

Rorty on Religion and Hope

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Despite Marx's dictum that 'the criticism of religion is the premise of all criticism', the critical tradition of philosophy and social theory in which Marx stands is marked by a deep ambivalence towards religion.¹ From Kant to Hegel and Marx, from Nietzsche to Heidegger and Freud, religion has been criticised for its metaphysical extravagances, its psychological costs and illusory compensations, and its inner tendency towards narcissism and violence. At the same time, this tradition of critique rarely simply negates religion. It typically sees religion, for all its faults, as harbouring something positive and important. In particular, there is widespread acknowledgement, even among the fiercest critics of religion, that religion provides a robust vehicle for human hope. Throughout the critical tradition, we find scepticism towards religion's knowledge-claims, and suspicion towards its underlying motives, co-existing with admiration for its capacity to frame and sustain hope.

Kant's critical philosophy provides a vivid example of how scepticism towards religiously grounded knowledge, and suspicion of religiously motivated morality, can sit alongside deep intellectual respect for religion as a reservoir of hope. Kant's demarcation of the domains of science, morality and religion, as reflecting the distinct 'interests of reason' in answering the questions 'what can I know?', 'what ought I to do?', and 'for what may I hope?', is of course a defining feature of his system (Kant 1933: A805 / B833). For Kant, the struggles for freedom, peace and justice that bring about moral progress are doomed if not sustained by a kind of radical hope. This is why reason, or the enlightened spirit of modernity, must have both a philosophical and a religious moment. Just as clear is the concern shared by the key figures of the Frankfurt School to give philosophical expression to the core of hope that informs and inspires

struggles against injustice and oppression. While the idea of historical hope is most explicitly thematised by Benjamin and Bloch, it also obliquely present in the philosophical thought of Horkheimer and Adorno, the latter of whom famously tied reason or the critical standpoint with a standpoint of redemption articulated under atheistic premises.²

This conjunction of enlightenment scepticism and utopian hope is evident today in Habermas's reformulation of critical theory. Habermas embraces the 'methodical atheism' of Kant, Hegel and Marx, and refashions it into what he calls 'postmetaphysical thought' (Habermas 2002: 74-75, 160). The fallibilist, proceduralist character of postmetaphysical thought prevents it from countenancing any substantive religious worldview or any religiously informed conception of the ends of life – indeed, it supplies materials for undertaking a critique of such conceptions. On the other hand, Habermas insists that religious concepts may have a 'semantic content' whose capacity to inspire, and by implication to sustain hope, is both 'indispensable' and untranslatable into the rational discourses of postmetaphysical philosophy (Habermas 1992: 51).

Charles Taylor is another philosopher who combines a modern distaste for metaphysical discourse about the existence of God with a more upbeat assessment of the significance of religion for the emancipatory project of critical theory and philosophy. Like Habermas, Taylor doubts that the 'stripped-down secular outlook' of much modern moral philosophy can elicit the kind of spiritual resonance of its Judaeo-Christian forebear, but he goes further in proposing that we may have to return to the theistic sources of secularism to keep its 'radical hope in history' alive (Taylor 1989: 520).

Viewed in this context, it comes as no surprise that the recent emergence of social hope as the leading theme of Richard Rorty's work should coincide with his first sustained philosophical engagement with religion.³ And as we would expect, this

engagement expresses a deep ambivalence. On the one hand, Rorty is impressed by the inspirational power of certain religious texts, and in particular the New Testament, which he describes as ‘the founding document of a movement that has done much for human freedom and human equality’ (Rorty 1999a: 203). The Christian scriptures and the lives of the Christian martyrs continue to inspire hope in the possibility of a morally better world. On the other hand, Rorty has grave reservations about the ‘Platonist’ framework used for grounding this hope in monotheistic religion and he is scathing of the form of institutionalised monotheism he calls ‘clericalism’. By his own account, the clash between Platonism and radical social hope – or hope, as Rorty puts it, ‘for a global, cosmopolitan, democratic, egalitarian, classless, casteless society’ (Rorty 1999a: xii) – sets the agenda for most of Rorty’s writings in the 1990s and it provides the specific terms of engagement for his writings on religion. Rorty is forced into a confrontation with religion by his concern to consolidate radical social hopes (hopes that religion – amongst other things -- has traditionally helped to sustain) by way of an outlook that is defined by its hostility to Platonism (the philosophical framework that has traditionally helped to sustain religion).⁴

It is this confrontation with religion that I want to examine in this paper. I start (section one) with a summary of Rorty’s general anti-Platonist stance, which Rorty himself closely associates with an anti-theist or secular one. While Rorty’s general philosophical outlook is of course inspired by classical pragmatism, its anti-Platonist credentials are best demonstrated, Rorty now thinks, with the conceptual armoury supplied by Robert Brandom’s inferentialism. Without going into details, I consider how Rorty uses a blend of inferentialism and liberalism to show that pragmatism and theism don’t mix. This is not to say, however, that religion and pragmatism don’t mix. On the contrary, Rorty strenuously maintains that pragmatism and religion are indeed

compatible, and the central task of his reflections on religion is to clarify how this is so. I then offer (section two) a reconstruction of Rorty's attempt to rehabilitate religion along non-theist, pragmatist lines. Viewed as a 'romantic polytheism', Rorty suggests, pragmatism can be seen to accommodate and even to embrace religion in its own way. Rorty presents pragmatism as a philosophy that, notwithstanding its anti-Platonism, both validates the religious impulse to 'stand in awe at something greater than oneself' and satisfies all that needs to be satisfied in the religious desire for 'redemption'. Rorty's case for the compatibility of pragmatism and religion thus does not rest on the claim that pragmatism and religion serve different purposes – in the sense, say, that science and religion do – and therefore don't really come into conflict with each other. Nor is the argument that pragmatism, as a second-order or philosophical discourse about religion, science, morals etc., holds independently of first-order scientific, religious, or moral beliefs, and so does not involve a rival set of commitments. The farther reaching point is rather that pragmatism at its best can encompass religion at its best, that the impulses and desires that find expression in religion, to the extent that they are worth saving, can be redescribed in pragmatist terms. As Rorty's redescription would rule out Platonism, the aimed at result is to make religion but not theism compatible with pragmatism.

I then turn (section three) to whether this aimed at result coincides with the one Rorty actually delivers. That it may not be is suggested by the difficulty Rorty has in convincingly spelling out how pragmatism provides adequate expression for just those salvageable needs, desires and aspirations typically associated with religion. The question I pose here is thus whether Rorty, in his attempt to render religion compatible with pragmatism, effectively strips religion of its distinctive content. Without claiming to give any definitive formulation of what that content may be, we can say enough – so

I argue -- to see how uneasily it sits with some of Rorty's central philosophical commitments, especially those linked with his utilitarianism. With little remaining that is recognisably religious in the pragmatist outlook Rorty recommends, doubt is cast on his claim to have made pragmatism and religion compatible. That is not to say that Rorty's pragmatism extinguishes the religious impulse, or that it lacks a religious dimension altogether. As we shall see in the final part of the paper (section four), Rorty makes use of a notion of 'unjustifiable hope' that is of religious provenance. But even here, in view of distinctions that can be made between different types of unjustifiable hope, antagonisms between Rorty's pragmatism and religion re-emerge.

1. Pragmatism against theism

Rorty sometimes describes his pragmatism as a radicalisation of the secularism of the Enlightenment (e.g. Rorty 2001a: 19; 1999a: xxvii). By this he means that pragmatism follows the Enlightenment in replacing the idea that human beings are reliant upon and answerable to God in their practices with the notion that human beings are accountable to themselves alone. Pragmatism takes over the Enlightenment's scepticism about supernatural or divine powers and it reiterates the Enlightenment's conviction that human flourishing (in all its diversity) is the only good. Pragmatism shares the Enlightenment's suspicion of authority, particularly authority grounded in something non-human, and it opposes the hierarchical social orders such authority has historically served to justify (see Rorty 1999b). Above all, pragmatism embraces the democratic ethos built into the Enlightenment project, an ethos emblematised by the standards of liberty, equality and fraternity. Pragmatism radicalises Enlightenment secularism, in Rorty's view, because it demythologises -- or as Rorty also puts it, 'de-divinizes' (Rorty 1989: 21) -- the notions of truth, reason and nature in the name of which the

Enlightenment originally stood its ground. In supposing that human practices were answerable to ‘the Truth’, ‘Reason’ or ‘Nature’ – that is, something other than more human practices -- the Enlightenment stopped short of full secularisation. Rorty’s pragmatism claims to make good this shortfall by being more consistently ‘anti-Platonist’.⁵ Rorty’s well-known defences of anti-foundationalism, anti-representationalism and anti-realism can be seen as tactical manoeuvres within this broad anti-Platonist strategy (see Rorty 1979; 1982).

Rorty generously reads Brandom as having refined this strategy still further, and he draws on Brandom’s inferentialism to argue that the preoccupation with the issue of the existence of God characteristic of theism is misplaced (see Rorty 2002a). While the details are quite intricate, the thrust of the argument is that there is nothing outside the argumentative exchanges of human enquirers that could possibly lend authority to belief: neither the experience of an individual, nor the dogmas of a tradition, nor the appeal to revelation can do the trick. Appeals to tradition, revelation, and experience might feature in an argumentative exchange, but they do not provide a perspective from which to judge the outcomes of such exchange: there is no authority higher than the community of enquirers itself; no higher adjudicating power that can arbitrate between what the community finds (as a result of argumentative exchange) and what an individual claims to experience or what a tradition claims to reveal. This is a general principle of pragmatist epistemology, but it has a particularly strong purchase, Rorty thinks, when it comes to claims about the existence of God: the existence of God can never be that which lends authority to the theist’s belief, and in the absence of any neutral or impartial criteria for adjudicating the disagreement between the theist and the atheist – criteria that are recognised as neutral by both parties to the dispute -- the question of the existence of God cannot be authoritatively settled.

But this deflation of the ontological stature of ‘God-talk’ is compensated by a recognition of the place where it does count: the sphere of what Rorty calls ‘cultural politics’. Religious language is to be judged not by its ability to designate possibly existing things, but by its ‘cultural desirability’ (Rorty 2002a: 75). Something is culturally desirable if it conduces to human happiness. And so the true measure of theism is not whether or not some preternatural, non-human power exists, but whether or not theism conduces to human happiness. In Rorty’s view, this is not just the issue that, in one form or another, discussions of theism tend to lead to (if they lead anywhere): it is the issue that should be the focus of theism’s self-defence.

Rorty does not lay out in detail what he thinks the ‘cultural desirability of God-talk’ actually is. But he says enough, in several different contexts, to suggest it doesn’t amount to much. So, for instance, in ‘Religion as Conversation-stopper’, he criticises ‘God-talk’ as an impediment to the processes of public deliberation characteristic of modern democratic societies (Rorty 1999a: 168-74).⁶ Public deliberation, Rorty points out, involves discussion of public concerns. For the discussion to flourish, it must not be stymied by the introduction of concerns that have no chance of engaging everyone. But this, in Rorty’s view, is just the effect that declarations of religious conviction, or the recourse to language that presupposes such conviction, are bound to have – at least on the public discourses of religiously heterogeneous societies, societies including citizens of different religious convictions and none. Under conditions of pluralism, theism makes the public or common concerns hard, if not impossible, to state; and on this account it sits uneasily with democracy. For those, like Rorty, whose commitment to democracy is paramount, this seriously compromises the cultural desirability of theism, at least insofar as it aspires to provide a framework for public deliberation.

In general, Rorty questions the cultural desirability of theism on account of features that allegedly make theism hostile to pluralism. Assuming there is no 'standard of excellence' against which the worth of a human life form may be measured, and given the 'potential infinity of equally valuable ways to lead a human life', the chief aim of social organisation – according to Rorty's 'philosophical pluralism' -- becomes that of promoting the 'greatest possible human diversity' (Rorty 1999a: 267). But in Rorty's view, it is enough to consider the characteristic vocabulary of theism to see that it is not conducive to that goal. Traditional 'God-talk' – talk of 'the Truth', 'love of the Truth', 'the Way', 'the Word', 'the Good' and so forth – not only gives a misleading impression of whatever authority lies behind it (by making it seem as if the authority has a more-than-social ontological weight): it also discourages pluralism by prioritising the one over the many. In the first place, such vocabulary disposes individuals to think that their ideals, aspirations and beliefs should form a coherent, unified whole, thereby discouraging the kind of 'experiments in living' that are a vital part of a progressive pluralist culture. Second, such talk encourages individuals to think that all life – other people's lives as much as their own – has the one ground of meaning; that everyone is made truly happy by sharing in the same ultimate source of happiness. Again, this way of thinking does little to foster pluralism: on the one hand, it can blind the individual to potential sources of fulfilment that do not fit the accepted theistic vocabulary; on the other, it can prevent people from recognising the human significance of ways of life that depart from their own. Either way 'theism' – understood as a general structure of thought that for Rorty is more or less homologous with 'Platonism' -- is at odds with pluralism and so is more likely to hinder than to promote human happiness.

It is important to see that Rorty's philosophical critique of theism is aimed more at a certain way of taking belief, and in particular a certain way of interpreting the

authority of belief, than at particular theistic doctrines.⁷ It is the ‘Platonic’ philosophical framework of theism that Rorty wants to challenge. This challenge invites us to compare the cultural desirability of two contrasting modes of thought: monistic theism – with its characteristically ‘Platonist’ kind of vocabulary -- and pluralistic pragmatism. Of course, such comparison is not the same thing as weighing up the actual harms and benefits of theism and secularism, not least because there is much more to monotheistic religions than their Platonist philosophical structure, and because the secular, pluralist culture Rorty has in mind serves more as a projected ideal than as a description of historical reality. Nonetheless, Rorty wants to say that we should be inspired and oriented by this ideal and for this reason persuaded of the virtues of pragmatism (insofar as it provides the mode of thought at home in it).

2. Reconciling pragmatism and religion

In his more unguarded moments, Rorty gives the impression that he thinks we would be better off without religion altogether.⁸ At such times, he is tempted to dismiss religion as philosophically misguided and as a hindrance to progressive politics. This is not, however, Rorty’s considered view. Despite his hostility to orthodox theism, he explicitly opposes those who think that ‘pragmatism and religion do not mix’ (Rorty 1998c: 25). Like James and Dewey before him, Rorty seeks rather to reconcile pragmatism and religion: he wants to show that only a certain conception of religion, one distorted by the influence of Platonism, rather than religious faith as such, is undermined by the Enlightenment’s critique of theism. The great virtue of pragmatism, according to Rorty, is that it shows us how to break the ‘traditional link between the religious impulse, the impulse to stand in awe at something greater than oneself, and the infantile need for security, the childish hope of escaping from time and chance’ (Rorty

1998a: 17-18). In Rorty's view, then, pragmatism takes the religious impulse in its untutored state and transforms it into the basis of what we could call, borrowing a phrase from Levinas, 'a religion for adults' (see Levinas 1990: 11).

How then does pragmatism manage this rehabilitation of religion? Rorty's answer is most explicit in his reflections on the notion of redemption (see Rorty 2000; 2001b). Redemption, in the sense that interests Rorty, involves a self-developing, self-transforming, and in a manner of speaking 'self-completing' encounter with something larger than oneself. The desire for redemption – which seems to be synonymous with the religious impulse as Rorty understands it – is a longing for one's life to be 'made good' by virtue of some kind of participation in the life of this larger, awe-inspiring thing. Rorty cites with approval Dorothea Allison's description of an 'atheist's religion' in which redemption comes from having 'something greater than ourselves to hold onto – God, or history or politics or literature or a belief in the healing power of love, or even righteous anger' (Rorty 1999a: 161). The particular object of belief, according to the pragmatist conception of redemption Rorty takes to be expressed here, is beside the point. What matters is the sheer 'insistence that some or all finite, mortal humans can be more than they have yet become': it is 'the insistence itself', or as Rorty also puts it, the very 'ability to experience overpowering hope or faith or love' (ibid.), that religion at its pragmatic best would help to sustain.

Rorty puts a lot of weight on the thought that such an understanding of religion drops the so-called Platonist assumptions that underpin traditional monotheism. The key assumption that needs to be dropped is that there is such a thing as 'redemptive truth', or 'redemptive knowledge of how things really are' (Rorty 2001b). The pragmatist understanding of religion, according to Rorty, recaptures the indifference to knowledge, belief and truth of the original, pre-philosophical religious impulse. It returns religion to

the state of cognitive innocence it enjoyed prior to its rationalisation, philosophisation and distortion into theology. But if the maturity of the pragmatist's religion does not come from the cognitive relation it puts the believer in, from whence does the maturity arise? At least part of Rorty's answer is that it comes from a humanistic demystification of that which non-cognitively redeems us. More precisely, whereas pre-philosophical (pre-Platonised) religion posits a non-human source of redemptive energies, post-philosophical, pragmatist religion construes redemption in terms of non-cognitive relations to other people. The maturity of pragmatist religion – what makes it, so to speak, a 'religion for adults' -- consists in large part in its recognition of the redemptive role of other human beings. In Rorty's pragmatist religion, redemption is refigured as 'redemption from egotism'.

According to Rorty's construal, Platonic redemptive truth, like pre-Platonised religion, posits a direct, unmediated access to the source of redemptive energies. To the extent that the revelation of Being, or contact with non-human, preternatural forces are supposed to be at stake, there is no need to engage with other people, and for this reason both redemptive truth and the primitive religious impulse are 'egotist' models of redemption. Of course, as we saw earlier, pragmatism denies that any kind of truth (not just so-called redemptive truth) can be arrived at by way of a socially unmediated contact with reality. All truth, and all knowledge, properly conceived, is intersubjective or 'dialogical'. But Rorty wants to distinguish the dialogicality of truth and knowledge from that which has a redemptive function. For whereas the dialogical or social character of knowledge involves the idea that it can withstand public scrutiny and criticism, and that it is the outcome of a common endeavour, redemption from egotism is not a matter of justifying oneself to others at all. Nor, in Rorty's view, need it touch on other people's concerns. One is not redeemed from egotism, in Rorty's sense, by

being able to defend oneself in relation to another. The redemption rather arises from being able to imagine oneself as enlarged, or made better, or perhaps transfigured and made complete, through the mediation of the lives of other people, including the fictional lives of people found in literature, the arts, and other cultural artefacts.

Rorty's pragmatist rehabilitation of religion thus turns on the idea that religion is not a matter of justified (or justifiable) belief. From the pragmatist perspective – and here Rorty endorses William James's view -- religion does not compete with science; indeed Rorty goes further than James in asserting that the religious person has no intellectual responsibility to justify her faith, and her deepest hopes, to others. But this does not mean that pragmatism as Rorty advocates it adopts a quietist or uncritical stance towards religion. Rather, it locates the challenge to religion elsewhere and reconciles itself with religion accordingly.

First, as we can gather from the previous discussion, in Rorty's account religion is answerable to the exigencies of democratic politics. Democratic politics, as Rorty envisages it, is essentially a common endeavour: at its best, it is a matter of people co-operating with each other in projects that add bit by bit to the sum total of human happiness. Given Rorty's philosophical pluralism, this will involve securing as much liberty – or 'opportunities for variation' -- for each individual as is consistent with the same liberty being available to all. The more people are able to pursue projects of self-creation and personal redemption the better. But the very goal of maximising the scope for individual variation entails a commitment to leaving individuals alone – in the sense of free from interference -- to pursue such projects for themselves. In acting collectively to improve the quality of their democracy, citizens are better off not having to deal with whatever it is that they separately seek redemption from. In this sense, Rorty reconciles religion with pragmatism by turning the former into a source of 'private' hope – hope

about what I (not we) may become – and he presents the ‘privatisation of religion’ as if it were merely a corollary of the democratisation of politics (see Rorty 1999a: 149).

There is, however, one exception: democracy itself as the highest hope and the object of religious awe and devotion. Rorty envisages a civic religion of democracy that keeps social hope alive sitting alongside many private religions sustaining private hopes about what individuals may become.

Whereas the first challenge to religion comes from the separation of private and social hope required for democracy, the second challenge relates just to the ability of religion to sustain those individual, private hopes. For an alternative source of private redemptive energy has emerged in the modern world, one that in important respects is superior to traditional religion: modern literature, and especially the novel. Rorty does not deny that religious or devotional literature does and will continue to inspire the exaltation of ‘having visited a better world’, and of being ‘saved’ or ‘redeemed’ by such a visitation. However, he also sees it as having given way to works of the creative imagination, a development Rorty welcomes and which he sees as progressing further under conditions of pragmatist democracy. Rorty notes how traditional devotional literature tends to emphasise ‘purification rather than enlargement’, and thus serves to reinforce the image of a single redemptive truth (Rorty 2001b). It thereby carries unwanted traces of Platonism, even when it is part of a self-consciously ‘privatised’ form of religion. By contrast, readers of the modern novel are spiritually nourished by making the acquaintance of widening circles of imaginary but significant people, which itself helps to sustain the private (but universal) hope of finding meaning in one’s life. With the rise of what Rorty calls ‘literary culture’, there is less need for religion even as a source of private hope.

3. Happiness and Meaning

Rorty's claim that religion is answerable to the demands of democratic politics, and his view that the privatised religions consistent with those demands are endangered by the rise of a literary culture, are both premised on the idea that the worth of religion consists in its cultural desirability or its contribution to human happiness. Rorty's pragmatist philosophy of religion is, at its core, a form of utilitarianism. Rorty embraces the term 'romantic utilitarianism' as a label for his religion-encompassing conception of pragmatism, even though the originator of the term, the French philosopher René Berthelot, used it to indict pragmatism. According to Berthelot, Rorty informs us, romanticism and utilitarianism were too different 'to permit synthesis' (Rorty 1998c: 21, 1999a: 267-8). I now want to consider a variation on Berthelot's hypothesis, namely that religion and utilitarianism may be too different to admit of synthesis, at least in the manner Rorty proposes. The question I raise here is whether the change in self-image that religion must undergo to become compatible with Rorty's romantic utilitarianism is still recognisable as an image of religion at all.

Recall that Rorty's rehabilitation of religion involves separating two elements that traditional religions tie together: the impulse 'to stand in awe at something greater than oneself' and the 'infantile need for security, the childish hope of escaping from time and chance'. The idea is that once these elements are separated, it becomes possible to cultivate the former in a way that promotes human happiness while discarding the latter as an impediment to that end.

But what exactly is it about the religious need for security, or the hope of escaping time and chance, that Rorty finds so objectionable? There seems to be two things which, while closely connected, should be kept distinct for the purpose of analysis. First, there is the idea that harbouring such hopes or yielding to such needs is

ineffective as a means for bringing about happiness. In order for us to attain happiness, it is more prudent, in the sense of more instrumentally rational, to try to take charge of our situation, to exercise our powers of agency more fully, than to plead for some divine, non-human intervention on our behalf. For Rorty, continued attachment to a non-human source of protection and fecundity truncates human capacities for action and discourages the further development of those capacities. It reflects a debilitating lack of human self-confidence. Rorty urges us to grow out of religious needs for security and hopes of escaping time and chance because they are imprudent and counter-productive: they aim at happiness but frustrate that end by undermining human self-belief.

Now, of course, the questionable instrumental value of established religion has long been maintained, not just by atheists but by a long line of religious reformers. As Rorty himself reminds us, the reflexive enhancement of human powers in the light of a sharpened sense of instrumental reason was a defining feature of the Protestant reformation. Clearly, religion has a capacity to reform itself so that it better accords with the standards of instrumental rationality. If one believes, for instance, that God protects and rewards those who maximise their capacities for instrumentally rational action, then the religious need for security expressed in that belief can sit alongside the development of effective modes of human agency quite comfortably.

But in any case, is it an adequate representation of the religious ‘need for security’ to say that it aims at happiness? When Rorty speaks of an ‘infantile’ need for security, he has in mind the kind of security that God understood as a big, all-powerful ally, capable of granting the wishes of those who please him, might be supposed to provide. The basic model is that of a child seeking protection from a parent. There is no doubt religions can satisfy a need of this sort, that they can nourish a sense of security that is at least analogous to that experienced by a vulnerable infant in relation to its

mother or father. But of course that is not the only model for thinking about how religion might satisfy deep-seated needs for security. An alternative conception, familiar in the anthropology of religion, construes the kind of security provided by religion in terms of an order that makes sense of whatever happiness and unhappiness there is in the world. According to this conception, religion delivers security not so much by its promises of future happiness in the after life or of superhuman assistance in this one, as by its role in fending off the threat of moral meaninglessness. This threat may be occasioned, as Geertz has written, by the apprehension of insurmountable human ignorance, evil and injustice, and the prospect of unbearable suffering; or, to give a different example, by the irruption of potentially unlimited cycles of violence, as Girard thought (see Geertz 1973; Girard 1977). The key point is that religion on this conception provides a sense of security by satisfying a need for meaning rather than by promising happiness or by being instrumental towards that end. It does this by positing an order within which there is happiness and unhappiness and in relation to which unhappiness is, as Geertz put it, 'sufferable'. Once the religious need for security is seen from this perspective, it looks quite different from a child's need for parental protection, a need that the child naturally grows out of as it loses its physical vulnerability.

Something similar can be said of the religious 'hope of escaping time and chance'. From a utilitarian perspective, or the standpoint of instrumental reason, this is objectionable because it is an ineffective tool for bringing about human happiness. It is childish because it amounts to a form of escapism: it arises from a failure to face the facts, to learn from experience and to take responsibility. It thus presents an obstacle to the project of maximising human happiness and minimising suffering. But that criticism doesn't seem so appropriate when the human-transcending order – the order that stands outside time and chance in Rorty's sense -- is seen not as a guarantor of happiness but,

as the cultural anthropology of religion suggests it should be, as the existential context within which human projects acquire worth and their sufferings become liveable. It may be mere childish escapism to suppose there is an almighty immortal being watching over me and looking after my interests. But that is hardly true of the thought that the contingent satisfaction and non-satisfaction of human interests is given meaning by something that transcends it.

But the main point I want to make here concerns not so much the adequacy of this criticism of religion as the implications it has for Rorty's proposed rehabilitation of religion. If, as for example Geertz suggests, it is a central feature of religious symbolic systems that they posit an order of meaning within which human struggles for happiness take place, if it is characteristic of them not to take the human realm of apparently contingent strife and suffering as self-contained, it is hard to see how a viewpoint for which time and chance is all-encompassing can conceivably count as religious. The religious content of a symbolic system, on this account, is not given by the means it proposes for the attainment of happiness, for instance submission to a higher causal power (one not subject to time and chance) or short term renunciation for the sake of long term enjoyment in the after life. The assumption that it is drives the utilitarian critique. From within the utilitarian point of view, religion only appears as one possible solution to an essentially technical problem - the problem of maximising happiness or minimising suffering. It does not appear as a response to the existential problem of meaning – for instance, as a framework for making sense of (rather than eliminating) suffering by locating human life in a larger moral order. Rorty's rehabilitated religion would do something that unreconstructed religions already do only badly (promote human happiness); but it does so by being abstracted from the distinctive semantic

content of religion, which situates human happiness and unhappiness in a larger, meaning-giving context.

Charles Taylor's recent writings on religion also bring out the difficulty of characterising religion in exclusively utilitarian terms (see Taylor 1999, 2002, 2004). He points out that the contextualisation of the sphere of human happiness and suffering – understood in terms of health and disease, prosperity and dearth, long life and premature death – within a broader realm of meaning is evident across the range of religious symbolism, but it is most striking in the so-called 'axial' and 'post-axial' religions that include Judaism, Christianity and Buddhism. This is because these religions posit a good that goes beyond happiness, so that a life may succeed 'while failing utterly on the scales of human flourishing' or by 'leaving the field of flourishing altogether' (Taylor 2004: 57). It thus becomes possible to see good or meaning even in things – such as pain, personal loss and worldly defeat -- that are unqualified bads in the utilitarian outlook. This is also the achievement of what William James called the 'religion of the twice-born'. Unlike utilitarian 'healthy-mindedness', which fails 'to accord to sorrow, pain, and death any positive and active attention whatever', the more complete 'religions of deliverance' strive for a kind of peace and fulfilment that 'cannot be reached by the simple addition of pluses and elimination of minuses from life' (James 1929: 165-6). For James, the 'twice-born' are able to achieve both a degree of religious insight and a depth of spiritual experience only through renouncing the 'healthy-minded' utilitarian perspective on life.

But what bearing does this point have on Rorty's position? So far I have been considering the force of Rorty's negative characterisation of the religious need for security and its associated hope for something beyond time and chance. Recall that Rorty does not want to accommodate these aspects of religion, his point is to separate

them out from another aspect of religion - awe at standing before something greater than oneself - which Rorty's pragmatism does embrace. The first reason Rorty gives for discarding the former is that it is practically disadvantageous: it reduces human capacities for effective action and so the likelihood of human flourishing. I have suggested, however, that the function of religious symbolism is to satisfy a need for meaning rather than flourishing, and that the positing of something beyond time and chance is indispensable to the way religion meets that function. If so, then to discount the possibility of there being an order of meaning that transcends time and chance is more damaging to religion than Rorty's proposed rehabilitation of religion can afford it to be. The second reason Rorty gives is that it is not just imprudent but demeaning to yield to such needs. We have seen that, in Rorty's view, a culture based on the sole authority of the free consensus of its members is more conducive to human happiness than one based on extra-human authority. But this is not the only thing that is admirable about such a culture: the people who belong to it are praiseworthy because they are no longer driven by the childish and supine desire to obey. To make do with the protection and fecundity a non-human source may provide is, on this view, to fail in one's responsibilities as an adult human being. To be worthy of happiness one must take responsibility for it: a happiness that results from one's own efforts is more admirable than one acquired through the favours of another. By ceding responsibility for their happiness to a higher, non-human power, human beings cut themselves off from the fuller, ethically more satisfying happiness possessed by a self-reliant, self-responsible being.

Rorty thinks (or better, for the reason I shall give in a moment, hopes) that a culture that meets this ethical standard of self-responsibility will also be one in which human flourishing is maximised. But he is sensitive to the possibility that the two

standards can come apart, that the ideal of autonomous self-reliance may come into conflict with the project of maximising human happiness. He agrees with Nietzsche, for instance, that ‘a stench of blood and of the lash lingers over Kant’s categorical imperative’ (Rorty 2001a: 28), and he concedes that John Gray’s prediction that ‘a culture cannot survive without either God or some substitute for him’ may be proved right (ibid: 33). It is an empirical matter, Rorty suggests, whether the desire to obey runs so deep as to make liberal utopia impossible; whether human beings are actually capable of the degree of self-confidence pragmatism attributes to them. ‘Only experiment will tell’ (ibid: 34), he writes. Because there is no way of knowing, it is better to think of it as an object of hope.

I shall turn to the role Rorty accords to hope in the next section. But first, it should be noted that Rorty’s ethical objection to the religious desire for security and of escaping time and chance – an objection that targets the worthiness of the desire rather than its effectiveness – is also on the face of it hard to reconcile with any conception of the religious. To be sure, Rorty’s celebration of the virtues of self-reliance and self-responsibility does not of itself exclude religion – again a family resemblance to the protestant ethic is noticeable here. The problem is rather that it makes a vice of the very idea that there is an order in which human beings are set and upon which they depend for spiritual sustenance. And this surely is inherently at odds with religious perspectives. From within a religious perspective, human beings are not self-sufficient regarding their deepest aspirations: they are ultimately dependent on some non-human source for the things that matter to them. Now this need not involve having a sense of accountability to something non-human. The religious sense of dependence is not just directed at a non-human source of authority, although this is the way Rorty typically characterises it. When Rorty praises self-reliance, the contrast he has in mind is with

obedience, servility and submission. Again, the model is that of a child's dependent relation to its parent. But this is not only a very narrow conception of what the religious sense of dependence consists in, it also excludes an idea which seems to be at the heart of distinctively religious modes of human self-interpretation: the non-self-sufficiency of the human with respect to its spiritual needs.

If the argument I have made in this section is sound, then a religion that doesn't satisfy the need for security, or that doesn't posit some transcendence of time and chance in the provision of that need, will be difficult to recognise as religion at all. This is a problem for Rorty's proposed pragmatist rehabilitation of religion because, as we saw, that project does divest the religious impulse of these elements, on the grounds that they are not conducive to human happiness understood as the interests of humanity as a 'progressive being'. But this need not be an insurmountable problem if 'democracy' can be shown to be a worthy object of what is left of religious desire, namely the impulse 'to stand in awe at something larger than oneself'. Religion can still be rehabilitated along pragmatist lines if that awe-inspiring thing is reconceived as full human flourishing in a classless, casteless global society.

Or can it? Let me just raise three issues that I think are relevant for dealing with this question, without offering an answer of my own. First, there is the issue of whether human cooperative efforts and achievements are as capable of inspiring awe as the traditional objects of religious inspiration: nature and God. This is distinct from the question of whether nature or God, rather than the free consensus of human beings, should be authoritative for us. It is not a matter of obeying this or that, but of being moved and awe-struck by something larger than oneself. This is an issue that Taylor has formulated in terms of the adequacy of what he calls secular 'moral sources' relative to theistic ones (Taylor 1989: 317). A second issue, also raised by Taylor but in a different

context, concerns the potential for destructive reversals of will in the wake of disappointment (Taylor 1999: 32). If the idea of democracy does fill me with awe, if my estimation of human powers is so high, then my disappointment with actual human performance will be all the more bitter. Zealous love and admiration for humanity is thus liable to flip into fierce hatred and contempt for it. What resources does Rorty's religion of democracy have for averting such reversals?⁹ Third, there is an issue about how this civic religion of democracy is to be embodied. If it is to be more than an abstract idea, if it is to be capable of mobilising the moral energy of people and winning their on-going allegiance -- if, in short, it is to gratify their deep-seated religious impulse -- then presumably it will be anchored in particular histories, practices, customs, rituals of remembrance, and so forth. But how is this to be achieved? What stories, memories, and public references will give life to this civil religion? Rorty's suggestion that, for Americans at least, a revival of American patriotism may provide the solution (Rorty 1998a) does not look very promising.¹⁰

These are issues concerning the viability of Rorty's conception of a civic religion of democracy, but similar questions can be raised about the privatised religions that would sit alongside it. Putting to one side now the role of civic religion, Rorty sees religion in a plural, liberal culture as satisfying private hopes about what individuals may become, rather than meeting the collective spiritual needs and aspirations of a community. He has this view because, like Mill, he thinks that human flourishing is best served by maximising opportunities for variation, by enabling individuals to pursue their own means of personal redemption for themselves. But isn't it a lot to ask of individuals that they interpret the source of their 'saving experiences' as applying to themselves alone? And if they are interpreted that way, won't that dilute the experience and weaken its 'saving power'? Can I have an authentic experience of salvation if I

experience it as a thoroughly private and subjective affair, of no relevance or significance to anyone else? There is an issue, in other words, about the satisfactoriness of fulfilled religious desire once it is divided into self-regarding and other-regarding components. A related issue concerns the location of a flourishing religious life, the conditions for which Rorty's pragmatism is meant to capture. Is the locus nothing more than the sum of individual lives, or might it also stretch ineluctably beyond that, to a collective way of life that can't properly be characterised as an aggregate of individual projects?

There may be no way of knowing if a civil religion of democracy is viable or if innumerable religions of private redemption can flourish alongside each other. Indeed, in Rorty's view, there isn't. For Rorty they are matters of hope. This is what makes his utilitarianism 'romantic'. In Rorty's lexicon, 'romance' stands for a 'faith in the future possibilities of moral humans, a faith which is hard to distinguish from love for, and hope for, the human community' (Rorty 1999a: 160). It is thus the name for a 'kind of religious faith', or rather, a 'fuzzy overlap of faith, hope and love' (ibid.). In the next section I want to look a bit more closely at how this hope is conceived.

4. Hope and Philosophy

We can summarise the import of Rorty's reflections on religion with a paraphrase of Kant's understanding of the tasks of his critical philosophy. Just as Kant sought to establish the limits of knowledge so as to make room for faith, Rorty tries to show how a proper understanding of the scope and significance of belief makes room for hope. In response to a criticism that he fails to take seriously the empowering, emancipatory role of religious belief – such as the role played by Christian belief in the American civil rights movement – Rorty says that 'if you have hope, it doesn't really matter whether

you believe that Christ was the son of God, or that there are universal human rights. The essential thing is to dream of a better world. Hope doesn't require justification, cognitive status, foundations, or anything else' (Rorty 1998d: 58). Dewey is Rorty's principle hero not least because, as Rorty wrote nearly twenty years earlier, 'his vocabulary allows room for unjustifiable hope, and an ungroundable but vital sense of human solidarity' (Rorty 1982: 208).

But what exactly does the expression 'unjustifiable hope' signify? This turns out to be quite a tricky question.¹¹ To see what it might mean, we should first distinguish between strictly unjustifiable hope – that is, hope that cannot possibly be justified – and hope that could in principle be grounded but which in fact is not so justified. For while Rorty may be right to say that hope doesn't require justification, in the sense that one does not have to be able to mount an argument in order to be able to hope for something, nevertheless we do ordinarily speak of 'grounds' for hope, and of hope being or becoming unjustified in the absence of grounds. So, for example, I may hope that a cancer patient make a recovery from the illness, but that hope will be unjustified if the illness is terminal, and there is in fact no chance of recovery. This would be an example of a hope that lacked justification on account of there being zero probability of the hoped-for thing coming about. A hope can also be unjustified on account of the nature of the hoped-for thing. A malicious hope, say, that someone suffer a protracted period of terrible pain, is unjustified on moral grounds. Hope may be unjustified because the end is not 'hopeworthy' in the sense that there is something morally objectionable about it. To put the matter a slightly different way, a hope is answerable to reason in contexts where there is a determinable likelihood of the hoped-for end occurring and where the desirability or 'hopeworthiness' of the end can be rationally evaluated.¹²

In so far as we give reasons for or against hoping, we are dealing with justified or unjustified hope. But we are not yet in the realm of unjustifiable hope. The unjustifiable hope that pragmatism makes room for isn't unjustified hope in the sense that there is a deficit of reasons for it. Rather, it is unjustifiable because it is not the kind of thing for (or against) which reasons can be given. Unjustifiable hope of this kind – let's call it unjustifiable hope A -- is hope for something that simply is not amenable to rational justification. There may be no rational basis for the hope in the order of being, human nature, the structure of human action or language, or human history, but then neither do these things count rationally against such hope. They are beside the point so far as hope is concerned. So there is nothing mysterious about unjustifiable hope A, nothing that breaks with the conceptual resources ordinarily available to us as human beings for justifying things.

However, hope can be unjustifiable in this way too -- that is, in arising from or being directed towards something that seems impossible or inconceivable from the human perspective. Kierkegaard, for example, articulated a hope of this sort when he wrote of the Christian hope of overcoming despair. Unjustifiable hope of this more radical kind – call it unjustifiable hope B -- is a hope that seems impossible from a human, this-worldly standpoint, it is not just something for which reasons count neither for nor against. So, for Kierkegaard, as a Christian I can hope for salvation even if the conceptual resources for understanding how that might be possible are unavailable to me. Unlike unjustifiable hope A – which is neither reasonable nor unreasonable because it falls outside the jurisdiction of reasons – unjustifiable hope B, in being directed at what is for all the world impossible, may look unreasonable from the perspective of the understanding. It can thus become hope in spite of what is reasonable to expect. John D. Caputo, following Derrida as well as Kierkegaard, argues that this structure actually

captures the essence of hope. 'Is not hope really hope only when things begin to look hopeless and it is mad to hope?', Caputo asks. To which he answers, following St. Paul (Rom. 4: 18): 'hope is hope only when one hopes against hope, only when the situation is hopeless' (Caputo 2003: 134). The idea here is that the less the likelihood of the hoped-for thing -- the less the empirical justification it has -- the greater or purer the hope one has for it, since such hope is not supported by external rational expectation. Such hope is not just indifferent to rational grounding; it resists the force of rational expectation and defies what reason can countenance. It may be an exaggeration to say that such defiance captures the essence of hope, or even that it is an essential feature of religious hope; but in transcending the realm of what is intelligible from the human standpoint, unjustifiable hope B does provide a paradigm of religious hope.

When Rorty commends pragmatism for providing a vocabulary that makes room for unjustifiable hope, it seems to be unjustifiable hope A rather than B that he has in mind. Pragmatism provides a framework within which the absence of 'guarantees' that history will turn out a certain way, and the lack of 'foundations' for morality, is no longer a concern. It enables us to think of hope, and to use notions like progress, freedom, democracy, and justice, without having to suppose they are grounded in anything like 'human nature', 'transcendental subjectivity', the 'truth of the subject', or the 'moral law'. Pragmatism, Rorty writes, gives us 'a kind of hope which doesn't need reinforcement' from such notions (Rorty 1982: 206). From the pragmatist perspective, the important thing is to hope that the future will be better than the past, and pragmatism shows us how to do this without using the worn out 'Platonist' vocabulary of traditional philosophy. Or to put the matter slightly differently, it helps us to see that the rejection of that vocabulary does not entail the end of liberal social hope; that, for example, 'there is no inferential connection between the disappearance of the transcendental

subject – of “man” as something having a nature which society can repress of understand – and the disappearance of human solidarity’ (ibid: 207). Liberal social hope both cannot and need not be justified in such terms. It does not follow from the inability of our powers of reason to ground utopian hope that we are forced to abandon the hope.

But in addition to the kind of hope which is unjustifiable on that basis, there are also traces of unjustifiable hope B in Rorty’s writings. So, for instance, the passage in which Rorty says that what matters for ‘romance’ is the sheer insistence that ‘human beings can be far more than they have yet become’ and the very ‘ability to experience overpowering hope’, continues by saying that this state not only takes us ‘beyond argument’ and ‘beyond presently used language’ but also carries us ‘beyond the imagination of the present age of the world’ (Rorty 1999a: 161). This way of talking about liberal utopian hope suggests it is the kind of hope which takes us outside the standpoint of the current world at least. It suggests that it is a hope for something like ‘world-transformation’, that is, a state of affairs which we are at present incapable of imagining, and which escapes the reach of our current conceptual resources. In this respect, the hope of ‘romance’ which pragmatism makes room for resembles unjustifiable hope B, and it can help to satisfy the religious impulse that finds expression in such hope.

However, this is not the register in which Rorty typically speaks of liberal social hope. Indeed, he typically contrasts the liberal hope pragmatism serves to make room for with romantic, quasi-religious utopian hope. Far from being an unjustifiable hope for world transformation, or a hope for something it is impossible to imagine given our current linguistic and conceptual resources, liberal social hope is directed merely at the possibility that ‘unnecessary human suffering can be decreased, and human happiness

thereby increased' (Rorty 2002b: 154). This mundane hope can be attached to any meliorist political strategy, however piecemeal, local or transitory, that aims at satisfying more 'banal and familiar desires'. Bit by bit, we may hope to approximate to the 'familiar and banal social democratic utopia' envisaged by Mill and Dewey (ibid: 150). As Rorty writes elsewhere, 'the best we can hope for' is something that the lucky few in the rich corners of the world already have, namely 'bourgeois democratic welfare states' (Rorty 1998b: 231).¹³ The utopian moment of liberal social hope, when it is expressed this way, concerns the generalisability of the happiness already enjoyed in prosperous social democratic countries. The challenge to our imagination comes from the difficulty of envisaging how the levels of happiness currently available only to the lucky few can be made available to everyone. We have to concede that the chances of realising prosperous social democracy across the globe are 'slim' (Rorty 1999a: 234). But 'short odds' are 'no reason to stop constructing utopias' (1998b: 201 n26); they provide 'no reason to stop hoping to get lucky' (Rorty 2001a: 36).

It is tempting to see the tension between the 'romantic' elements of Rorty's pragmatism – those which, according to Rorty, enable pragmatism to satisfy the religious impulse -- and the 'utilitarian' elements re-emerging here. On the one hand, Rorty wants to make room for the 'unjustifiable' but 'glorious' hope that, for example, Christianity and Marxism helped keep alive. He wants to accommodate hope for what seems for all the world impossible, a hope that is not limited by the conceptual resources currently available to us. The realisation of such hope may involve something like world-transformation, but that doesn't mean we should give up hope for it. On the other hand, speaking as a utilitarian, he is suspicious of such hope, and warns against taking orientation from abstract hopes about the future. What matters is the here and now, and the hope that things can get better bit by bit, through small scale increases in

the sum of human happiness, within the framework of the current (liberal, social democratic) standpoint of the world. This hope is also ‘unjustifiable’ in the sense that, for pragmatists, it is not supported by belief in the inherent goodness of human nature, the inevitable progress of history, the will of God and so forth. And it is this kind of hope that Rorty has in mind when he says that pragmatism replaces the questions ‘What is Being?’ and ‘What can I know’ with ‘a new form of Kant’s question “What may I hope?”’ (Rorty 1996: 8). For as Rorty continues, ‘in this new form Kant’s question becomes “What may we hope?”’, and that, it turns out, is limited, meliorist utilitarian hope, not the unlimited, absolute, world-transformative hope of romance and religion.

If the hope that pragmatism makes room for is meliorist utilitarian hope, we can ask how much is really gained by calling it ‘unjustifiable’. As we have seen, the main rationale for Rorty’s use of this expression is that it signals a commitment to hope which is not backed up by philosophical beliefs about the order of being, divine will, human nature, or the telos of history. This is just as well, Rorty thinks, not just because those beliefs are themselves ungrounded, but because preoccupation with them gets us nowhere, and worse, the ‘Platonist’ vocabularies in which they are embedded are a barrier to the emergence of a progressive liberal culture. By using the term ‘unjustifiable’, Rorty wants to emphasize that there are no justifying criteria for social hope, as if a hope for something that did not conform to human nature, or that was not written into the iron laws of history, was not permitted. Now it should be said that even if hope were thought to be grounded in such notions, it would still require a commitment, or a ‘decision’, to take up the attitude of hope, or to live in hope. Even the hope of the most ardent metaphysician is unjustifiable in this sense. Conversely, the pragmatist’s unjustifiable hope is not without reasons of its own, and so not without its own justification. As Rorty says, hopelessness in regard to liberal utopia is in part due to

an absence of ‘the kind of historical narrative which segues into a utopian scenario about how we can get from the present to a better future’ (Rorty 1999a: 231). It arises in part from ‘an inability to construct a plausible narrative of progress’ (ibid: 232). But this is just another way of saying that the availability of such narratives would consolidate hope by providing it with a kind of rational support. The telling of plausible historical narratives of progress is, after all, not just a matter of imaginatively re-describing the present: it is also an important way of giving reasons, reasons that make explicit the real potential contained in the present. It may be that this potential won’t come to pass, but pragmatist and metaphysician alike can hope that it will.¹⁴

Notes

¹ See Karl Marx, ‘A Contribution to the Critique of Hegel’s Philosophy of Right. Introduction’, in Marx and Engels (1975): 175.

² For a useful introductory outline of the Frankfurt School’s relation to religion, see Eduardo Mendieta’s ‘Introduction’ to Habermas (2002).

³ The idea of social hope has been an important part of Rorty’s pragmatism for a long time, as we can see for instance in his 1980 paper ‘Method, Social Science and Social Hope’ (in Rorty 1982). But its emergence as the leading theme of his philosophy seems to date from the late eighties. The writings on religion I refer to are: ‘Religious Faith, Intellectual Responsibility and Romance’ (1997), ‘Failed Prophecies, Glorious Hopes’ (1998) (both reprinted in Philosophy and Social Hope, 1999); ‘Pragmatism as Romantic Polytheism’ (1998); ‘Pragmatism as Anti-Authoritarianism’ (1999); ‘The Decline of Redemptive Truth and the Rise of a Literary Culture’ (2000) and ‘Redemption from Egotism: James and Proust as Spiritual Exercises’ (2001) (both available at the time of writing from Richard Rorty’s Stanford University website); ‘Cultural Politics and the Question of the Existence of God’ (2002); and ‘Anti-Clericalism and Atheism’ (2003). The first lecture of Achieving Our Country (1998) is another source of Rorty’s thoughts on religion and social hope. Hardwick and Crosby (1997) contains a number of essays that look at the connection between Rorty’s pragmatism and American religious thought. A more recent, brief account of Rorty’s ‘religious turn’ that also stresses the American context can be found in Jason Boffetti (2004).

⁴ A comment of Rorty’s made in response to Michael Williams seems to be at odds with my interpretative thesis. Rorty states (reprising Kant’s three questions referred to above) that ‘The religious question’, as opposed to the scientific and the philosophical question, is “what should we be afraid of?” (in Brandom 2000: 215). Joining this remark with

Rorty's warning against taking orientation from abstract hopes about the future made in a response to Habermas (ibid: 61), Brandom suggests, in his introduction to the volume in which these statements appear, that Rorty recommends a substitution of 'concrete fear for abstract hopes' (ibid: xvi) and in this sense gets caught up in a distinctively religious set of concerns. Let two quick remarks suffice to back up my way of staging Rorty's relation to religion in view of these comments. First, the concepts of hope and fear are very closely related, and it may be that we never have one without some element of the other: hope that something be contains an element of fear that it not be, and vice versa. Hopes and fears merge. Second, Rorty's comment about the centrality of fear to religion is, as far as I can tell, untypical. Elsewhere, as we'll see, he explicitly links religion with a desire for redemption, a desire also expressed as hope.

⁵ Rorty uses the word 'Platonism' to refer to 'a set of philosophical distinctions (appearance-reality, matter-mind, made-found, sensible-intellectual, etc.): what Dewey called "a brood and nest of dualisms"' (Rorty 1999a: xii). Platonism, as Rorty understands it, makes it seem unavoidable that we distinguish the real from what is merely apparent, the found from what is merely made, the mental from the material etc; and it makes the real or the found (rather than the apparent or the made) the proper goal of thought – as if, say, it is by representing things (or as Rorty famously put it, by 'mirroring' them) that thought meets its true standard of excellence.

⁶ This essay, written in 1994, now needs to be read alongside Rorty's restatement of his views on the matter in 'Religion in the Public Sphere - A Reconsideration' (2003). In the latter, Rorty's more specific target is 'ecclesiastical organisations' whose promulgation of orthodoxy breeds intolerance, exclusion, and unnecessary conflict. Elsewhere, Rorty has expressed regret that he used the word 'atheism' rather than 'anti-clericalism' to characterise his views (Rorty 2003a: 39-40).

⁷ So, for instance, Rorty writes that pragmatists ‘have to get along without personal immortality, providential intervention, the efficacy of the sacraments, the Virgin Birth, the Risen Christ, the Covenant with Abraham, the authority of the Koran, and a lot of other things which many theists are loath to do without’ unless they interpret them ‘symbolically’ (Rorty 1999a: 156). It should be pointed out that ‘pragmatic liberalism’ need not have this implication, as for example Gary Gutting has shown (see Gutting 1999: 171).

⁸ For instance, he recommends following Sartre’s advice to ‘attempt to draw the full conclusions from a consistently atheist position (Rorty 1998b: 48-9, as cited by Guignon and Hiley 2003: 30); he laments the baleful influence of theistic ideas (such as sin) on American cultural politics (e.g. Rorty 1998a: 32, 95); and he looks forward to a utopia ‘where we no longer worship anything, where we treat nothing as a quasi divinity’ (Rorty 1989: 22). Boffetti (2004) reports that Rorty declared to a hall of students and former colleagues at the University of Virginia in 2000 that the Enlightenment was right to suggest that the human species would be better off if it could ‘outgrow’ religion (Boffetti 2004: 24).

⁹ For further discussion of this issue, see Smith (2002: 230-233).

¹⁰ For a discussion of some of the problems that arise from Rorty’s linking of civil religion, utopian politics, and national identification, see Shulman (2002).

¹¹ My treatment of the issues involved here has greatly benefited from discussions with Heikki Ikäheimo, Arto Laitinen, and comments on an earlier draft of the paper from an anonymous referee for Inquiry.

¹² I owe the expression ‘hopeworthiness’ to Arto Laitinen. For a fuller treatment of the distinction between the normative and empirical bases for evaluating hope, see Day (1991).

¹³ I leave to one side how Rorty can reconcile this specification of utopia with the specification he gives of it elsewhere as a ‘classless, casteless society’.

¹⁴ Earlier drafts of this paper were presented in seminars at Macquarie University, the University of Sydney, and the University of Liverpool. I would like to thank participants in those seminars for their comments. I would also like to thank Heikki Ikäheimo, Arto Laitinen, and the anonymous referee from Inquiry for their helpful suggestions.

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