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The Theological Uses of Rortian Ironism

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Religion is that element which, in beings endowed with reason, is called upon to make good any deficiency of attachment to life.

—Henri Bergson, *The Two Sources of Morality and Religion*

This is an essay about the theological uses of Richard Rorty's ironism.¹ I have written it for several reasons, not all of which can be explored here, but by stating them the reader will better understand the cluster of ideas of which it is a part and which I hope to flesh out in future essays. This cluster of ideas is as follows:

First, the religious/secular divide that has resulted from, most notably, the Enlightenment project has been accepted, largely, without a proper and sufficiently nuanced examination of the possibilities associated with the meanings of the terms *religious* and *secular*. I would argue that those terms have been hijacked by those who think of each only narrowly to mean something like (a) belief that is settled along the lines of Peircean methods of isolated subjective speculation, authority, or tenacity (where tenacity includes revelation from beyond time and chance); and (b) the, loosely speaking, "scientific method," which values inquiry as part and parcel of a self-correcting public enterprise in which doubt is viewed as salutary, as the beginning of newer and better beliefs. In the minds of the hijackers, the "religious" is, of course, associated with (a); and the "secular," more or less with (b). The dogma on which this distinction rests should be challenged. Indeed, I take the view that there is nothing inherent in the concept of religion that places it beyond the pale of an enterprise that is self-correcting, open to change, and views doubt as salutary, as the beginning of further inquiry leading to deeper and richer religious experiences and engagement with the world. Indeed, the very conjoining of religion and faith (which may more profitably be thought of as a Grand Conclusion or Grand Vision without all of the pieces of the conclusion or vision fully explicated) implies *enormous room for doubt*. The sphere of the religious is not exhausted by recounting the blind creeds and bloodbaths that result from some of its various iterations, any more than politics is exhausted by recounting pogroms and colonialism. As Charles Taylor reminds us:

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It is [too] quick to jump to the conclusion that whatever has generated bad action must be vicious (hence nationalism must be bad because of Hitler, communitarian ethics because of Pol Pot, a rejection of instrumental society because of the politics of Pound and Eliot, and so on). What it loses from sight is that there may be genuine dilemmas here, that following one good to the end may be catastrophic, not because it isn't good, but because there are others which can't be sacrificed without evil. . . . All this, in a context of historical ignorance, helps to accredit the over-simple and almost caricatural readings of one or another strand of modernity. Such readings make various facets of modernity seem easy to repudiate. . . . Above all, we have to avoid the error of declaring those gods invalid whose exclusive pursuit leads to contemptible or disastrous consequences. (1989, 503, 511)

Second, the practical/spiritual divide—another dogma of modernity, centered largely, it seems to me, in a European ethnocentric fixation on considerations of what is better and what is worse in terms of our time and energies—is equally ripe for critique, as it is more than arguable that this divide is a social construction that need not exist and ought not exist. The criticisms of *homo economicus* and of “the one dimensional man,” proffered by Veblen, Marcuse, Radhakrishnan, and others, are apt and must be explored.

Third, the view of truth in phenomenological terms rather than in mere logical or scientific terms goes largely unexplored other than by thinkers who can blend streams of thought from various traditions (as have Rorty and, before him, Emerson).

Fourth, Rorty's ironism is a significant structural element of a virtue ethics for the twenty-first century and one (or something like it) we would do well to incorporate if we are to face the almost impossible political and technological challenges ahead.

Fifth, the religious life is salutary, in my view, when “religious life” is understood as participation in communities, whether small or large, committed to forms of life that allow the space for members or participants to give regular and full-throated assent to deep spiritual feelings of connection with the world, to charity, and ultimately to a reasoned abandonment of self to a set of high and salutary ideals. Its communal dimensions are healthy ones, and it may be noted that the fixation of belief does not refer only to individual agents but to communities: “The fixation of belief refers to the ways of arriving at ideas that settle down in the minds of *a people* as habits, customs, traditions, ‘folkways of thought.’ . . . They influence conduct insofar as a belief is ‘that upon which a man is prepared to act’” (Peirce 1966, 91; emphasis added). Because of the power of religions, adhered to because they provide *vistas* on and for life rather than mere viewpoints on isolated matters of fact, value, or the ethically problematic situation, *vistas* that are missing in the so-called secular age, the question before us, then, is not how we rid ourselves of religions, but—How may we harness their power to create a world in which charity and human solidarity, as well as “solidarity” (in a manner of speaking) with the rest of nature, are obtained?

I agree with Charles Taylor when he writes in his new work, *A Secular Age*, that “in any case, we are just at the beginning of a new age of religious searching, whose outcome no one can foresee” (2007, 535). It may be that his use of the words “new age” is off-putting to a conclave of trained thinkers because of its connotation of unreflective ideas, bad appropriations of foreign modes of religiosity, and the like. I, too, wince at much of what comes out of what is called “new age.” But I honor the searching that I see taking place. This new age movement arose to fill the void that was created in the so-called secular age about which Taylor writes, and its current forms are merely a beginning. The search is on, and the Enlightenment dogmas are cracking and crumbling. People with philosophical training may, if we choose, help shape the direction of these various attempts to erect new forms of religiosity, or we can, as I suspect many of us will, stand on the sidelines and continue to live out Hegel’s curse and fly at twilight, having missed another opportunity to shape what will be, I am predicting, a powerful reformulation of the very meaning of religion.

As strange as it may seem, Rortian ironism links up nicely with a commitment to a life that can be described as one of *religious minimalism*. By *religious minimalism* I mean forms of communal spirituality (religion) that are stripped of dogmatic confessions and dogmatic creedal formulations, that admit their clerics or leaders to the role of “executive” rather than priestly guardian of esoteric “truths,” and that read all religious writing with historicist eyes and as edifying allegories, metaphors, and analogies that stimulate our better impulses toward charity and solidarity. However, unlike Rorty (and despite critics of religion such as Richard Dawkins and Christopher Hitchens), I am convinced that, all else being equal, we shall not abandon our religious impulses, nor should we abandon them, just as I remain convinced that we, generally speaking, will not abandon our embrace of things sublime, or beautiful, or political, nor should we abandon them. But my hope is for the blossoming of forms of minimalist religion that are potent in their ability to draw out of future generations attitudes of awe and reverence nourished in and through enclaves of various sizes, whose group celebrations are the essence of religious life as understood from Durkheim onward. Richard Rorty’s notion of ironism provides a conceptual key that can be used to unlock those possibilities—the possibilities that I think are no mere watery remainders or reductions of religious life but, in fact, hold the promise of full-blooded and full-throated religiosity *cum* theologies that are not constrained by doubt but, rather, view doubt as, necessarily, at the nucleus of religious life. Such doubt would be seen as the catalyst that transforms that life into a *cheerful adventure* through vistas transformed by growth and experience, by which our descriptions of God and of the physical world itself will indeed shift, and should shift, throughout the journey of life. It embraces the notion that such shifting is neither religious vice nor heresy, evidence of neither tepidness nor flightiness. It would be a form of religiosity that would finally come around to an experimental approach regarding its own mission and finally come to see what all see who

walk through life's various mansions—that no one ever rests, either in body or in thought, and that to expect our religious and theological thoughts to become arrested is antihuman rather than charitable and is an idea that does not jibe with the balance of our experiences and endeavors in life.

And this is no Utopian hope. Entering into new religious and theological vistas is not the exception in the history of religions but, rather, the norm. We only think otherwise because of an incomplete understanding of that history or because we commit the fallacies that lead to what Charles Taylor warns us about, that is, our tendencies to accredit the oversimple and caricatural readings of our history and of our experience.

This possibility for religion, I assert, can be its future just as it has been its past and can align religious thought with the values of pluralism and “the open society” that we hold dear. If that be so, and if I am right about the persistence of the religious impulse, then talk of the death of religion, so popular among many intellectuals (Rorty included), will, I predict, do very little to put away that impulse, as intellectual historian Mark Lilla (2007) has recently noted, somewhat wistfully. It is we in the so-called West, self-described secularists, who are out of touch with reality when we suggest that the future of the *world* is a so-called secular future and that a future Utopia will be devoid of religious ritual, or God-talk, or prayer, or raised hands. The question—the challenge—is, How may ironism (the view that in holding our final vocabularies, our highest and most dear attachments, we must be constantly “self-conscious” because we are conscious of other competing final vocabularies that appeal to us) train that impulse in such a way that the other *summum bonum* of the Rortian ethic—the discovery of and avoidance of cruelty as we live out our religious lives—is a first-order principle of what must be characterized as our *experimental* religious selves?

I admit that the idea of a Rorty-informed theology seems counterintuitive, perhaps even a bit of a shock to the system, but only if one neglects to note that the ironist is herself a creature of faith (“meta-stable,” as in Rorty’s definition of the ironist), albeit a faith that may have little truck with old forms of theology and theologically based epistemic claims. She holds to her final vocabulary with certain misgivings that take into account the opportunity costs of doing so, yet she invests her life and understands her life with reference to it. She does so because, for her, her final vocabulary is, as a matter of *decision*, the “best,” given all of her various considerations of the others that could replace it. Indeed, it is because ironism rests on faith—the faith that at the moment, at least, one “has it right” enough to plan a life and to converse about one’s vision for oneself and for one’s community—that Rortian ironism and my notion of religious minimalism mesh. It is precisely a faith because it does not rest on “certainty” or “truth” but floats upon an honestly derived and reasonably bold *perspectivism*. It embraces the *existential* choice made so famous by and in that school of thought. It is Luther saying, “I can do no other,” as it is Harriet Tubman, or Franklin Roosevelt, or Jack Kerouac saying the same. In religion, it is faith in one’s own vision of the

meaning of *everything*. It is the quintessential Emersonian faith, penned in his essay "Self-Reliance," about believing that what is true for self is true for all. The ironic twist, the addition to Luther's, or Tubman's, or Roosevelt's, or Kerouac's words that the ironist insists be added, is "for now." The "for now" keeps the focus on the human agent as the highest value, rather than a *current* and *contingent* set of perspectives to which the agent may cling as a final vocabulary. The "for now" is an exigent formulation, in that it leaves the agent free to breathe and move and think new thoughts. This bold perspectivism moves away from religions as collections of claims about the nature of the world, toward religions as various sorts of enclaves that experiment with various theological and religious ideas about how life should be lived and perhaps even where or why it should be lived. The religious ironist's experimentalism does not ask, "How can I believe?" but, rather, "What is it like to try to step inside the perspective of one who sees God or the Tao in a rock garden, or in a stream, or even in a pile of dung?" "I shall try that on," says the religious ironist: "I will enter in, but as I discover that what I find is lacking, I will try to point out what I see or else, if I have sincerely outgrown or out-thought the current view, move on."

There is a kind of *faith* that may yet emerge from this historical moment that is not rooted in science-defying claims that offend modern sensibilities and that complies with an open, informed, and vibrant ethics of "belief," although for the religious ironist *belief* takes on a different sense than the word usually carries. This kind of faith requires more of a step than a leap, a decision to, in confidence, walk within the parameters of one's final theological/religious vocabulary, to plan and construct a form of life, and to face the world as one at home in it rather than as a stranger, huddled against its threats. Thus, there is a theological use to which Rortian ironism can be put, and this use may allow for a new understanding both of Rortian ironism itself and of the possibility of faith in the contemporary world. So the *Eureka!* presents itself when one considers that the ironist herself may be said to "walk in faith," and, if that be so, the idea of "walking in faith" means that our well-considered final vocabularies about the larger questions of life need not be castigated by so-called secularists, as each subjects itself to constant revision and seduction by other points of view. As there are no epistemological foundations, the secularist ironist and the now-proffered religious ironist may both be said to be engaged in serious but contingent descriptions and redescriptions of the world. Thus metaphor and analogy are given the honored place that they deserve but devoid of ultimate claims about the way the world, or God, or the Tao (etc.) *really* is. (One may recall that Lao Tsu's first statement, and ultimate warning, in the *Tao Te Ching* is that the Tao that can be told/named/explained is not the Tao, and there are cognates to this claim in the more mature and nuanced "theologies" of other traditions, most notably in Hinduism, in which Brahma is never graspable but always adumbrated into slices of possible experiences and imaginative theological play.) Ironic theology plays out within the spirit of dance rather than of epistemology, into an aesthetic engagement with life for the sake

of human flourishing, and invites bold claims for consideration as possible fonts for the construction and maintenance of various forms of life linked to salutary speculations about the source of all that we have before us.

Of course, those who are the most severe critics of Rortian ironism see it very differently than as sketched here. For them, it is an acidic prescription that can only lead to a ghastly epistemological or theological relativism that puts all religious claims up for grabs—especially the most science-denying ones. Well, that it is, for all religious claims are and always were up for grabs, just like all other claims. As Gianni Vattimo argues in *The Future of Religion*, a book that is a series of exchanges between Rorty and himself, the biggest error of the Christian church has been its jousting with science for the right to determine what is true about the world. Speaking as a very idiosyncratic Catholic Christian who understands the need for something like Rortian irony, which he prefers to clothe in the language of hermeneutics, Vattimo says: “Because we are not yet . . . Christian enough, we still oppose the historical-cultural cogency of the biblical tradition to a ‘natural reality’ that supposedly exists independently of it and with respect to which the biblical truth is obliged to ‘prove itself’” (Rorty and Vattimo 2005, 53). Vattimo and I want to step away from any such attempt to “oppose.” Rortian irony, the embrace of phenomenological descriptions of life alongside scientific descriptions, and serious hermeneutical “play” can all indeed lead to a robust and full-throated religiosity that can serve the deep spiritual needs (the need to be fully at home in the world) of people in pluralist societies, wherein differences are seen as fonts of possible experience rather than as dangerous combat zones in a zero-sum war of religious epistemologies, and can help us move past hackneyed dualistic notions such as the secular/religious and the practical/spiritual. Rorty, of course, did not think that religion has much of a place in the Utopia he sketches repeatedly in his writings, writings limited to the lexicons of politics, sociology, and ethics: “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” (Rorty and Vattimo 2005, 40). Vattimo and I beg to differ, and what is left out—we shall say, “ironically”—is a vast domain of human experience—the religious domain. Without that domain, life, for billions, is impoverished and would be even if the Rortian Utopia became a reality. The larger, vexing questions of life Rorty assumes would cease in such a Utopia. I boldly assert that they would not. They *could* not. They could not because there is no imaginable future in which the question of our and the “world’s” ultimate origins, our explorations, descriptions, and re-descriptions about human experience, and our suspicions about various possible “destinies” are likely to cease. Each generation answers the call to explore the

largest questions of life for itself, despite the ancestors' grand pronouncements that they have settled such matters for all time.

But, this aside, the notion of irony itself has potent theological uses, even if for Rorty religion is but a hangover from our traditional past or a "failure of nerve" to live without an appeal to something beyond time and chance. Because he bought into the various dualistic dogmas and surveyed too few religious traditions, Richard Rorty, as so many, misunderstood the possibility of religion as having little or nothing to do with imbibing foolish notions or pie-in-the-sky salvation. Religion, both at its core and at its best, is concerned with the preservation of life itself—with, as Henri Bergson has proffered, our perennial need to "make good any deficiency of attachment to life" (1977, 210). It does so in ways unlike any other human construction or endeavor, that is, via recurring activities whose sole purpose is to hallow life, to insist on its sacredness even in the face of our depravations and tragedies, to remind us that we are immeasurably more significant than the sum of all that we do.

Note

1. Rorty defines an ironist "as someone who fulfills three conditions: (1) She has radical and continuing doubts about the final vocabulary she currently uses, because she has been impressed by other vocabularies, vocabularies taken as final by people or books she has encountered; (2) she realizes that argument phrased in her present vocabulary can neither underwrite nor dissolve these doubts; (3) insofar as she philosophizes about her situation, she does not think that her vocabulary is closer to reality than others, that it is in touch with a power not herself. . . . I call people of this sort 'ironists' because their realization that anything can be made to look good or bad by being redescribed, and their renunciation of the attempt to formulate criteria of choice between final vocabularies, puts them in a position which Sartre called 'meta-stable': never quite able to take themselves seriously because always aware that the terms in which they describe themselves are subject to change, always aware of the contingency and fragility of their final vocabularies, and thus of themselves." (1989, 73–4)

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