How Richard Rorty Found Religion

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Main content

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Richard Rorty's aversion to traditional religion and religious belief is well known. In 2000, for example, he told a packed house of students and former colleagues at the University of Virginia that he was a "militant secularist" and that the Enlightenment was "right to suggest that religion is something that the human species would be better if it could outgrow." It was Diderot, Rorty reminded them, who said that "the last king should be strangled with the entrails of the last priest" and "even though some of my best friends are priests, I feel some sympathy with all these critics of religious institutions."

But in recent books and essays Rorty has expressed the hope that "romantic polytheism" will come to serve as America's new religious center. Rorty says that he now agrees with his sometime critic, Michael Sandel, who wrote in Democracy's Discontents that it may never be possible to separate morality and religion entirely, since doing so often "generates its own disenchantment." Rather, liberal societies must admit that, according to Rorty's reading of John Rawls, they create "new moralities and new religions." Despite predicting in his earlier writings that religion would one day wither away, Rorty now proposes a new public religious faith.

His religious turn became an open possibility as far back as the 1970s, when he forsook rationalistic analytic philosophy for neopragmatism. Rorty has come to realize that what pragmatists like himself and John Dewey offer is a vision for public life in which democracy itself serves as "a metaphysic of the relation of man and his experience in nature." By so defining democracy, pragmatists offer something that satisfies Paul Tillich's definition of a religion as that which we designate as our "symbol of ultimate concern." And Rorty admits that his own philosophical purposes are "ultimately spiritual," since "the adoption of my view would be a real change in people's self-image."

Following his pragmatist mentor John Dewey, Rorty believes that we might usefully substitute faith in human potential for retrograde faith in a benevolent God. In the essay "Religious Faith, Intellectual Responsibility, and Romance," Rorty criticizes the other American pragmatist luminary, William James, for getting stuck in what Dewey called the "second stage" of religious consciousness. James still believed that aligning ourselves with "a power that is not ourselves will do unimaginably vast good." Rorty wishes that James had reached the "third stage" of religious consciousness, in which humans put their "faith in the future possibilities of moral humans, a faith which is hard to distinguish from love for, and hope for, the human community. I shall call this fuzzy overlap of faith, hope, and love 'romance.'" (He also calls it "social hope," "solidarity," and "a religion of democracy.")

Neopragmatists of a Rortian stripe (not to be confused with the Jamesian sort) offer what amounts to an alternative picture of man and his place in the universe--one that, as Rorty has lately begun to acknowledge, does resemble religious faith, as it fills the void of meaning that...

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Explore
Richard McKay Rorty (October 4, 1931 in New York City – June 8, 2007) was an American philosopher and pragmatist. On James's view, "true" resembles "good" or "rational" in being a normative notion, a compliment paid to sentences that seem to be paying their way and that fit with other sentences which are doing so. Introduction to Consequences of Pragmatism (1982). Even Rorty's fellow utilitarians might doubt that trimming the citizenry's utterances to suit Rorty's views would make for a sufficiently rich discussion to serve the greatest good for the greatest number. But how would one go about discovering or showing that someone was homophobic, and thus motivated by fear and hatred, if not by determining that the person's stated reasoning is insufficiently coherent to be taken at face value? Once again, however, I find it ironic and unfortunate that Rorty, the anti-essentialist, appears to have a strong interest in debating the question whether this or that "ism" is inherently compatible or incompatible with some other "ism." 9 Richard Rorty, "Religion in the Public Square: A Reconsideration", Journal of Religious Ethics 31.1 (2003):141-149, 141. Richard Rorty (1931–2007) developed a distinctive and controversial brand of pragmatism that expressed itself along two main axes. One is negative—a critical diagnosis of what Rorty takes to be defining projects of modern philosophy. The other is positive—an attempt to show what intellectual culture might look like, once we free ourselves from the governing metaphors of mind and knowledge in which the traditional problems of epistemology and metaphysics (and indeed, in Rorty's view, the self-conception of modern philosophy) are rooted. The article considers how Richard Rorty's writings on religion dovetail with his views on the philosophical significance of hope. It begins with a reconstruction of the central features of Rorty's philosophy of religion, including its critique of theism and its attempt to rehabilitate religion within a pragmatist philosophical framework. It then presents some criticisms of Rorty's proposal. Psychological research examining the salutary effect of religion on health has found that religion supports positive beliefs such International Journal of Culture and Mental Health 9 as hope and reduces uncertainty, which provide comfort to the person to better cope with crisis or suffering (Koenig & Larson, 2000;Krause et al., 2002).