstorff and Jeffrey Stout have convinced him to moderate and refine his approach to religion. Indeed, in subsequent years, Rorty begins a series of engagements with the Italian, Catholic philosopher, Gianni Vattimo, that explore more thoroughly the relationship of his pragmatism to religion.⁸ One imagines that what intrigues Rorty about Vattimo is that here is a philosopher who has learned a similar lesson about historical contingency from his reading of the modern continental canon of Hegel-Nietzsche-Heidegger-Gadamer, and yet who nevertheless remains a theist (however idiosyncratically). Perhaps even more surprising, as Boffetti chronicles, Rorty begins to use religious tropes in support of his own ideal of liberal democratic political community.

Indeed, in later works such as Achieving Our Country, “Rorty describes a uniquely American faith, whose adherents, he writes, have included Walt Whitman, Ralph Waldo Emerson, and Abraham Lincoln. Sometimes Rorty calls this American

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⁶ Ibid., 26.
faith a ‘religion of democracy’ and at other times ‘romantic polytheism.’ But both concepts bring together in a single vision his strong sense of ‘social justice’ and an appreciation for the sublime and the mystical.”\textsuperscript{9} Richard John Neuhaus concurs, noting that, “when Rorty gets his political wind up,” he “portrays liberal democracy as a quasi-religion.”\textsuperscript{10} Sounding almost preachy, Rorty writes,

My sense of the holy, insofar as I have one, is bound up with the hope that someday, any millennium now, my remote descendants will live in a global civilization in which love is pretty much the only law. In such a society, communication would be domination-free, class and caste would be unknown, hierarchy would be a matter of temporary pragmatic convenience, and power would be entirely at the disposal of the free agreement of a literate and well-educated electorate.\textsuperscript{11}

Yet, as Boffetti admits, Rorty’s development over the last decade of his life of this allegedly “spiritual” conception of liberal democracy continues to coexist with expressions of sympathy for the notorious Diderotian sentiment that the last king should be strangled with the entrails of the last priest.\textsuperscript{12} In his final exchange with Stout, published posthumously, Rorty reiterates the robust commitment to secularism that he first voiced in \textit{Contingency, Irony, and Solidarity}. He writes that, “Religion does indeed seem unlikely to wither away, but it is important to insist it would be better off if it did.”\textsuperscript{13}

What are we to make of all this? Has Rorty made a “religious turn,” as Boffetti suggests, or does he still maintain a highly skeptical and negative attitude toward religion? We can more easily understand Rorty’s position by focusing on a theme that he

\textsuperscript{10} John Richard Neuhaus, \textit{American Babylon} (New York: Basic Books, 2009), 129.
\textsuperscript{11} Rorty, \textit{Future of Religion}, 40.
increasingly used to describe his pragmatic liberal project: anti-authoritarianism. This impelled Rorty to label his position on religion “anticlericalism” rather than “atheism.”

Rorty’s problem with religion is strictly political, not epistemological:

[Anticlericalism] is the view that ecclesiastical institutions, despite all the good they do – despite all the comfort they provide to those in need or in despair – are dangerous to the health of democratic societies. Whereas the philosophers who claim that atheism, unlike theism, is backed up by evidence would say that religious belief is irrational, contemporary secularists like myself are content to say it is politically dangerous. On our view, religion 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.14

Rorty can thus regard properly privatized religion with benign indifference. As a utilitarian pragmatist, he examines the social results of religious belief. He recognizes that religion offers psychological comfort to many believers, and often motivates them to actively promote policies that, perhaps coincidentally, advance liberal justice. Whatever Rorty thinks of the plausibility of religious belief, he can support these results. What he objects to is the use of religion to obstruct the quest for liberal justice, and he suggests that such obstruction is particularly effective when endorsed by religious institutions.

Because Rorty recognizes that most religious believers do not separate their faith from their commitment to their churches in the way that he insists they must in order to be good liberal citizens, his “reconsidered” approach to religion does little to modify his hostility toward its traditional manifestation. His cooption of religious language to describe his “liberal utopia” is an effort to secure for his political ideal the passion that religious devotion often inspires, rather than a true rapprochement with traditional religion. In fact, he prefers to apply the adjective “romantic,” rather than “religious,” to

14 Rorty, Future of Religion, 33.
his passionate, imaginative, this-worldly hopes for humanity. But because postmodern theologians and philosophers of religion, like Tillich and Vattimo, have so expanded our notion of what counts as “religion,” Rorty avails himself of their largess. He can, without too much irony, for example, suggest that hope for a future liberal utopia should replace faith in God as our Tillichian religious “symbol of ultimate concern.” This rhetorical maneuver, however, should not be interpreted as Rorty gaining a greater appreciation for traditional religion. Indeed, if one reads carefully his “mea culpa” to Carter, it is clear that he doesn’t backtrack an inch: Rorty’s liberal politics will not finally tolerate religion that obstructs public progress toward his liberal utopia. Moreover, it seems that Rorty ultimately does not trust even a properly privatized religion to behave itself.

Rorty’s position, of course, exercises religious thinkers like Carter and Wolterstorff, who argue that their religion is essential to their democratic political reasoning. Nevertheless, at a time when many liberal theorists, in the name of toleration, endeavor to contort liberal commitments to render them more accommodating to nonliberal ways of life (usually by rendering those commitments helpfully vague), we should commend Rorty for his forthright admission that his liberalism clashes with the religiously informed political visions of Carter and Wolterstorff. Rorty writes that, for instance, “When we American college teachers encounter religious fundamentalists, we do not consider the possibility of reformulating our own practices so as to give more weight to the authority of the Christian scriptures. Instead we do our best to convince these students of the benefits of secularization.”

“Jeffersonian compromise” that has generally kept religious conflict out of American politics.\(^\text{16}\)

Rorty recognizes that good liberal citizenship requires the development of an ethical character that will support liberal politics. He thus issues this hypothetical response to illiberal, religious parents:

There are credentials for admission to our democratic society, credentials which we liberals have been making more stringent by doing our best to excommunicate racists, male chauvinists, homophobes, and the like. You have to be *educated* in order to be a citizen of our society, a participant in our conversation, someone with whom we can envisage merging our horizons. So we are going to go right on trying to discredit you in the eyes of your children, trying to strip you fundamentalist religious community of dignity, trying to make your views seem silly rather than discussable. We are not so inclusivist as to tolerate intolerance such as yours.\(^\text{17}\)

This is refreshingly candid and clear, even if it is the case, as is likely, that Rorty would not engage his illiberal interlocutors in such strident tones at the cost of possibly converting them to his views. What this response also indicates is that Rorty’s understanding of the relationship between religion and liberalism is best understood if we consider Rorty to be a “virtue liberal,” akin to such liberal theorists as Amy Gutmann, Stephen Macedo, William A. Galston, and Richard Dagger.\(^\text{18}\) Although Rorty’s project is much more wide-ranging than those of the latter theorists, his work should be read as fundamentally recommending and attempting to cultivate a certain sort of ethical character, one that will be ideal for liberal democratic citizenship and simultaneously


\(^{17}\) Rorty, “Universality and Truth,” 22.

produce an intellectual class whose conceptual innovations are essential to civilizational progress.

In what follows, I discuss three critiques of Rorty’s approach to religion: one by a Protestant philosopher of religion (Nicholas Wolterstorff), one by a nontheist scholar of religion (Jeffrey Stout), and one by an ordained Catholic intellectual (Rev. Richard John Neuhaus). Since each of these critiques comes from a different angle, they will enable us to triangulate Rorty’s position and better understand the relationship between religion and his pragmatic liberalism. First, however, I will make a brief case for reading Rorty as a virtue liberal, who has a unique conception of the civic virtues required for good citizenship.

I. Virtue Liberalism and Rortyan Irony

Rorty’s articulation of liberalism is theoretically minimalist. It is, however, ethically thick. This is why it is unfortunate that he does not engage with the work of other virtue liberals: his pragmatic liberalism is best understood as a version of virtue liberalism. Rorty does not theorize liberal democratic politics in the traditional way: he does not specify and defend a schedule of liberal negative and positive rights; he does not theorize democratic deliberation; he does not offer a detailed description of ideal political procedures or institutions. He recognizes that all of these things are needful for a successful liberal political community. Nevertheless, pragmatically starting from his admittedly advantaged location in the economically developed, politically stable, liberal democratic United States, he assumes that the citizens of his and similarly situated societies already have in place a (imperfect) scheme of liberal rights and more or less

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functional democratic political institutions. The challenge is to improve them, and our ability to make progress depends upon the character, knowledge, talents and, frankly, luck of the citizenry. Hence, Rorty offers a vision of an ideal liberal society whose inhabitants have embraced his pragmatic liberalism and its associated habits of mind. He suggests that such a society will be better and more humanely able to solve the problems it faces, and will be more interesting and exciting place to live.

An immediate objection to interpreting Rorty as a virtue liberal is that, unlike the virtue liberal theorists named above, Rorty does not systematically list and flesh out a set of virtues that democratic citizens should possess. Instead, all we find in Rorty’s is work is occasional, almost casual passages, like the following: “Producing generations of nice, tolerant, well-off, secure, other-respecting students [who are earnestly concerned to be morally inclusive] in all parts of the world is just what is needed – indeed, all that is needed – to achieve an Enlightenment utopia.”\(^\text{20}\) Elsewhere, he argues that “rationality” is not a truth-tracking cognitive faculty, as the Western philosophical tradition has often tried to characterize it, but is rather “a set of moral virtues: tolerance, respect for the opinions of those around one, willingness to listen, reliance on persuasion rather than force. These are the virtues which members of a civilized society must possess if the society is to endure.”\(^\text{21}\) Although unaccompanied by much conceptual analysis, passages like these capture the very heart of Rorty’s vision of liberal modernity.

The qualities of character that the pragmatic liberal citizen possesses are especially cultivated through sentimental liberal education, which teaches not only the intellectually promiscuous substance of the liberal arts, but also instills liberal virtues,


\(^{21}\) Rorty, *Objectivity, Truth, and Relativism*, 37
like open-mindedness, critical thinking and, more controversially, an ironic fallibilism toward one’s own beliefs. Thus, Christopher Voparil is correct to identify Rorty’s opus as a type of *Bildungsroman*: a genre of literature that endorses a model of ethical self-development and individuality. Following his philosophical lodestar, John Dewey, Rorty insists that such development takes place only within a communal context that politically and culturally supports it. Liberalism, for Rorty, is much more than a theory of politics. It is an ethos that features a thick and dynamically evolving web of cultural habits and practices.

Perhaps the most significant contribution that Rorty makes to liberal theory is to emphasize the importance of *irony* as a civic virtue that is crucial for good citizenship. It is the virtue of irony, produced by humanistic liberal education, that protects the liberal utopia from becoming, as it were, *utopian*, i.e., ethically monist and absolutist. Given irony’s importance to his social ideal, however, it is particularly unfortunate that Rorty’s discussion of it in *Contingency, Irony, and Solidarity* is somewhat muddled. The problem is that he implies and conflates two different and conflicting senses of irony: (1) irony as a civic virtue that *all* citizens should possess, and (2) irony as a disposition and practice of “intellectuals.” If we carefully reconstruct Rorty’s discussion and make the proper distinctions, however, we can illuminate his conceptions of irony and the central roles they play in liberal politics and culture.

Rorty introduces the property of irony by describing the person who exhibits it: the “ironist.” The ironist “is the sort of person who faces up to the contingency of his or her own most central beliefs and desires – someone sufficiently historicist and nominalist

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to have abandoned the idea that those central beliefs and desires refer back to something beyond the reach of time and chance.”

Rorty recognizes, however, that most citizens of contemporary democracies are not ironists but are rather “nonintellectuals,” who are traditionalist and do not accept the contingency of their most cherished beliefs; they are “still committed to some form of religious belief or to some form of Enlightenment rationalism.” Nevertheless, he insists that in liberal utopia, “ironism, in the relevant sense, is universal.” Consequently, he writes that “the citizens of my liberal utopia would be people who had a sense of the contingency of their language and moral deliberation, and thus of their consciences, and thus of their community. They would be liberal ironists – people who met Schumpeter’s criterion of civilization, people who combined commitment with a sense of the contingency of their own commitment.”

Later in the book, however, he appears to contradict himself by suggesting that the nonintellectual citizens of an “ideal liberal society” would not be ironists, though they would nevertheless be “commonsensically nominalist and historicist. So they would see themselves as contingent through and through, without feeling any particular doubts about the contingencies they happen to be.” How can we reconcile these statements? Must all citizens ideally be ironists or not? What’s the difference, if any, between “irony” and the acceptance of the historical contingency of one’s commitments?

In order to make sense of Rorty’s discussion, we must distinguish more clearly between two different senses of irony to match the distinction that Rorty draws between

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24 Ibid.
25 Ibid.
27 Ibid., 87.
intellectuals and nonintellectuals. The first sense of irony, which applies to all inhabitants of liberal utopia – intellectuals and nonintellectuals – is a civic virtue that good liberal democratic citizens possess. The civic virtue of irony is, casting it in Aristotelian terms, a Golden Mean between a deficiency of commitment to one’s values and beliefs (e.g., wishy-washiness, superficiality, instability of identity, diffidence) and an excess of commitment (e.g., rigidity, close-mindedness, dogmatism, absolutism).

Possessing this virtue entails conceiving of one’s most deeply held set of commitments – what Rorty calls one’s “final vocabulary”28 – as a product of historical contingency and thus not required by any alleged metaphysical authority. Adopting this attitude supports what we might call “critical open-mindedness”: a sense of one’s own fallibility or finitude, which can nevertheless be combined with an ability to be steadfast in one’s currently best-justified judgments. This fallibilism, which must be clearly distinguished from a paralyzing skepticism or nihilism, enables liberal citizens to be properly, though not absolutely, tolerant in their politics. What counts as “properly tolerant,” of course, cannot be finally captured by a theoretical formulation or set of principles, which is why it is a matter of virtue.

The fact that the civic virtue of irony is based on a sense of contingency associated with “historicism” is significant. The fallibilism of irony is not merely doubt or tentativeness about one’s final vocabulary. Rather, irony is produced by critical study of humanity’s beautiful and often problematic pluralism: the wide range of multifarious responses to the challenges of the human condition that people of different times and places have developed. Historicist irony stems from an educated recognition of historical

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28 A “final vocabulary” is the “set of words each of us employs to justify our actions, beliefs, and lives; they are the words we use to say who we are” (Rorty, Contingency, Irony, and Solidarity, 73).
conceptual change and its contingency. Although Rorty, unlike Dewey, does not develop a comprehensive philosophy of education, it is clear from Rorty’s work that someone who is “historicist” has received a comprehensive liberal education.

The civic virtue of irony facilitates liberal politics because the evolving settlement of liberal justice makes ethical demands on citizens that a sense of irony equips them to deal with. Because the norms, laws, and policies of this settlement are always subject to change through democratic politics (which includes the activities of the courts), liberal citizens must be able to change their practices, and thus their beliefs which support those practices, to abide by that settlement. If, for instance, I am a farmer and my particular method of slaughtering livestock comes to be deemed cruel and inhumane by enough of my fellow citizens, who successfully vote to get it outlawed by the democratic state, then I must cease to use this method and switch to a legal method even if it is economically burdensome. This example, of course, doesn’t appear to implicate any deeply held metaphysical beliefs, though it could: I could be certain stripe of libertarian and insist that my animals are my property to dispose of as I wish, and that the state is therefore violating my self-evident human rights by making me switch to a more expensive method of slaughter. A more salient example, perhaps, is the Dutch ban on Jewish kosher and Muslim halal slaughter on the grounds of animal cruelty. Regardless of what one thinks of the law, it was legitimately enacted through the Dutch liberal democratic political process, and Jewish and Muslim citizens are hence prima facie obliged to obey it.²⁹

²⁹ I intentionally leave aside questions of when civil disobedience or political revolution might be justified, which would carry us too far afield. Suffice to say that I (rather conventionally) think that both of these responses can be justified along a continuum of increasing levels of injustice, with civil disobedience legitimately employed against reasonably heinous injustice and political revolution as the last resort against a badly unjust regime. These sorts of relatively extreme political activity are, in any case, generally (and hopefully) marginal in a reasonably just liberal democracy.
The liberal political settlement, of course, requires citizens who lose in the democratic process to abide by the law, even if they believe it to be unjust, even as they attempt to get the law changed by continuing the political debate. Thus, Jews and Muslims in the Netherlands must abide by the law, regardless of how deeply it offends their religious sensibilities, if they are to remain a part of the political community. Having a sense of irony about their religious beliefs that support ritual slaughter will hopefully enable them to adjust to the new legal reality, i.e., the new definition of liberal justice that the law implements. Perhaps some Jewish and Muslim communities will succeed in altering their religious beliefs and render their practices perfectly consonant with the law. Rorty’s suggestion is that this outcome is more likely if the members of these communities possess the civic virtue of irony. Religious believers who, on the other hand, insist that their traditional method of ritual slaughter is divinely commanded, as opposed to being a historically contingent practice invented by their ancestors in a very different time and place, will be less likely to abide by the law or, at least, more likely to harbor a politically destructive resentment toward their fellow liberal citizens. Rorty, of course, doesn’t imagine a liberal politics bereft of strife; to the contrary, a certain amount of political strife indicates that the pluralism he cherishes is healthy. He just thinks that metaphysical and religious views held nonironically and insistently injected into political debate is a recipe for an unhealthy, unproductive politics.

If this first sense of irony is a civic virtue ideally possessed by all liberal citizens, the second sense of irony is less directly political and more exclusively an ethic of the intellectual class. Although Rorty occasionally uses the term “ironist” broadly to refer to all of the citizens of liberal utopia (because they all do accept the contingency of their
final vocabularies), he usually employs it as a synonym for “pragmatic intellectual.” These intellectuals are the Millian eccentrics, the Bloomian “strong poets,” the conceptual innovators, who use the freedom afforded to them in the private sphere to produce new ideas by ironizing various parts of culture and giving them a new spin. Ironist intellectuals who succeed in creating attractive new vocabularies that solve problems and inspire their fellow citizens are the strong poet “heroes” of the liberal polity.30

Being an intellectual himself, Rorty devotes a disproportionate number of pages to describing the character and activities of ironist intellectuals in liberal utopia. Their experiments that challenge established doctrines and expand our imaginations are crucial for civilizational progress. But no less important is the ideally universal civic virtue of irony, which helps keep the liberal political community in tact. As I have suggested, this virtue is ethically demanding and requires a certain sort of education. With regard to religion, the question arises for Rorty whether possession of this virtue is compatible with the historically common sorts of religious beliefs, practices, and institutions. He suspects it is not, which is why the politics and culture of his liberal utopia are completely secularized. Both religious and nonreligious thinkers alike have, unsurprisingly, taken exception to this conception of liberal democracy.

II. Wolterstorff

Like other religious thinkers, Nicholas Wolterstorff criticizes Rorty’s suggestion that religion is a “conversation-stopper” in democratic political debate, which leads to Rorty’s misguided insistence that religion must be privatized and rendered publicly irrelevant to politics. For Wolterstorff, this privatization amounts to an undemocratic

30 Rorty, Contingency, Irony, and Solidarity, 24-25, 53.
exclusion of religious voices from the public sphere. He attacks Rorty’s position on religion in several ways, including arguing: that Rorty maintains a self-contradictory understanding of liberal toleration; that Rorty, like other secular liberal theorists, reveals himself to be not only anti-pluralist, but also anti-democratic, by placing a moratorium on religious language in the public sphere; and, lastly, that real reason that Rorty hopes for the secularization of liberal culture is that he believes that traditional religion is incompatible with his own quasi-religious commitment to John Dewey’s vision of democracy. Rorty identifies this Deweyan ideal with what Wallace Stevens and Harold Bloom dub the “American Sublime”: a romantic form of democratic community whose point is to make “possible the invention of new forms of human freedom.”

It is exactly this politics that Wolterstorff, as a Christian, finds threatening.

Against Rortyan liberalism, Wolterstorff argues for what he believes is a more realistic conception of modern democracy, which inevitably features a cacophony of widely diverse voices and demands, and in which fundamental disagreements get resolved, not by philosophy, but through the ballot box. Wolterstorff, however, passes too easily over the demanding ethical presuppositions of liberal democratic politics. While Rorty agrees that liberalism must permit religious language to be freely expressed in political deliberation, the evolving demands of liberal justice inevitably puts pressures on traditional religion and its institutions. The disagreement between Wolterstorff and Rorty is over whether such pressure is necessary and legitimate.

Wolterstorff begins his critique by suggesting that Rorty holds contradictory views concerning liberal toleration of pluralism. On the one hand, Rorty endorses the

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postmodern assessment that the Enlightenment project’s attempt to philosophically identify a universal foundation for truth claims is a failure. Rorty argues against the presumption that we possess a shared, cognitive faculty of Reason that can bring necessary reconciliation among the wide array of incompatible and competing language games that is the hallmark of liberal society. On the other hand, Rorty nevertheless urges us to achieve a “universal intersubjective agreement” on an ideal liberal morality, produced through “justification,” i.e., deliberative cultural politics. Wolterstorff counters, “I myself have no hope for universal intersubjective agreement, or at least, no expectation. To say it again: I view our human condition as such that we must expect the endurance of such fundamental disagreements as those Rorty refers to; indeed, I think that one of John Rawls’s most perceptive comments was his observation that under conditions of freedom, such disagreements tend to multiply rather than disappear.”

Rorty, Wolterstorff argues, appears to both recognize and deny the problem of intractable pluralism. Wolterstorff, however, falls prey to a common misunderstanding of Rorty’s position. There is a difference between arguing that something like Reason, Human Nature, or Natural Law provides metaphysically objective grounds for universal liberal morality, and arguing that people can hopefully be persuaded to adopt the historically contingent language and practices that constitute liberalism. Rorty adopts the latter position and disavows the former. Indeed, Rorty criticizes the Enlightenment project precisely in order to deflate the overblown metaphysical rhetoric that plagues traditional liberal political philosophy. He wants to encourage people to view such philosophical arguments as just more moves in the conversation of cultural politics, rather than as identifying noncontingent moral truths. The problem with metaphysical rhetoric is that it

is authoritarian – even when ostensibly employed to justify liberalism – and therefore tends to be hostile to pluralism and democracy. Rorty thus agrees with Wolterstorff’s critique of liberal theories that purport to identify a priori and “neutral” principles that block religious reasoning from entering the public sphere. Rorty instead argues that in order to be faithful to liberal values, we should understand liberalism as an evolving tradition of practices that cannot be given a final theoretical formulation. By endeavoring to construct just such a formulation, liberal political philosophers risk stifling the ongoing, free, and pluralistic conversation that is crucial to the progress of liberal politics. Instead, constraints on liberal politics emerge pragmatically and in media res, and crucially depend upon the liberal virtues of the deliberators.

Rorty argues that this pragmatic approach to liberalism both saves it from academic attacks on its alleged faulty philosophical foundations as well as making it more rhetorically appealing to nonliberals, who are rightly skeptical about question-begging philosophical claims for liberalism’s superior “rationality.” Rorty suggests that, if we Westerners could get rid of the notion of universal moral obligations created by membership in the species, and substitute the idea of building a community of trust between ourselves and others, we might be in a better position to persuade non-Westerners of the advantages of joining in that community. We might be better able to construct the sort of global moral community that Rawls describes in “The Law of Peoples.” In making this suggestion, I am urging, as I have on earlier occasions, that we need to peel apart Enlightenment liberalism from Enlightenment rationalism. . . . [G]etting rid of rationalistic rhetoric would permit the West to approach the non-West in the role of someone with an instructive story to tell, rather than in the role of someone purporting to be making better use of a universal human capacity.  

As an anticlericalist, Rorty is especially concerned about the influence that religious institutions have on democratic politics. For example, Rorty sees the

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34 Rorty, “Religion in the Public Square,” 146.
contemporary debate over gay equality as “a standoff between a sizable body of opinion that treats gays and lesbians as contemptible and despicable and another body of opinion that treats those who quote Leviticus 18:22 as contemptible and despicable.” He notes that “religious reasons are pretty much the only reasons brought forward in favor of treating [gays and lesbians] with contempt.” He concludes that perhaps “the reason Christian pulpits have become the principal source of homophobia is the same as the reasons that they were the principal source of European anti-Semitism – namely, that encouraging exclusivist bigotry brings money and power to ecclesiastical organizations.”

In response to this harsh conclusion, Wolterstorff moves to the heart of his disagreement with Rorty by identifying two reasons behind Rorty’s anticlericalism: (1) that ecclesiastical institutions tend to obstruct the progress of liberal justice, and (2) that institutionalized religion encourages people to become mentally and spiritually dependent upon “some power external to themselves.” For Rorty, both of these reasons amount to the same thing: the authoritarian, anti-liberal tendencies and political views that, historically, have been promoted by institutionalized religion. In his view, pragmatic liberals can “grant that ecclesiastical organizations have sometimes been on the right side, but we think that the occasional Gustavo Gutierrez or Martin Luther King does not compensate for the ubiquitous Joseph Ratzingers and Jerry Falwells. History suggests to us that such organizations will always, on balance, do more harm than good.” Thus,

36 Rorty, “Religion in the Public Square,” 146.
Rorty believes that the real disagreement between Wolterstorff and him concerns the empirical question of the extent to which ecclesiastical organizations are harmful.

Wolterstorff retorts that he is tempted to tell his own historical narrative of how religion has crucially bolstered, rather than undermined, human freedom. Instead, however, he chides Rorty and his fellow liberal theorists for their hypocritical fear of pluralism – especially religious pluralism – which drives their insistence that liberal democratic politics must proceed from shared moral (i.e., liberal) premises. Because these premises must be shared, liberal theorists insist that they must be secular; they cannot, given religious pluralism, be religious premises. For Rorty, too much pluralism in the public produces fundamental moral disagreement, and this results in “stopped conversation,” i.e., political failure. Wolterstorff, however, challenges Rorty’s assumption that “stopped conversation” is necessarily a problem for liberal democratic politics. Wolterstorff offers a time-tested solution to this alleged problem: “We take a vote.” Wolterstorff continues,

In Rorty, Rawls, Audi, Larmore, and their cohorts, there is an implicit dislike for a procedure that I regard as belonging to the very essence of a democracy, viz., voting. I do not understand it. . . . Conversation-stopping is not some appalling evil perpetrated upon an otherwise endlessly-talkative public by religious people. Stopped conversation is an all-pervasive feature of political debate in a democracy; and voting is a procedure for arriving at a decision of the body when conversation is stopped. 38

Wolterstorff concludes that the reason that this democratic solution is unacceptable to Rorty is that Rorty must be working with a different, and substantively anti-pluralist, conception of democracy. Indeed, as a religious person, Wolterstorff detects something illiberal and menacing about Rortyan democracy. On Wolterstorff’s

view, it is “the genius of liberal democracy to guarantee certain basic rights and liberties to its citizens and resident aliens, and to assure access by all normal adults to fair voting procedures. Given that basic framework, it accepts all ‘comprehensive doctrines,’ to use Rawls’ term, as they come. It does not tell religious people that they have to shape up by privatizing their religion . . . . It doesn’t tell anybody that they have to shape up. Come as you are.”

Some votes and judicial decisions you will win and some you will lose. “A liberal democracy survives as long as those who lose the vote think it’s better to lose the vote than to destroy the system. Its survival does not depend on making anybody shape up to anything other than the formal requirements of the system itself.”

Wolterstorff thus offers what he believes is a conception of liberal democratic politics that is much more realistic and tolerant than Rorty’s (and those of his fellow secular liberal theorists).

But Wolterstorff’s political theory is a bit too facile. There’s a reason that liberal theorists aren’t satisfied with Wolterstorff’s ostensibly straightforward democratic proceduralism. One need hardly invoke the worst democratic injustices (e.g., the election of Hitler) to be concerned that voting can lead to unjust political results. As the passages above indicate, Wolterstorffian democracy presupposes a liberal framework of “certain basic rights and liberties” and a citizenry that is ethically disposed to respect it. Why is the requisite commitment to this framework any different from the idea of “shared moral premises” that Wolterstorff rejects? Moreover, as Wolterstorff surely knows, it is the details of this framework, which he leaves utterly unarticulated, that are at issue for liberal democratic theory and, ultimately, politics. He thus commits the philosophical sin

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39 Ibid., 137. 40 Ibid.
of begging the question by blithely and implausibly assuming that there is unproblematic agreement on the framework of “rights and liberties” in which voting takes place. Voting fails to adequately solve deep disagreements about this framework, because the very point of calling something a “right” means that it is not something that should be subject to a vote. Wolterstorff’s simplistic response to liberals who are concerned about how to navigate fundamental moral disagreement about justice in a liberal political regime is thus singularly inadequate and unsatisfying. Rorty agrees that there must be a general consensus on a framework of liberal rights and liberties in order for there to be successful democratic politics, which in fact consists of deliberatively and continually reforming this framework at the margins. He just recognizes, as Wolterstorff fails to, that a liberal democracy must produce this consensus by educating and socializing citizens, regardless of their religious faith, to possess the liberal virtues.

When he chastises liberal theorists for insisting that political argument must proceed from shared, and therefore secular, premises, Wolterstorff challenges, “Here’s a more just arrangement: letting people say what they want to say on political issues and letting them argue for their positions as they think best to argue for them, provided they conduct themselves with the requisite virtues.” Rorty responds that Wolterstorff “has convinced me that he is right to insist that both law and custom should leave him 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.” Indeed, given his deep commitment to J.S. Mill, it is doubtful that Rorty has ever thought that religious believers should be coercively

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41 Ibid., 135.
42 Rorty, “Religion In The Public Square,” 143.
muzzled from using religious language in politics. He just suspects that liberal politics will be more productive, all things considered, if people did stop citing scripture as justification for their policy positions. Again, this judgment stems from Rorty’s empirical assessment that, on balance, the political and ethical values of traditional religions cannot generally be squared with his vision of liberal utopia. For that reason, he would prefer those values, unless they can be given secular justification, to be privatized and not vie for possible enforcement as policy by the state. Moreover, he issues the traditional liberal warning to religious believers who would have their religious agendas enacted as law: beware of upsetting the hard-won Jeffersonian compromise that has more or less successfully combined religious liberty with social peace. As Rorty puts it, “Contemporary liberal philosophers think that we shall not be able to keep a democratic political community going unless the religious believers remain willing to trade privatization for a guarantee of religious liberty, and Carter [and Wolterstorff] gives us no reason to think they are wrong.”

Wolterstorff insists that a liberal democracy that properly respects pluralism should not force anyone to “shape up,” i.e., conform their ethics and politics to the standards of secular liberalism. He does, however, concede that all liberal democratic citizens must conduct themselves with the “requisite virtues” in and meet the “formal requirements” of the public sphere. The tradition of virtue liberalism in which I place Rorty suggests that “creating” such liberal citizens is no mean feat, requiring much in the

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43 Indeed, even Rawls has made it clear that liberal freedom of speech permits religious language to be used in political debate. He just insists that it must finally be accompanied by secular justifications, i.e., “public reasons,” for any policy enforced by the state, because one of central the purposes of liberalism is to avoid having one church use the state to dominate all of the other diverse sects in liberal society (John Rawls, “The Idea of Public Reason Revisited,” University of Chicago Law Review 64, 3 (Summer 1997), 783-807).

44 Rorty, Philosophy and Social Hope, 170-71.
way of liberal education and socialization. Because being a good liberal citizen entails a distinct, ethical way of looking at the world, Stephen Macedo argues that, “Liberal political norms have a private life: they help shape and structure the private lives of liberal citizens.” Indeed, “The success and stability of liberal politics depends on people’s private beliefs and commitments becoming importantly liberalized – becoming, that is, supportive of liberal politics.” Contra Wolterstorff, Macedo’s point is that liberal politics inevitably tells citizens to “shape up.” This is because “Liberalism embodies a set of substantive moral values, positive values that should secure the highest allegiance of liberal citizens, values that override or preclude many commitments, require some, and condition all other goals and projects, positive values that penetrate and pervasively shape the lives and characters of liberal citizens.”

Rorty, because he is explicitly committed to a substantive moral and political ideal of Deweyan liberal democracy, understands this. This is why he is so brazen about his intentions to educate his students from ethical and religious backgrounds that are incompatible with this ideal away from those backgrounds and toward his ideal. When Wolterstorff proclaims allegiance to liberal democracy, which features “rights and liberties” and “requisite [civic] virtues,” he seems to be blind to what this allegiance ethically entails. Wolterstorff correctly points out that Rorty’s conception of democracy entails a substantive ethical ideal (which Wolterstorff finds antithetical to Christianity), but he fails to see that his own does as well, as any conception of liberal democracy must.

The ethical requirements for liberal democratic citizenship unavoidably place stringent

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46 Macedo, Liberal Virtues, 265.
47 Ibid., 54.
48 Ibid., 265.
limits on pluralism; those who reject these ethical requirements must be told to “shape up.”

Wolterstorff, therefore, would do better to try to counter Rorty’s empirical claims about the role that religion and religious institutions play in liberal democratic politics. He needs to argue that, contra Rorty, the good produced by citing Psalm 72 in support of government policy outweighs the bad caused by the public profession of Leviticus 18:22. He needs to counter, perhaps as Charles Taylor does, that secular ethics and, therefore, the politics it produces are likely to be motivationally deficient without reference to something “beyond life.”49 We can imagine that Wolterstorff’s alternative to Rorty’s American Sublime includes a citizenry that is more recognizably Christian (according to Wolterstorff’s understanding of Christianity), or is at least more respectful of Christianity and of religious faith more generally. This is a citizenry that is in a sense more humble than Rorty’s community of would-be, individualistic strong poets, because Wolterstorff’s citizens recognize that, despite the liberty that their political community affords them, they are ultimately dependent on a loving God. Moreover, it is an America whose media and academic elites don’t sneer at religious faith as the last refuge of the simple-minded. Unfortunately, however, in his “Engagement With Richard Rorty,” Wolterstorff fails to articulate this or any other plausible alternative because he fails to see the tension between the ethical requirements of liberal citizenship and the empirical practices of American religion and its institutions.

IV. Stout

Intellectual fellow travelers are often the most nuanced and creative critics because they, by definition, do not find one’s ideas obviously wrong. Jeffrey Stout’s

critique of Rorty’s position on religion is no exception to this general rule. As a secular pragmatist who has been much influenced by Rorty, Stout is also a “boring” sort of atheist. Like Rorty, Stout worries about the anti-liberal political ramifications of some strains of religion. He also, in contrast to the New Atheists, prefers to criticize these strains “without using the concept of rationality as a club.” But that’s where the similarity ends. Stout charges that “Rorty’s writings on the role of religion in politics often retain the spirit, if not the letter, of militant secularism,” whereas he strives to see “religion, in its public as well as its private manifestations, as an ever-changing mixture of life-giving and malignant tendencies.” Where Rorty dreams of a completely secular liberal utopia, Stout’s liberal utopia features secularists and religious believers proceeding arm-in-arm, working together to achieve a just society.

As we have seen, Rorty thinks the downside of the Falwells outweighs the upside of the MLK’s. Stout, in contrast, lets his hope for MLK’s eclipse his fear of the Falwells. He writes, “My dream is to revive the sort of coalition between religious groups and secular intellectuals 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 responds with complete agreement that this is the best case political scenario in the short-term, i.e., at least for the “next couple of centuries,” since religion isn’t about to disappear in that timeframe. But he insists on the importance of pursuing “a long-term, militantly secularist, philosophical agenda,” that will hopefully one day result in a “perfect

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51 Ibid.
52 Ibid.
secularist utopia,” whose inhabitants will 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.”

Given his much more positive assessment of the political and cultural potential
of religion (as well as the apparent fact of its permanency), Stout challenges Rorty’s
insistence that secularization must be the goal for pragmatic liberals. For Stout,
secularization, even if it were possible, throws the baby out with the bathwater. While
Rorty hopes that religious believers will respect the Jeffersonian compromise by simply
ceasing to quote scripture as a basis for anti-liberal policy positions, Stout believes that
liberals should “challenge them on their own ground.” Stout agrees with Rorty that
some people who, for example, quote Leviticus 18:22 to justify anti-gay discrimination
are indeed homophobic sadists, but refuses to accept Rorty’s implication that they
generally all are. Instead Stout divides people who espouse anti-liberal policy positions
based on alleged scriptural grounds into three groups: (1) sadists motivated by hatred and
cruelty, (2) sincere believers who are trying their best to figure out what the Bible teaches
about homosexuality, gender roles, etc., and (3) people who are more or less
unreflectively against liberal policies like same-sex marriage, not because they hate gays,
but because they have been raised (religiously) to accept that position. Stout insists that
while people in the first group may be genuinely vicious and unconvertible, the latter two
groups, and especially group (3), might be reached and have their minds changed.

53 Rorty, “Reply to Stout,” 549.
54 Stout, “Rorty on Religion and Politics,” 531.
The way for a liberal to do this, according to Stout, is to show religious believers that one takes the details of the Bible seriously. Liberals should, for example, ask religious believers to explain why, if they take Leviticus as their basis for being against gay equality, they do not take other biblical passages literally, like Exodus 21:7, which permits a father to sell his daughter into slavery? Stout contends that, if such believers are “confronted with the flimsiness of their reasoning,” they are likely to change their minds, or else reveal themselves to be motivated merely by hatred and fear. Rorty is therefore wrong to discourage religious reasoning in the public square; religious arguments for anti-liberal policies should rather be engaged head on.

Rorty, unsurprisingly, is less sanguine that such a Socratic ploy can, as it were, separate the sheep from the goats. After all, as Stout admits, “few people take themselves to be hateful or sadistic,” and “[g]iven that rational entitlement [to one’s beliefs] is context-sensitive and that relevant features of context vary from person to person, this sort of criticism is bound to be complicated business.” Rorty is famous, of course, for being a philosopher who doubts the power of “rational” argument, because interlocutors who deeply disagree with each other so often proceed from such different premises that they cannot but appear to one another to be begging the question. Committed religious homophobes will have rationalizations at hand for why some biblical passages must be interpreted one way rather than another. After all, the Christian tradition of taking some scriptural passages more literally and others more allegorically goes all the way back to Paul. Thus, though arguments pointing up alleged inconsistencies may occasionally

55 In note 19, Stout recounts a conversation from the television show, The West Wing, in which the center-left President Bartlett gets the best of a biblical literalist talk show host in just this way (Stout, “Rorty on Religion and Politics,” 543).
56 Ibid., 532, passim
57 Ibid., 530, 532.
change minds, Rorty generally does not “share Stout’s belief that ‘picking apart their rationalizations’ is likely to give Leviticus-citers ‘insight into their own motives.’”58 Rather, Rorty suggests that novels, journalism, movies, and works of art are more likely to enlarge the minds and toleration of citizens who holds anti-liberal beliefs. He confesses, “I pin my (admittedly faint) hopes on the power of dramatic narrative.”59

Stout not only thinks that Rorty underestimates the possibility of rationally convincing religious believers of the errors of their anti-liberal beliefs, he also accuses Rorty of underestimating the role that ecclesiastical institutions can play in advancing liberal democratic justice. This is, of course, like the empirical disagreement that Rorty has with Wolterstorff and it is difficult to know how it could ever be resolved. Attempting to count up the historical instances of “good” and “bad” behavior by ecclesiastical institutions seems rather futile, even if there was agreement on what qualifies as “good” and “bad” (and Rorty and Stout appear to have more agreement on this than Rorty and Wolterstorff).

Lastly, Stout attacks Rorty’s hunch that that “nontheists make better citizens than theists.”60 Stout argues that this does not follow from Rorty’s pragmatism, which looks to the practical consequences of belief. Theism, defined simply as belief in God, “involves no political implications whatsoever,” and thus has no necessary connection to the quality of one’s citizenship.61 Indeed, Stout believes that Rorty pretty much concedes this point when he praises religious thinkers like Vattimo for adopting a version of theism that amounts to little more than the notion that God is love. Given that “bare theism”

58 Rorty, “Reply to Stout,” 548.
59 Ibid.
61 Stout, “Rorty on Religion and Politics,” 537.
does not necessarily lead to bad liberal democratic citizenship, Stout advises Rorty to avoid such sweeping generalizations and instead evaluate the political meaning of each set of beliefs on a case-by-case basis.\footnote{Ibid., 538.}

Stout tries to make sense of Rorty’s seemingly unpragmatic anti-theism by attributing to him the assumption that theism must be accompanied by a distinction between the natural and the supernatural. This distinction opens the door to the sort of spectatorial conception of knowledge that Rorty has spent his career criticizing, because it suggests that there is a supernatural, “God’s-eye view” of reality. This then inevitably leads to claims by some, e.g., priests and prophets, to have privileged access to this ultimate view, which causes problems for democratic political equality.\footnote{Ibid., 537.} Stout notes that one finds similar lines of logic in Dewey and Hegel. He also asserts, without much discussion, that these arguments are simply not persuasive: there is no necessary dialectical direction from theism to authoritarianism.

Stout here puts his finger on the crux of Rorty’s position. Rorty agrees with Dewey’s pragmatist view that the “whole-hearted pursuit of the democratic ideal requires us to set aside \textit{any} authority save that of a consensus of our fellow humans. . . . What Dewey most disliked about both traditional ‘realist’ epistemology and about traditional religious beliefs is that they discourage us by telling us that somebody or something has authority over us.”\footnote{Richard Rorty, “Pragmatism as Anti-Authoritarianism,” \textit{Revue Internationale de Philosophie} 207, 1 (1999), 7, 9.} Stout thus correctly identifies the problem: if Rorty’s pragmatism “entails that epistemic authority or privilege is always and only a matter of social agreement \textit{among human beings}, then theism, with its characteristic acknowledgement of
an ultimate, non-human source of authority, is incompatible with pragmatism – and also perhaps with democracy . . . “

Indeed, the reason that Rorty has no problem with the peculiar theism of a philosopher like Vattimo is that Vattimo’s own theology prevents him from making any ethical or political claims on the basis of his religion. But, as Stout well knows, this is not the case with lots of, probably most, theists who believe that their religion is the source of their ethical codes. Stout’s logical point that theism has no ethical or political implications is correct but trivial, because that’s not empirically what most theists believe.

Stout attempts one final argument to suggest that Rorty is wrong to see theism as incompatible with pragmatic liberal democracy. Stout says that Rorty’s pragmatism is a “pragmatism about norms,” which according to Robert Brandom is the idea 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.”

Stout observes that:

Rorty glosses this in turn as the self-reliant claim that all authority rests ultimately in human hands. But [theistic pragmatist] thinkers like [Peter] Ochs and [Cornel] 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.”

Stout goes on to suggest that these practices might include “the very activities that the Bible represents as involving human beings and God in partnership, such as promise

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65 Stout, “Rorty on Religion and Politics,” 540.
67 Stout, “Rorty on Religion and Politics,” 541.
making, promise keeping, agreeing to enter a covenant, and holding one another responsible in terms of a covenant.”

This is, one must admit, an interesting suggestion. Nevertheless, it is easy to see why Rorty would demur if asked to extend the democratic political community to include a Supreme Being: a “partnership” between God and man hardly resembles the one that ideally holds between equal democratic citizens. Moreover, there is also the obvious problem that it is difficult to tell when God is deliberating with us and our fellow (human) citizens. As Rorty puts it, “As I see it, the whole point of pragmatism is to insist that we human beings are answerable only to one another. We are answerable only to those who answer to us – only to conversation partners. We are not responsible either to the atoms or to God, at least not until they start conversing with us.” If Rorty is correct that religion, and especially its institutions, tend to encourage authoritarian ideas and practices, then he is right to argue that it is not finally compatible with the secular ideals of liberal democracy.

V. Neuhaus

One might not initially expect a neoconservative Catholic priest to take Rorty’s postmodern pragmatism seriously, but then the late Rev. John Richard Neuhaus was hardly a typical man of the cloth. A leading Catholic intellectual and editor of First Things, he presents a unique perspective on Rorty’s pragmatic liberal project, which Neuhaus believes is the most impressive attempt to think through the implications our present, postmodern “age of irony.” Indeed, although Neuhaus deploys impressive

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68 Ibid.
69 Rorty, “Comments on Jeffrey Stout’s Democracy and Tradition.”
philosophical and literary erudition in his critical assessment of Rorty’s liberalism, the very fact that he is not a secular liberal philosopher, like most of Rorty’s critics, provides a vantage point that perhaps enables him to see its features and attractions in some ways even better than the latter critics. Neuhaus, for example, notes in a 1990 article that Rorty may be more of a Romantic thinker than he realizes. While Neuhaus is critical of this Romanticism, Rorty does indeed begin to place more emphasis on this aspect of his own thought in his later writings. But for all the acuity of his assessment of Rorty’s project, Neuhaus still falls prey to some fairly common misunderstandings of it. Perhaps this is inevitable, given Neuhaus’s ultimate suspicion that Rorty’s response to the modern world is, and must be, a spiritual dead end.

Neuhaus begins by briefly rehearsing Rorty’s well-worn historical narrative of how Western modernity arrives at its ideal denouement of his secularized liberal utopia.

Rorty writes:

I crudely sum up the story which historians like Blumenberg tell by saying that once upon a time we felt a need to worship something which lay beyond the visible world. Beginning in the seventeenth century we tried to substitute a love of truth for a love of God, treating the world described by science a quasi divinity. Beginning at the end of the eighteenth century we tried to substitute a love of ourselves for a love of scientific truth, a worship of our own deep spiritual or poetic nature, treated as one more quasi divinity. The line of though common to Blumenberg, Nietzsche, Freud, and Davidson suggests 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.

Neuhaus, of course, rejects this narrative, suggesting that worshipping nothing might literally become worshipping nothing – a hopeless, dangerous nihilism – or what for

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72 Rorty, Contingency, Irony, and Solidarity, 22.
Neuhaus amounts to the same thing: an existentialist worship of the self and what the self does in the face of nothing.\textsuperscript{73}

Nevertheless, he does appreciate Rorty’s efforts to imagine a post-Enlightenment liberalism. He writes,

To the religious thinker who is not a professional philosopher, but who does share Rorty’s devotion to liberal democracy, *Contingency, Irony, and Solidarity* has a number of appeals. Rorty’s “liberal ironist” seems to be a modest fellow who leaves a lot of intellectual space open for possibilities about which we cannot know for sure. He appears to be an easygoing person who does not take himself too seriously, who demonstrates a lively serendipity, and who is prepared to be infinitely tolerant of other people more or less like himself, which is to say people at home in the genteel ambience of Mr. Jefferson’s university in Virginia.\textsuperscript{74}

Neuhaus even suggests that the active fallibilism that is so central to the character of the liberal ironist is perfectly compatible with post-Enlightenment Christianity.\textsuperscript{75} But as he probes further, he begins to identify things in Rorty’s liberal utopia that he finds deeply objectionable.

Neuhaus subjects three features of it, in particular, to criticism: (1) Rorty’s attempt to defend liberal democracy in the face of his insistence on the historical contingency of all final vocabularies; (2) Rorty’s assumption that religion is authoritarian; and (3) Rorty’s extreme individualism. Given Neuhaus’s otherwise perceptive summary of Rorty’s work, it is almost disappointing that he makes the common mistake of accusing Rorty of paradox-mongering because Rorty appears to both eschew the possibility of knowing “Truth” while nevertheless making truth claims.

Neuhaus can’t help himself, at points, from viewing Rorty as a Cartesian radical skeptic and ethical relativist, rather than properly understanding Rorty as a fallibilistic

\textsuperscript{74} Neuhaus, “Joshing Richard Rorty.”  
\textsuperscript{75} Neuhaus, *American Babylon*, 135.
pragmatist.\textsuperscript{76} This leads him to accuse Rorty of offering a “rich fare” in “contradictions and inconsistencies.”\textsuperscript{77}

For example, Neuhaus writes, “For all his radical skepticism, Rorty appears to ‘know’ an astonishing number of truths – public truths, the kinds of things that his despised ‘metaphysicians’ call facts.”\textsuperscript{78} One of these truths is that all “truths” are historically contingent, which paradoxically includes the truth that truths are historically contingent. But, of course, the reason that Rorty wants us to treat truth claims as historically contingent is not because he \textit{knows} that they are, but rather because he hopes that adopting this ironical disposition will have the pragmatic effect of making us better liberal citizens (which is also an admittedly fallible hunch). Rorty imagines that we are more likely to be tolerant and innovative if we conceive of our final vocabularies as the products of time and chance. He is aware of the risk that this may leave us less resolute in our moral convictions – in one sense, that is the point, since we may come to realize that our moral convictions are wrong and oppressive – but this tradeoff for increased toleration, at least in the Western modern context, is one that Rorty is willing to make. As he puts it, a fundamental premise of his liberal utopia is that “a belief can still regulate action, can still be thought worth dying for, among people who are quite aware that this belief is caused by nothing deeper than contingent historical circumstance.”\textsuperscript{79} Again, philosophy is unlikely to give us a final answer to the question of what to tolerate and what not to, which is why democratic negotiations concerning where to draw the line crucially depend on the virtuous judgments of the negotiators.

\textsuperscript{76} Ibid., 131.  
\textsuperscript{77} Ibid., 141.  
\textsuperscript{78} Ibid., 142.  
\textsuperscript{79} Rorty, \textit{Contingency, Irony, and Solidarity}, 189.
At times, Neuhaus recognizes that this is Rorty’s position, but ultimately he cannot take it seriously (and thus questions at times whether Rorty himself is serious about it). For instance, Neuhaus, unlike some of Rorty’s philosophical critics, sees clearly that Rorty’s philosophical project cannot be understood in the absence of Rorty’s normative commitment to liberal democracy. But, Neuhaus complains, because Rorty’s “philosophy is in the service of such politics, it provides no measures by which such politics can be either criticized or confirmed.”

He cannot accept Rorty’s defense of liberal democracy, based “merely” on historically contingent commitment, as adequate. To the contrary, Neuhaus argues that the prospects for a humane social order in the absence of a belief in general moral foundations is “depressingly dim.” He thinks that Rorty’s commitment amounts to a “wistful hope that some useful institutions and practices might be rescued from the philosophical rubble.”

From Rorty’s viewpoint, Neuhaus is making the intellectualist mistake of thinking that a way of life and its politics is dependent upon the persuasiveness of supporting philosophical theories. We should deflate such philosophical efforts by taking them to be more or less helpful summaries of our contingent political and ethical intuitions. By contrast, a more properly pragmatic defense of liberal politics and culture is an inevitably hermeneutical effort aimed at making “one feature of our culture look good by citing still another, or comparing our culture invidiously with others by reference to our own standards.”

Rorty also favors telling Whiggish historical narratives that plausibly show

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81 Ibid., 148.
82 Ibid., 152.
83 Rorty, *Contingency, Irony, and Solidarity*, 57.
the development of modern liberalism as a story of progress.  

In his view, “Social and political philosophy usually has been, and always ought to be, parasitic on such narratives” because the most effective social criticism always refers “to a story about what had happened and what we might reasonably hope could happen in the future.” Neuhaus is therefore wrong to suggest that Rorty’s advocacy of liberal democracy consists merely of the bald assertion that it’s the best.

Like other religious critics, Neuhaus accuses Rorty of caricaturing religion: “Most dismissively treated is what [Rorty] assumes is the necessary connection between religion and uncritical certitude.” Neuhaus protests that “postliberal Christianity” has little to do with certitude but everything to do with faith and hope, which ironically makes it akin to Rorty’s insistence that a shared, imaginative hope for a better future is at the center of the moral solidarity required for liberal utopia. Here, of course, we again run into the empirical disagreement that Rorty has with defenders of religion. Rorty can respond to Neuhaus that religion doesn’t have to be dogmatic. It just, in fact, often is.

In Neuhaus’s view, Rorty’s wrongheadedness about religion is based on a commitment that Neuhaus finds even more disturbing: Rorty’s celebration of radical individualism, of his would-be “strong poets,” who are, in a phrase that Neuhaus takes from George Bernano’s *Diary of a Country Priest*, “overflowing with sheer self-appreciation.” Neuhaus observes that, “There is in Rorty what might be described as an egoistic eschatology, and his caricature of religion prevents him from entertaining an

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84 Rorty, *Philosophy and Social Hope*, 231.
85 Ibid., 231-32.
87 Ibid., 158.
alternative eschatology." Unsurprisingly, Neuhaus is skeptical of Rorty’s Millian exhortation to do one’s best to creatively fashion a novel self out of our inherited cultural materials. In response to this ethic, Neuhaus issues the (Catholic) reply:

But, instead of pursuing self-creation by playing the new against the old, one may be persuaded that the best thing to do, even the fullest realization of the self, is identification with existing final vocabularies – vocabularies that are not only “talked” but also lived out in individual lives and communal narratives. Recognizing the contingency of all vocabularies, one may find in an existing vocabulary such compelling intimations of the good, the beautiful, and, yes, the true that one has no higher desire than to be part of the continuation of that final vocabulary. . . . For many of us, Christianity is such a final vocabulary.

Neuhaus suspects that the affable exterior of the liberal ironist belies a self-absorbed and ethically empty interior. He finds evidence of the liberal ironist’s nihilistic self-worship in Rorty’s admiration for Derrida, whose ironism explicitly embraces sterility and death. As Neuhaus points out, Rorty’s discussion of Derrida in Contingency, Irony, and Solidarity recounts Derrida’s provocative conflation and rejection of metaphysics and children because both are “generalities” that trap and destroy our individuality. Such solipsistic ironism, Neuhaus argues, “is not an aberration but a logical end of the ironist project,” because the perpetual overcoming of the self that the goal of that project “leaves, precisely, nothing.” Why does Rorty have any hope that such a being will retain his commitment to liberal democracy? After all, “The liberal ironist is not cruel for the simplest of all utilitarian reasons: his hope that other people, in

88 Ibid., 145.
89 Ibid., 155-56.
90 Ibid., 138-139; see Rorty, Contingency, Irony, and Solidarity, 128.
91 Neuhaus, American Babylon, 153.
turn, will not be cruel to him.” Indeed, Rorty even commits the gaffe of calling this hope “selfish.” This does not seem promising in terms of moral motivation.

But to conclude that Rorty’s liberal utopia is, on its own terms, a Hobbesian world of self-seeking narcissists misrepresents Rorty’s vision. As Rorty puts it, Neuhaus’s Catholic Church “holds that views such as Mill’s reduce human beings to the level of animals. But philosophers like me think that utilitarianism exalts us by offering us a challenging moral ideal. Utilitarianism leads to heroic and self-sacrificing efforts on behalf of social justice.” Just because the liberal ironist has no philosophically necessary reason for his public moral commitment to minimize cruelty does not mean his allegiance to it is weak. This is because the commitment is a matter of the liberal ironist possessing the liberal virtues, which enable him to best identify and work to eliminate cruelty.

The central theme of Rorty’s Deweyan ideal is that self-creation and justice must be perpetually balanced and that philosophy cannot tell us a priori what that balance should be. As I described it above, Rorty’s liberal utopia is communitarian: while there is always a healthy tension between the private experiments of the ironists and the public demands of liberal morality, the liberal ironist does not see the public and private as fundamentally opposed but rather as dependent upon each other. Neuhaus acknowledges that this is Dewey’s conception of democracy but accuses Rorty of abandoning the “common faith” that holds Dewey’s democratic community together. And yet, like Boffetti and Wolterstorff, Neuhaus does recognize that Rorty offers a “quasi-religious”

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92 Ibid., 149.
93 Rorty, Contingency, Irony, and Solidarity, 92.
94 Rorty, An Ethics for Today, 8.
95 Neuhaus, American Babylon, 133-34.
conception of liberal democracy, though one that is fully secularized. Rorty points out that the process of secularization has not resulted Western civilization’s moral collapse but, to the contrary, has coincided with the development of history’s most just and humane societies. This suggests to him that the further withering of religion is likely to promote further liberal progress.

**Conclusion**

When Rorty views the American political landscape, he notices that many people who espouse political beliefs that are contrary to his ideal of liberal society understand those beliefs to be grounded in their religious faith. Moreover, he thinks that these problematic beliefs are often actively and effectively promoted by the churches these people attend. Indeed, Rorty believes this has generally been the case in human history. John Stuart Mill has long been quoted as observing that while not all conservatives are stupid, most stupid people are conservative. Likewise, Rorty’s position on religion might be summed up: while not all religious believers are antiliberal, most antiliberals in liberal society are religious believers.

Yet believers like Wolterstorff, Neuhaus, and Vattimo seem to belie Rorty’s connection between religion and antiliberal politics. As Stout would insist, each is thoughtful, nondogmatic, and even ironic in their responses to Rorty; they eminently exhibit the liberal virtues. But they are also, of course, highly idiosyncratic. While Wolterstorff insists that he and Rorty embrace “profoundly different comprehensive perspectives,” when we read their eminently civil and eloquent debate, we might be excused for wondering just how ethically different they actually are in practice. (As philosophical stalwarts of the elite American academy, could they really be that
different?) Fr. Neuhaus insists that, “The radical mode of contingent existence that Rorty prizes would seem to be much heightened by a Christian eschatology that, unlike Rorty’s, is falsifiable (after all, it is hypothetically conceivable that Jesus will not return in glory)." But how many Christians who are prone to bringing their religious beliefs into the public square are likely to admit such a possibility? Rorty plausibly suspects that such Christians devote themselves to the faith precisely in order to quash such doubts.

What drives Rorty’s position that religion must be privatized in the short-term, and wither away in the long-term, is his belief that the only public authority that should be recognized in a pragmatic liberal community is the evolving, deliberative consensus of citizens who possess the liberal virtues. Religious and metaphysical beliefs are perennially a threat to this vision because they suppose something nonhuman that might require something of us. Religion is not “irrational.” It has historically sometimes produced good things, like art, moral action, and happiness. But because secular commitments can equally produce such good things, religion is simply not worth the risk. We should refrain from imagining that there is something larger than us that is responsible for us and that we are responsible to. Rorty writes:

If we give up this hope, we shall lose what Nietzsche called “metaphysical comfort,” but we may gain a renewed sense of community. Our identification with our community – our society, our political tradition, our intellectual heritage – is heightened when we see this community as ours rather than as nature’s, shaped rather than found, one among many which men have made. In the end, pragmatists tell us, what matters is our loyalty to other human beings clinging together against the dark, not our hope of getting things right. James, in arguing against realists and idealists that “the trail of the human serpent is over all,” was reminding us that our glory is in our participation in fallible and transitory human projects, not in our obedience to permanent nonhuman constraints.97

96 Neuhaus, American Babylon, 146.
97 Richard Rorty, The Consequences of Pragmatism (Minneapolis, MN: University of Minnesota Press, 1982), 166.