Must Religion be a Conversation-Stopper?

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Richard Rorty has suggested that religion is a conversation-stopper.[1] Jeffrey Stout has questioned this claim, gently chiding Rorty for his animus toward increasing assertiveness on the part of religiously committed individuals in their address of public issues.[2] Stout concludes that "conversation is the very thing that is not stopped when religious premises are introduced in a political argument."[3] He is convinced that Rorty is overly sensitive on this matter and believes, with Nicholas Wolterstorff and others, that religious people in a pluralistic democracy have not only the right but also the responsibility to share their convictions and the reasoning that leads to their opinions on vital moral and social issues. Stout quotes Wolterstorff as follows:

> It belongs to the *religious convictions* of a good many religious people in our society that *they ought to base* their decisions concerning fundamental issues of justice on their religious convictions. They do not view as an option whether or not to do so. It is their conviction that they ought to strive for wholeness, integrity, integration in their lives: that they ought to allow the Word of God, the teachings of the Torah, the command and example of Jesus, or whatever, to shape their existence as a whole, including, then, their social and political existence. Their religion is not, for them, about *something other* than their social and political existence; it is *also* about their social and political existence. Accordingly, to require of them that they not base their

[1] Richard Rorty, "Religion as a Conversation Stopper," in *Philosophy and Social Hope* (New York: Penguin, 1999) 168–74. Originally pubished in *Common Knowledge* 3 (1994) 1–6.

[2] Jeffrey Stout, *Democracy and Tradition* (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 2004) ch. 3, esp. 85–91, "Is Religion a Conversation-Stopper?".

[3] Ibid., 90.

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> decisions and discussions concerning political issues on their religion is to infringe, inequitably, on the free exercise of their religion.[4]

In what follows, I revisit Stout's question, "is religion a conversation-stopper?" and explain why he believes that Rorty is inappropriately skeptical regarding the role of religion in public life. I then show why Rorty is in fact correct to be skeptical about bringing religious views into discussions of significant public issues.[5] Stout, along with Wolterstorff and others, is overly optimistic, and his critique of Rorty reveals his undue optimism. I explain why current perspectives on religion justify Rorty's skepticism about bringing it into public discourse. I also suggest a different perspective on religions that might enable the sort of optimism Stout embraces. The change of perspective I suggest involves taking our religious views not as *justified or warranted by* documents, sources, traditions, and revelations but rather as *embedded in or deriving from* those documents, sources, traditions, and revelations. The latter way of understanding our religious views opens them to intellectual strategies of genealogy, or to explanatory strategies that contextualize them within particular traditions of culture and history. I conclude this essay with two relevant points. The first is that neither justifying nor explaining the sources of one's religious views, the strategies roughly of justifying religious beliefs and providing genealogies of them—tools for "deconstructing" them as some would have it—can claim proper priority in our religious lives. Explaining the sources of our commitments is as trenchantly definitive of those commitments as is providing dialectical justification for them. (William James discerns and exploits this fact about our religious views throughout his work.[6]) My second concluding point is that Stout departs significantly, in ways that adversely affect his views, from the constructive intellectual stances of the classical pragmatists, among whom I include primarily William James and John Dewey; Rorty, although many dislike his views on religion, is a better representative of classical pragmatism than is Stout.

[4] Ibid., 72. Nicholas Wolterstorff, "The Role of Religion in Decision and Discussion of Political Issues," in Robert Audi and Nicholas Wolterstorff, *Religion in the Public Square: The Place of Religious Convictions in Political Debate* (Lanham, Md.: Rowman and Littlefield, 1997) 105 [italics in original].

[5] For a perspective affirming Rorty's skepticism regarding the propriety of allowing religion fully into public life, see Lewis H. Lapham, "The Wrath of the Lamb," *Harper's Magazine*, May 2005, 7–9. See also in the same issue, Jeff Sharlet, "Soldiers of Christ: I. Inside America's Most Powerful Megachurch," 41–54. For an expression of concern that shares my perception of the Christian right as an emerging political/social juggernaut, see the editorial, "Onward Moderate Christian Soldiers," by John C. Danforth, *The New York Times* (17 June, 2005).

[6] See William James's Gifford Lectures, *The Varieties of Religious Experience* (New York: Longmans, Green, 1902; repr., Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1985) esp. lecture 18; see also Lecture 1 of James's 1910 series of lectures, *A Pluralistic Universe* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1977). The strategy I here call "genealogy" or "explanation" is ubiquitous in James's work.

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Stout's Optimism; Rorty's Realism

In 2004, following Massachusetts' Supreme Judicial Court's ruling in the *Goodridge* case, the issue of gay marriage became a significant public issue.[7] Gay marriage then joined public debates over welfare assistance, abortion, euthanasia, and the environment as an issue of the sort politicians rush to exploit. Public debate was then graced by such utterances as "God created Adam and Eve, not Adam and Steve."[8]

The question over which Rorty and Stout disagree is whether or not public discussion of the issue of gay marriage should sequester from public view religious grounds for opinions on the issue. According to Stout, those whose religious perspectives ground their opinion on this issue have three alternatives: They may remain silent; they may offer justifying arguments based strictly on principles that they share with their policy opponents; or they may "express their actual (religious) reasons for supporting the policy they favor while also engaging in immanent criticism of their opponents' views."[9] Only the third of these possibilities, says Stout, allows religious people to engage fully and openly in public debate about the issues that separate them from their opponents. Rorty's policy, according to Stout, would itself be a conversation stopper, for it would require those with religious reasons for their views on controversial issues to remain silent in the public contexts in which policies are debated and decided.[10] But Stout is optimistic:

> One can always back up a few paces, and begin again, now with a broader conversational objective. It is precisely when we find ourselves in an impasse of this kind that it becomes most advisable for citizens representing various points of views to express their objectives of understanding one another's perspectives, learning from one another through open-minded listening, and subjecting each other's premises to fair-minded immanent criticism.[11]

A problem with Stout's third alternative is that, as a matter of fact, engaging in "immanent criticism" of their opponents' views does not usually occur to those who appeal to religious ideas to support their public policy positions. Such people are usually content with recourse to the final authority of such palliatives as "God created Adam and Eve, not Adam and Steve." Such conversation-stopping recourse leads Rorty to reject the inclusion of religion in public policy debate. In the face of such recognizable conversation-stopping strategies, how might one follow

[7] See, for example, Robert M. Baird and Stuart Rosenbaum, *Gay Marriage* (Buffalo: Prometheus, 2004).

[8] This quote is from an unidentified minister of the Christian gospel in Washington, D.C. For similar sentiment without the compelling rhyme of this quote, see "Adam and Eve, not Adam and Henry," in Baird and Rosenbaum, 115–16.

[9] Stout, *Democracy and Tradition*, 88. For Stout's account of the idea of immanent criticism, as well as his understanding of its importance, see ibid., 73.

[10] Ibid., 90.

[11] Ibid.

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Stout's recommendation that one "back up a few paces, and begin again, now with a broader conversational objective?" Might one suggest that perhaps Adam and Eve were not literally human individuals, but only characters in one of many diverse creation stories? Might one suggest that conditions in twenty-first century America are very different from the conditions that prevailed when that creation story was written? Might one suggest that there are genetic causes for sexual preferences that were unknown before late in the twentieth century? From the opposite perspective, might one suggest that the disease of democratic liberalism has eroded the traditional ideals of Christian morality? Or perhaps that liberal individualism has undermined natural community-based constraints on unnatural behavior? How might one "back up a few paces" and begin another conversation with broader, yet still relevant, objectives?[12]

The problem these questions uncover is that of justification by recourse to authority, a strategy typical of debates that take place when religion comes into the public marketplace of ideas. For those with specific religious convictions regarding issues of public consequence, such as the issue of gay marriage, justification by recourse to religious authorities—privileged texts or persons—is the norm. For those with more "liberal" perspectives on issues of public consequence, justification by recourse to the cultural authority of science is a frequent norm. Questions such as suggested in the previous paragraph are designed to break down a particular recourse to authority. Any effort to undermine religious individuals' recourse to authority, an effort to "back up a few paces, and begin again, now with a broader conversational objective," is an effort to question the legitimacy of such recourse. Likewise, any effort to undermine more liberal individuals' recourse to the authority of science is an effort to break the hold of such recourse.

Rorty is concerned that religion is a conversation stopper because he is skeptical about the prospects for success of any strategy designed to undermine typical recourses to religious authority; he thinks that pursuing broader conversational objectives is unlikely to yield anything like progress in the face of such appeals. One can beat surrounding intellectual bushes only so much, and no matter how much one beats about one remains unlikely even to distract one's conversational partner, especially concerning issues of social import such as gay marriage (or abortion, welfare assistance, intelligent design in biology classes, and so on). Rorty's realistic assessment of the likely outcome of seeking broader conversational objectives produces his characterization of religion as a conversation stopper.[13]

[12] In fairness to Stout, one should acknowledge that he takes up many of these issues at various points within the chapters of his book and frequently expresses strong preferences or presents extensive arguments addressing them.

[13] In his more recent essay, "Religion in the Public Square: A Reconsideration," *Journal of Religious Ethics* 31 (2003) 141–49, Rorty moderates his view that religion is a conversation stopper only modestly. Rorty allows in this more recent essay that Wolterstorff has persuaded him that it is no more illegitimate for Wolterstorff to cite Biblical passages in favor of his social views than it is for Rorty to cite John Stuart Mill's *On Liberty*. Rorty still believes that religion is a conversation

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The response to Stout suggested by these remarks in defense of Rorty is that Stout may be naïve in the face of what American religious culture has become in the early years of the twenty-first century. Stout may, in the tradition of twentieth-century pragmatists such as James and Dewey, be hopeful and optimistic, but the dispassionate pessimism with which Rorty views American religious culture at the outset of the third millennium is more realistic.

My Religion: Justification

Rorty's realism regarding this issue is supported by recent developments not only in the social and political arena,[14] but also in epistemology, specifically as it applies to religious belief.

These social and political developments include, among many others, the reelection by a small but significant margin of George W. Bush to the Presidency in 2004, aided by the general campaign strategy of solidifying his political support among religiously conservative voters.[15] Bush's appeal to this religiously conservative base of political support was, many commentators agree, primarily responsible for his margin of victory in the campaign. His appeal included such strategies as his proposal to amend the U.S. Constitution to prevent same sex marriages; President Bush also characterized Massachusetts's *Goodridge* decision allowing same sex marriage as the work of liberal activist judges in need of restraint by such an amendment. The heightened sense on the part of many morally and socially conservative voters that American culture has become too permissively liberal on social issues has led to an intentional consolidation of Republican Party politics around conservative religious agendas. A significant part of this new conservative religious politics is a refusal to appear timorous or apologetic in any way about one's religious views or their social consequences.[16] The reasons for this renaissance of religious assertiveness in American politics are many. However one might explain it, the "wall of separation" recognized by Thomas Jefferson[17] appears endangered in more definitive a way than at any previous time in American history. What explains this new assertiveness among religiously conservative people? Why

stopper in so far as it involves an appeal to authority in justification of any particular view on any social issue. Rorty avers that he would not regard his appeal to Mill as authoritative and definitive in support of any particular position he might hold, and he would urge a similar modesty on those, including Wolterstorff, who might be tempted to appeal to the definitive authority of some biblical passage or religious personage.

[14] See n. 4 above.

[15] Notice that the failure of political strategies designed to appease the religious right during the congressional elections of 2006 does not diminish the temptation among Republican politicans to curry favor among religiously conservative voters.

[16] For some rumination on this phenomenon, see for example Stanley Fish, "One University Under God?" *The Chronicle of Higher Education*, 7 January, 2005.

[17] See Jefferson's letter to the Danbury Baptist Association, printed in *The Writings of Thomas Jefferson* (ed. Andrew Lipscomb and Albert Bergh; Washington, D.C., 1903–1904) 16: 281–82.

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now this danger to the wall of separation? Why now this insistence on a vigorous reinsertion of individual religious convictions into the public policy deliberations of our distinctively pluralistic American democracy?

Answers to these questions are various and come from many different disciplinary perspectives. Historians, sociologists, and political scientists have their own responses. What might philosophers say to it? What might we think of as the "philosophical underpinnings" not only of these conservative religious views, but also of the greater willingness to become publicly more aggressive in defending conservative religious convictions on issues such as same-sex marriage, abortion, and the teaching of evolution in public schools? What philosophical developments enable and support this new assertiveness among religious conservatives?[18] A more modest way of posing this question is to ask what philosophical developments are congruent with this new assertiveness; one need not think of "philosophical underpinnings" as the actual causes of social events. But surely one may see significant congruence among developments in our intellectual worlds and developments in our social worlds—congruence that provides support for cultural movement in a religiously conservative direction. Thinking in the pragmatist spirit of the conviction that ideas have consequences, and in a relaxed but sensitive way about the philosophical background of this increasing religious assertiveness in the American social context, what developments might our philosophical world offer as candidates for such a background?

One answer to this question begins with the formation of the Society of Christian Philosophers in the mid-1980s and its founding and sponsorship of the journal *Faith and Philosophy*. The resultant growth of intellectual activity around projects of Christian philosophy has been notable, and frequently this activity has centered on historically conservative Christian social and moral perspectives. But of greatest significance for this movement in defense of Christian philosophy has been the remarkably successful work of some key figures who have spoken unapologetically about their Christian commitments. These figures include, among others, Robert Adams, William Alston, Alvin Plantinga, and Nicholas Wolterstorff. Each writes for general philosophical audiences on standard philosophical issues in ways that support their Christian commitments. One key to their success has been their unwillingness to temper or moderate their own Christian convictions for general philosophical audiences. Many philosophers, Christian and non-Christian, acknowledge a need to consider the views of these Christian philosophers because of their productive ways of addressing traditional philosophical issues.

[18] Gilbert Meilaender raises a similar question in connection with Stout's perspective on democracy and religion, and finds that Stout has recourse ultimately to the philosophical tradition of American pragmatism. See Meilaender's review, "Talking Democracy," in *First Things* 142 (2004) 25–31. Meilaender finds Stout's recourse to pragmatism finally disabling because he sees it as inevitably committed to contextualism, relativism, and a refusal to engage questions of ultimate authority. This refusal to engage questions of ultimate authority or to submit to it ("to bend the knee") and to bring the results into the public arena Meilaender finds inimical to his Christian commitments.

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One of these philosophers whose writing is instructive in the current context is Alvin Plantinga. Plantinga's work in epistemology is comprehensive and distinctly Christian, and its distinctive feature for present purposes is its insistence that belief in God is "properly basic," that it is unproblematic from the standpoint of justification or warrant. This conclusion Plantinga supports through a trilogy of generally accessible works about epistemology concluding with his largest volume, *Warranted Christian Belief*.[19] The point of Plantinga's work is to exonerate Christians epistemically, to remove from them the burden of justifying their religious views apart from their individual responses to the internal instigations of the Holy Spirit.[20] He writes:

> On the [Aquinas/Calvin] model, then, theistic belief as produced by the *sensus divinitatis* is basic. It is also *properly* basic, and that in at least two senses. On the one hand, a belief can be properly basic for a person in the sense that it is indeed basic for him (he doesn't accept it on the evidential basis of other propositions) and, furthermore, he is *justified* in holding it in the basic way: he is within his epistemic rights, is not irresponsible, is violating no epistemic or other duties in holding that belief in that way. . . . There is another sense in which a belief can be properly or improperly basic: *p* is properly basic for S in *this* sense if and only if S accepts *p* in the basic way, and furthermore *p* has *warrant* for S, accepted in that way. . . .
>
> According to the [Aquinas/Calvin] model I am presenting here, theistic belief produced by the *sensus divinitatis* can also be *properly basic with respect to warrant*. . . . It isn't just that the believer in God is within her epistemic rights in accepting theistic belief in the basic way. That is indeed so; more than that, however, this belief can have warrant for the person in question, warrant that is often sufficient for knowledge. The *sensus divinitatis* is a belief-producing faculty (or power or mechanism) that under the right conditions produces belief that isn't evidentially based on other beliefs. On this model, our cognitive faculties have been designed and created by God; . . . The purpose of the *sensus divinitatis* is to enable us to have true beliefs about God; when it functions properly, it ordinarily *does* produce true beliefs about God. These beliefs therefore meet the conditions for warrant; if the beliefs produced are strong enough, then they constitute knowledge.[21]

In Plantinga's way of thinking about Christian religious beliefs, now a significant focus for Christian epistemologists, conservative Christians need assume no burden of proof for their religious views since those views are epistemically innocent and may be held with impunity in the face of skeptics.[22] Because of the *sensus*

[19] Alvin Plantinga, *Warranted Christian Belief* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2000).

[20] Plantinga's acronym for these internal instigations of the Holy Spirit is "IIHS."

[21] Ibid., 177–79.

[22] In fairness to Plantinga, one should notice that this characterization of believers' epistemic situation requires, in his view, the assumption that God exists and that there is indeed a Holy Spirit who provides the occasion for these believers' views. Humans' epistemic situation depends, for externalists generally, on their ontological situation.

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divinitatis, Christians have warrant for their theistic belief that is "often sufficient for knowledge."[23]

In fairness to Plantinga, I note that he makes some effort to restrict his claim of epistemic warrant to central Christian tenets, to what he (along with Jonathan Edwards) calls "the great things of the gospel."[24] The great things of the gospel are, according to Plantinga, the central teachings of the gospel, those contained in the intersection of the great Christian creeds. In his footnotes, Plantinga makes clear that he does not intend his claim of warrant for the great things of the gospel to include everything a typical Christian believes. Plantinga thus might be cautious about extending his claim of the warrant supplied by the *sensus divinitatis* beyond the great things of the gospel to views on what Christians should believe about homosexuality, abortion, intelligent design, capital punishment, social security, church-state relations, or other socially significant issues on which conservative Christians frequently take distinctive views. Nevertheless, while Plantinga himself might be cautious about what Christians should believe about these issues and whether they might be warranted in holding their conservative beliefs, many other Christians are very aggressive in their positions on such controversial social issues.[25] And although Plantinga might be cautious about extending his claim of warrant to these more controversial Christian perspectives, such caution may not be as dear to him as these remarks make it appear.

Plantinga does explicitly say in his footnotes that his focus on the "great things of the gospel" is not intended to restrict the *sensus divinitatis*, or the internal instigations of the Holy Spirit, to providing warrant only for propositions that intersect with the great Christian creeds. He notes:

> And hence not everything a typical Christian believes (as a Christian) will be, strictly speaking, part of faith. For example, she may believe that Jesus Christ performed miracles, or that God is omniscient, or that the Bible is a specially inspired word from the Lord, or that faith naturally issues in good works; none of these is, as such, part of the content of faith. (This is not in any way to downgrade the importance of these things, and certainly the content of faith may enter into her reasons for believing them.) And in thus specifying the

[23] For a sober, yet Christian, assessment of Plantinga's views, see Paul K. Moser, "Man to Man with *Warranted Christian Belief* and Alvin Plantinga," *Philosophia Christi*, Series 2 (2001) 3:369–77. (Plantinga responds to Moser in adjoining pages of the same issue.)

[24] See esp. Plantinga, *Warranted Christian Belief*, 248, and esp. nn. 15 and 16.

[25] A noteworthy, but not exceptional, instance of this failure of modesty on the part of a Christian minister occurred in Waynesville, North Carolina during the month of May, 2005. The Reverend Chan Chandler allegedly expelled members of his Southern Baptist church for their refusal to support the Presidential candidacy of George W. Bush. Many lifelong Democrats and members of Rev. Chandler's church found themselves excluded from church fellowship on political grounds. The episode resulted in Rev. Chandler's eventual resignation and his taking with him many of the church's previous members. One who left with him, Misty Turner, was quoted as saying, "I'm not going to serve where there are so many ungodly people." For an account of this episode, see *The New York Times*, 16 May, 2005, A1.

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> content of faith, I am not, of course, trying to specify those beliefs which are such that accepting them is necessary for being a real Christian.[26]

The text of this note and of the footnote succeeding it indicates that Plantinga is not interested, at least in this book, in adjudicating what is essential to being a Christian, but it also intimates that he is open to expanding warranted Christian belief beyond the great things of the gospel. The Heidelberg Catechism, he notes, includes a "conviction that everything God reveals in his word is true." Plantinga further asserts, "God presumably reveals more, in his word, than the great truths of the gospel."[27] These passages are strong hints that Plantinga is open to conservative Christian views on issues of public significance such as gay marriage, abortion, intelligent design, church-state relations, and others. Such views may have warrant, may be justified, and may constitute knowledge, although Plantinga does not pursue these issues in this book.

Plantinga's epistemological views, views he holds by design to exonerate Christian beliefs from epistemic suspicion, serve as a natural background for increasing aggressiveness among Christians in asserting their conservative views on moral and social issues. Plantinga's intellectual aggressiveness on behalf of creedal Christianity gives momentum to the political agenda of conservative Christians. And Plantinga's own openness to the "conviction that everything God reveals in his word is true," along with his explicit defense of the content of Christian creeds, signals to conservative Christians and politicians that they might well have his philosophical support for their agendas. Epistemology, in Plantinga's work, becomes the cultural handmaiden of Christian creedalism and conservative politics. Whatever might be his own views on abortion or gay marriage or intelligent design or church-state relations, Plantinga's philosophical views implicitly strengthen conservative agendas regarding these issues.

Regarding the dispute between Rorty and Stout, Stout believes that Rorty's opinion—that one's religious views should be kept private—is itself a conversation stopper. In contrast Stout maintains that those who deeply disagree over social and moral issues should "back up a few paces, and begin again, now with a broader conversational objective." Rorty's response to Stout might make use of the above discussion of Plantinga's epistemological views. In Plantinga's epistemology, the authority of the *sensus divinitatis*, of the internal instigation of the Holy Spirit, is warrant, justification, and knowledge providing. How might one follow Stout's advice to back up a few paces and begin anew with broader conversational objectives? How might one try to broaden conversation about these foundational, warrant-providing authorities?

The *sensus divinitatis* is as authoritative, in Plantinga's epistemology, as are perception and memory; as the latter reliably produce true beliefs so does the *sensus divinitatis*. Possibilities for further relevant conversation about abortion,

[26] Plantinga, *Warranted Christian Belief*, 248 n. 15.

[27] See Ibid., 248 n. 16.

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gay marriage, and other controversial issues, on the assumption that the *sensus divinitatis* speaks to them, become quite limited against the background of Plantinga's epistemology; for that background, the authority of conservative views for those who hold them becomes assured by the authority of the reliable medium, the *sensus divinitatis*, that warrants holding them. Again, independently of whether or not Plantinga might himself agree with the claims of groups that embrace conservative agendas on controversial issues, his reformed epistemology supplies a comforting background context for those conservative agendas. Conservative Christian groups may appropriate his understandings of warrant, justification, and knowledge to fortify their agendas, and they may do so even if they are, unlike Plantinga, philosophically naïve. The impetus for their conservative convictions takes further momentum from Plantinga's reformed epistemology. The question arises again: What possibilities for backing up and beginning anew with broader conversational objectives might suggest themselves? The authority of Christian texts, traditions, and designated persons becomes in Plantinga's thought foundational and unyielding; in consequence Stout's hopeful suggestion that one try to pursue broader conversational objectives becomes hollow.[28]

The point of Plantinga's work is to address issues of justification; he intends to show that the central content of Christian faith is properly basic, warranted, and justified, and constitutes knowledge. The conviction of the National Association of Evangelicals is that their call to civic responsibility is likewise normative for believers because it is based on reliable, knowledge-producing mechanisms—the Bible and/or Christian historical traditions, or in Plantinga's language the internal instigation of the Holy Spirit. The focus of these thinkers and indeed of most thinkers concerned with such questions is the issue of justification. Their focus on justification, along with their recourse to foundational authority, is the Achilles' heel of Stout's effort to see them as amenable to pursuing broader conversational objectives. Rorty sees the matter more clearly: religion is a conversation stopper.[29]

[28] In further support of this claim, I would note Lewis Lapham's citation of a quote from the National Association of Evangelicals's booklet entitled "An Evangelical Call to Civic Responsibility." The quote reads as follows: "We engage in public life because God created our first parents in his image and gave them dominion over the earth (Gen 1:27–28). . . . We also engage in public life because Jesus is Lord over every area of life . . . to restrict our stewardship to the private sphere would be to deny an important part of his dominion and to functionally abandon it to the Evil One. To restrict our political concerns to matters that touch only on the private and the domestic spheres is to deny the all-encompassing Lordship of Jesus (Rev 19:16). "Notebook: The wrath of the Lamb," *Harper's Magazine,* May 2005, 7.

[29] See again Rorty's 2003 "reconsideration" of his view, cited in n. 13 above. Insofar as the idea of justification by authority is concerned, note that Rorty does not back down; he would be fully sympathetic to the critique of Plantinga offered here.

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After Justification

The point of the above discussion, one that should have been evident from the philosophical effort expended on issues of epistemology during the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, is that efforts to justify in a non-contextual way particular beliefs or creeds, is a fruitless enterprise. Pursuit of that effort still yields the same alternatives of skepticism or knowledge rooted in basic beliefs endowed with their own unique mode of justification. Descartes gives us innate ideas; Roderick Chisholm gives us synthetic *a priori* principles of evidence; and Plantinga gives us the fruit of the internal instigations of the Holy Spirit.[30] And philosophical disputes about the justification of particular beliefs about values or religion continue unabated.

An alternative to these continuing disputes is to think of religious beliefs not as justified or unjustified in the epistemological sense that seeks contact with reality itself, but rather as natural ways of expressing human needs in an encompassing natural world. Human life is, as John Dewey occasionally puts it, "aleatory," subject to vicissitudes of fortune and misfortune. In this traditionally pragmatist way of thinking about religion, religions and their practices are a natural response to the larger natural contexts of human life.[31]

Thinking of religions in this alternative way emphasizes their naturalness as a normal response to the ecological contexts of the human world. In all of the diverse niches in which humanity has managed to survive there have been myriad threats, the most daunting of which have been beyond human control. But even the most daunting of these natural threats have alternated with conditions beneficial to human flourishing. Hurricanes, tornadoes, and floods punctuate seasonal periods of growth and harvest; bitter winters give way to romantic springs and summers; times of sickness and death yield to times of health and vigor. In such natural contexts, religions bring a perspective to the vicissitudes of human lives, families, and communities that supports the larger human hopes that keep humanity oriented toward a better future.

To see religious beliefs, practices, and communities in this way is to see them as natural and almost surely common to all human communities. Viewing religions as expressions of ubiquitous human needs opens them to questions about their particular origins, their adequacy to meet the needs and interests that give rise to them, and the prospect of altering them so that they more adequately serve those needs and interests. This way of thinking about religious beliefs, practices, and

[30] There are differences among these three, as well as among other figures that might also be added to this list. Descartes and Chisholm are, in a proper Enlightenment spirit, thoroughly egalitarian in their epistemological thought; they think of all persons, qua persons, as having the same innate ideas or synthetic a priori principles of evidence. Plantinga, in an opposed but proper Calvinistic spirit, allows for the possibility that the internal instigations of the Holy Spirit may fall only on a select subset of persons.

[31] See, for example, *1929: The Quest for Certainty* (ed. Jo Ann Boydston; vol. 4 of *The Later Works of John Dewey, 1925–1953*; Carbondale, Ill.: Southern Illinois University Press, 2008) esp. ch. 1.

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communities opens them to strategies of explanation, genealogy, comparison, and contrast.

William James points significantly toward this ecological way of thinking about religions in his discussions of philosophy of religion. James prefers to approach religion through what he calls "science of religion" rather than by philosophy.[32] One reason for James's preference is that through this approach religions become open to the explanatory techniques of science, and they leave behind the issues of justification that are the focus of traditional philosophy of religion. John Dewey joins William James in this preference for leaving aside the issues of epistemology that dominate traditional philosophy of religion.[33]

Thinking about human religious perspectives in broadly genealogical ways that render justification always contextual, rather than in the foundational ways characteristic of religious epistemology and exemplified in Plantinga's work, enables the broader conversational context to which Stout aspires. When religious people are able to clarify the religious grounds for their views on significant social and political issues, and when they are able to accept the historical, ecological context that underlies those religious grounds, then stepping back from a foundational appeal to the absolute authority of persons, texts, or traditions becomes possible. To step back from such appeals to authority is to step away from seeing one's own religious views and their social/political implications as uniquely warranted, authorized, or justified in a way that other religious (or nonreligious) views are not.

To broaden conversational contexts when individuals bring their own particular religious perspectives on controversial issues into the public arena requires a genealogical, explanatory way of addressing those perspectives. A genealogical way of addressing religious perspectives sees them in the full concreteness of the historical contexts and traditions that give rise to them, sustain them, and project them into their futures. To insist on seeing religious perspectives, along with their social and political consequences, in the context of justification—to make justification of those perspectives and their consequences primary in addressing them intellectually—is to exclude the possibility of continuing conversations with interlocutors with whom one disagrees. (Plantinga's strategies of justification in *Warranted Christian Belief* exemplify this removal of possibility, as do those of the National Association of Evangelicals.)

Rorty is right that religion is a conversation stopper if issues of justification are at the forefront of thought about religions and their social and political consequences. Rorty is wrong if genealogy can become primary in thought about religions and their social and political commitments. Similarly, Stout is wrong to assert that one might always continue the conversation by beginning again with broader objectives if he is thinking of religious perspectives as in some sense ultimately justified. And

[32] See "Philosophy," in James's *The Varieties of Religious Experience*, ch. 18.

[33] This preference is ubiquitous in Dewey's work, but his Terry Lectures, *A Common Faith* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1934) express it with specific attention to issues of religion.

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Stout is similarly right in criticizing Rorty for his pessimism about this issue if he is thinking about achieving broader conversational objectives by casting the issues into a broadly genealogical context.[34]

Focusing on issues of epistemological justification where religious beliefs, or their social and political consequences, are concerned inevitably ends (historically speaking) in innate ideas, synthetic a priori truths, or the *sensus divinitatis*. Alternatively, it may end in skepticism. Any of these loci is a dead end for the hope of continuing conversations about contested social and political issues. Understanding religions in a healthy, pragmatist way contextualizes issues of justification so that citizens may indeed back up a few steps and begin with broader conversational objectives; the American pragmatist tradition enables and encourages the continuing conversation Stout recommends.[35]

Two questions remain for this discussion of the controversy between Rorty and Stout. The first question is which of these two ways of addressing issues of religion— justification or genealogy—ought to have intellectual primacy. The second question is how Stout himself sees these issues: Does he see epistemological justification as the primary, "bottom-line" issue where religions are concerned? Or does he, along with William James,[36] see genealogical approaches as primary, "bottom-line" dimensions in our understanding of religions?

Justification or Genealogy?

The first question—which mode of intellectual address of matters religious should be primary—is itself a question of justification and thus begs the question about which mode of intellectual address is primary. Asking such normative questions usually assumes that such questions are primary. The dominant perspective of the pragmatist tradition, however, is that normative questions about justification are not primary or ultimate in human intellectual life. Primary instead are the human contexts within which such questions about justification arise; for the dominant

[34] This way of thinking about this issue would be congenial to Dewey's larger views about belief, knowledge, and religion. See for example *1925: Experience and Nature* (ed. Boydston; vol. 1 of *The Later Works of John Dewey,* 1988) 303: "Were not objects of belief immediate goods, false beliefs would not be the dangerous things which they are. For it is because these objects are good to believe, to admit and assert, that they are cherished so intolerantly and unremittingly. Beliefs about God, Nature, society and man are precisely the things that men most cling to and most ardently fight for. It is easier to wean a miser from his hoard, than a man from his deeper opinions. And the tragedy is that in so many cases the *causes* which lead to the thing in question being a value are not *reasons* for its being a good, while the fact that it is an immediate good tends to preclude that search for causes, that dispassionate judgment, which is prerequisite to the conversion of goods *de facto* into goods *de jure*." Note Dewey's emphasis on causes and understanding them.

[35] The pragmatist tradition can neither enable nor encourage such constructive conversation so long as any of the conversational partners insists on recourse to strategies of justification by authority, and this is Rorty's point in his "reconsideration" of his earlier, more strident rejection of religion in public discourse; see n. 13.

[36] See n. 6 above.

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strands of pragmatism, genealogy and explanation are primary in human intellectual life, and questions of justification are secondary and contextual.[37] Questions of justification are questions that arise within particular contexts, contexts that themselves determine what answers are appropriate and justified. Justification is secondary to and a function of the larger contexts of human life. Scientific questions offer perhaps the clearest way of seeing how this contextual understanding of justification works. Consider for example the following questions and how scientists have answered or might answer them: Are there Quarks? Does a genetic analysis of horses and dogs yield the same biological classifications of those species as does a phenotype analysis of them? How many persons with narcissistic personality disorder also have borderline personality disorder? Does playing computer games make children smarter? Are Christians more forgiving than Muslims?

For pragmatists, issues pertaining to the justification of belief are uniformly contextual, and any particular instance of belief held to be justified is open to strategies of genealogy that exhibit the context-dependence of the belief and its mode of justification. Are pragmatists able to *justify* this commitment to context dependence and genealogical accountability for any belief and its justification? No. For pragmatists, and especially for the classical pragmatists William James and John Dewey, the context dependence of justification is a natural outcome of the continuity of humanity and its institutions with the natural world. Given this commitment to human continuity with nature, every human phenomenon, including strategies of justification and argument, is a response to natural and social contexts and is hence dependent on those contexts. For those who, like Plantinga, do not accept the idea of human continuity with nature, the idea of justification, along with its usual epistemological apparatus of an *a priori*/*a posteriori* distinction or a necessity/contingency distinction, along with other such distinctions, provides an ongoing medium that enables resisting the idea of such continuity. One must begin somewhere, either with one or another apparatus of justification or with the idea of human continuity with nature, which renders contextual all the apparatus associated with philosophical projects of justification. And one cannot begin without begging questions that motivate either the projects of justification or the idea of human continuity with nature.[38]

Along with this philosophical demotion of the idea of justification of belief, pragmatism also offers alternative understandings of every idea central to the Western traditions of philosophy, understandings that give these ideas more power

[37] I have already mentioned William James's view in *Varieties*. John Dewey's commitment to this way of understanding human intellectual life is evident throughout his writings, but see in particular *1934: Art as Experience* (ed. Boydston; vol. 10 of *The Later Works of John Dewey,* 1989) for an elaborate account of how all human practices and institutions have roots in human history and human ecological contexts. (I should mention also that this pragmatist view cannot be defended without begging the question any more than can the view that justification is the primary issue.)

[38] This fact may explain why "real epistemologists" do not take the classical pragmatists seriously; the pragmatists' "justification" is, by their intellectual lights, not justification at all.

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in addressing problems facing human communities. Not only justification, but also knowledge, doubt, belief, and truth become ideas that live and grow within the human contexts of their use; such ideas do not, as most philosophers suppose, have fixed content that may be elicited solely by analytical techniques. But this essay is not the proper venue for an expansive account of the benefits of the pragmatist intellectual tradition for human lives and communities.

Consider now the second remaining question mentioned above: Does Stout himself acknowledge that the contexts of genealogy and explanation must be primary in human thought about religion in order to raise religion above its conversation-stopper status? Such a primacy is required by the classical pragmatists' commitment to human continuity with nature.

Stout and Classical Pragmatism

The answer to this second question about Stout, in my view, must be negative, but the negative answer cannot be unequivocal. Stout appreciates fully the role of genealogy in understanding individuals, families, and communities. We are one and all the individuals, families, and communities we are as a consequence of the traditions and practices that have set us in our particularity upon the contemporary stage. We are embedded in communities of practice that yield our identities, and in consequence we hold the beliefs and values that accompany these identities. Nevertheless, we are individuals, and to be individuals means that we are capable of interacting creatively, even oppositionally, with the very communities that in some vague way yield our identities.[39] In appreciating the significance of our traditions and our individuality Stout embraces the genealogical thinking that is inseparable from classical pragmatism.

In some crucial ways, however, Stout turns away from pragmatism's full embrace of the human situation, and he does so in a way that undermines his commitment to the pragmatist tradition he much admires. A symptom of Stout's doubtful vigor in this respect is his commitment to discursive argumentation as central to each individual's democratic identity. As he puts it in his concluding chapter:

> The social practices that matter most directly to democracy . . . are the discursive practices of ethical deliberation and political debate. The discursive exchange essential to democracy is likely to thrive only where individuals identify to some significant extent with a community of reason-givers.[40]

This emphasis on discursive practices, deliberation, and debate is symptomatic of a commitment to dialectical argument, to exhibiting one's commitments as conclusions of arguments that might be challenged, debated, rejected, or affirmed. Such strategies are recognizably dialectical and designed for rational justification.

[39] See Stout, *Democracy and Tradition*, 74.

[40] Ibid., 293.

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Stout further remarks as follows at an earlier juncture in the development of his reasoning:

> The inferential activity of reason-giving is hardly the whole of ethics as a social practice, but it is central to it. Indeed, it is because the claims in which we express our commitments can play the role of premises or conclusions in inferences that they have conceptual content. . . . If we did not have inferential commitments, if we were not committed to treating one claim as a reason for another, the claims themselves would lack significance. To mean something in particular, they need to be taken to imply something and not to imply something else. Their inferential relations confer significance—conceptual content—upon them.[41]

Again, Stout appears solidly committed to the activity of reason-giving as central to a commitment to democracy, and the reason-giving he intends is designed to *justify* one's position or perspective on the issue in question.

Stout's commitment to the activity of justifying one's position appears to make issues about justification foundational to ethical deliberation in democratic communities. Justifying one's view on a particular issue appears in his discussions to be an activity in principle independent of the communities and traditions that enable those views as well as the strategies of justification that dialectically support them. But a thoroughgoing pragmatism accepts the genealogical dependency of one's views, as well as one's strategies of justification for those views, on one's communities and traditions. My reading of Stout is that he is at least ambivalent about pragmatism, and a further symptom of his ambivalence is the fact that he does unquestionably assert his independence of Dewey.[42] Stout's ambivalence is evident in his overly vigorous embrace of strategies of dialectical argumentation as central to democratic life and traditions.

A further symptom of Stout's overly vigorous, and less than pragmatist, embrace of dialectical justification is his discussion of the ideas of truth and proposition. Stout feels no reluctance to admit that truth is a property, although he is reluctant to consent to any current characterization of that property; he accepts what he calls

[41] Ibid., 283.

[42] Stout repeatedly distances himself from what he thinks of as Dewey's commitment to the idea that truth is warranted assertability. See, for example, 240 and 248. My own view is that this way of thinking about Dewey's understanding of truth, one not unique to Stout, is inaccurate and overly simplified; see, for example, Dewey's discussion of truth in *Logic: the Theory of Inquiry* (ed. Boydston; vol. 12 of *The Later Works of John Dewey*, 2008) 178–79. Also, compare Stout's discussion of truth with that of Duane Cady in *Moral Vision: How Everyday Life Shapes Ethical Thinking* (Lanham, Md.: Rowman & Littlefield, 2005) esp. 55–56. Cady's discussion, while brief, is explicitly genealogical. Speaking of the classical pragmatists, one must not overlook William James; James's struggles to express his understanding of truth were frequent and unsuccessful. See Hilary Putnam's discussion of James's understanding of truth in "James's theory of truth," in *The Cambridge Companion to William James* (ed. Ruth Anna Putnam; Cambridge University Press, 1997) 166–85; see also in that same volume the essay by Bruce Wilshire, "The Breathtaking Intimacy of the Material World: William James's Last Thoughts," 103–24, esp. 115–16.

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"modest pragmatism," a form of pragmatism that rejects any proposal to reduce truth to some form of coherence, acceptance, or utility.[43] Stout also embraces the idea that truth is a property of propositions, and apparently has no misgivings about the distinctly non-pragmatist philosophical idea of a proposition.[44] These commitments on Stout's part evidence a reluctance to embrace fully the pragmatist tradition in philosophy; they undermine his ability to show how that pragmatist tradition might robustly sustain American democracy even as that democracy becomes skeptical about its religious roots as *epistemologically* justified. Stout must become more vigorous in his embrace of classical pragmatism if he is to be successful in turning aside the critiques of his conservative Christian interlocutors who scorn the idea that American pragmatism might be a constructive contribution to genuine democracy.[45]

Conclusion

Western philosophers' pervasive concerns with central normative ideas of human communities—justification, rightness, goodness, truth, belief, knowledge, etc.—tend to conceal from them the fact that that norms and values always do their work contextually and derive their significance from human communities and from various dimensions of human continuity with our world. Stout appears to have consented to this concealment in his protest against Rorty's characterization of religion as a conversation stopper. In spite of his obvious affection for American pragmatism, Stout fails to embrace the fullness of pragmatism's naturalization of thought about the central ideas of philosophy. Stout's "half-way covenant" with American pragmatism leaves him uncomfortably on the fence between Plantinga and Rorty. Getting off this particular fence requires that Stout embrace more fully the pragmatists' idea that explanatory and genealogical contexts take precedence over the contexts of justification that are so dear to Anglo-European philosophers such as Plantinga. Rorty's protest against bringing religion into social and political discussion is simultaneously a protest against the presumptions of those Anglo-European philosophers.

[43] See Stout 251, and more generally 248–55.

[44] John Dewey gives a pragmatist account of the idea of a proposition as an instrument of human activity in *Logic, The Theory of Inquiry*, 162, but this idea is very different from that of propositions as abstract particulars and bearers of fixed truth-values, and the latter idea is the one Stout evidently intends to embrace in his own discussion of propositions.

[45] Stout's critique of these conservative Christian perspectives is nonetheless quite helpful in spite of my general conclusion that Stout himself does not go far enough in his embrace of traditional pragmatism. See especially part two of *Democracy and Tradition* "Religious Voices in a Secular Society," 64–181.

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