

## **RORTY ON FAITH AND HOPE:**

### **Comparative Perspectives on Neopragmatist Philosophy of Religion**

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#### **1. Introduction**

Neopragmatism is not a unified philosophical school of thought. Some leading (mostly American) philosophers have, since the 1980s, been described by this term, emphasizing their background in classical pragmatism. It is widely agreed that the two most important neopragmatists are Richard Rorty (1931-2007) and Hilary Putnam (1926-); other key figures include Joseph Margolis, Nicholas Rescher, and Susan Haack. The latter two have, in particular, sought to advance Charles S. Peirce's pragmatism, while the most famous neopragmatists have turned to William James and John Dewey instead. Moreover, some authors distinguish neopragmatism from "new pragmatism", suggesting that the latter need not be based on "old" pragmatism, despite thematic similarities (Misak 2007). It is often a problem whether the label "neopragmatist" should be attached to a particular thinker; occasionally, the word is used exclusively to refer to Rortyan pragmatism, while some use it broadly to cover different philosophical views influenced by the pragmatist tradition.

Classical pragmatism sought to reconnect philosophical theorizing with human practice. The pragmatic maxim, formulated by Peirce and James, advises us to consider what conceivable practical results our conception of an object may involve; our conception of such results *is* then our conception of that object. Neopragmatists share this general pragmatic approach to philosophical and scientific problems. However, a neopragmatist is not merely someone who studies classical pragmatism. Neopragmatists generally seek to apply pragmatist insights into contemporary problems, including the one concerning the relations between science and religion. This is what Richard Rorty has done in his own way as well.

Like the classical pragmatists, neopragmatists have in significant ways promoted the science–religion dialogue. While few neopragmatists are primarily philosophers of religion, neopragmatism as a philosophical framework is applicable to the problem of understanding religion and its relations to science. This paper focuses on Rorty’s (and to some extent Putnam’s) neopragmatism, especially as it emerges as an approach to the relation between science and religion. Some other neopragmatist thinkers and ideas relevant to this topic are also briefly introduced. The Rorty–Putnam contrast is, however, crucial for understanding neopragmatism, also because it is an opposition between secular and religiously engaged pragmatisms.

## **2. Rorty: pragmatism as antirepresentationalism, philosophy as cultural politics**

### **2.1. Giving up the very idea of “human answerability”**

Rorty’s neopragmatism is clearly the best known both among philosophers and non-philosophers. In his book, *Philosophy and the Mirror of Nature* (1979), Rorty redescribed the history of Western philosophy in insightful ways, arguing that the problems of skepticism and the external world are “optional” and need not be taken seriously. Neither the mind nor language is a “mirror of nature” purporting to accurately represent external reality. Language – statements, vocabularies, and what Ludwig Wittgenstein called “language-games” – is a human invention, a collection of tools people may, pragmatically, use for various purposes. No vocabulary (neither scientific nor religious, for instance) is more intimately in touch with the way the world is “in itself” than any other; no linguistic framework is “Nature’s own”. This is of profound significance for the science–religion dialogue. Language is used quite differently for different purposes; its goal is not to represent the way things are but to satisfy human needs and interests. Its main goal, then, is to help us “cope” with the world.

In later works, Rorty urges that pragmatists should enter a “post-Philosophical culture”, giving up “Philosophy with a capital ‘P’” (Rorty 1982), that *solidarity* is prior to objectivity, and *democracy* to knowledge (Rorty 1991, 1999), that truth is not a goal of inquiry (Rorty 1998), that we should embrace an *antirepresentationalist* pragmatism, giving up the illusion of accurate representation (Rorty 1991, 1999), and an *ironism* suspicious of any “final vocabularies” (Rorty 1989), and that “cultural politics” should replace traditional philosophical inquiry (Rorty 2007).

Rorty was a radically secular thinker until the 1990s. His criticism of the metaphysical and epistemological tradition of Western philosophy is closely connected with his secularism: he has identified assumptions that have played the role that was in earlier worldviews reserved to God. Such is, for instance, the “absolute”, “independent” reality, the world *an sich*. According to Rorty, as human beings and civilization grow more mature, such assumptions are given up. We should not think of ourselves as being “responsible” or “answerable” to any non-human power, divine or not. Accordingly, we should not base our inquiries on the assumption that we are aiming at truth as accurate representation of independent reality. Thus, secularism is a key to Rorty’s critique of Western philosophy; he has – to the dismay of scientific realists and naturalists – continuously argued that philosophers have not gone far enough in such secular attitude.

Rorty’s *ethnocentrism* (captured in the slogan, “we have to start from where we are”) is, however, close to *cultural relativism* (though Rorty explicitly denies being a relativist), leaving room for the autonomy of both scientific and religious descriptions of experience. Science is no more closely connected with the way the world is than religion – or any other human practice – is. People living within a religious *ethnos* have to start from where *they* are. Accordingly, Rorty does not maintain, as many atheists do, that scientific progress has made, or will make, religions irrational, unjustified, etc. He holds that modern people (“we Western liberals”) would do better without religious vocabularies, just as they would do better without racist or sexist ones – or without the vocabulary of scientific realism and truth-seeking inquiry. Scientific realism and religious fundamentalism, Rorty (1999, 157) argues, are “products of the same urge”, because attempting to convince people that they ought to develop an “absolute conception of reality” and attempting to convince them that they ought to “live ‘for God only’” are “of a piece”; both are “attempts to make one’s own private way of giving meaning to one’s life – a way which romanticizes one’s relation to something starkly and magnificently nonhuman, something Ultimately True and Real – obligatory for the general public”.

Philosophy cannot adjudicate between the disputes of science and religion, because it possesses no ahistorical “God’s-Eye View” (Rorty 2003, 39). Secularism – or “anti-clericalism” – is not primarily philosophical but cultural-political issue (*ibid.*). However, the problem, according to many critics, is that if Rorty’s ethnocentrism leads to relativism, his neopragmatism lacks the normative resources of saying that this is what *ought to* be maintained. We will, in what

follows, repeatedly return to this problem, which might simply be labeled “the problem of normative force”.

## 2.2. Rorty on hope

Rorty’s attitude to religion slightly changed during his last years. It would be mistaken to call him anything else than secular in his late writings; yet, he authored several essays on religion in the 1990s and 2000s (Rorty 1999, 2003, 2007). I will next discuss the significance for the philosophy of religion of Rorty’s view on *hope*, as well as his suggestion that the question of religion is ultimately a question of *cultural politics* rather than philosophy.

Beliefs, including religious and metaphysical ones, are for pragmatists habits of action, inseparable from our practice-embedded being-in-the-world (to employ Heidegger’s phrase), in which various hopes, fears, and other attitudes are inextricably present. We could hardly acquire *any* beliefs in the pragmatist sense, unless we encountered reality in a context colored by hope, being oriented toward future actions which (we hope) may change the world. In a Peircean context, Elizabeth Cooke (2006) has argued that we need to hope that our questions are genuinely answerable for us to be able to inquire. Critics view Rorty’s treatment of hope – for many, a paradigmatic neopragmatist picture of hope – as an unfortunate trivialization of this concept. After all, Rorty’s (1999) “philosophy of social hope” is part of his strictly antimetaphysical pragmatism: inquiry does not deal with the way the world is, but is a matter of conversation, replacing contingent vocabularies by other vocabularies.

In the three-essay set entitled, “Hope in Place of Knowledge: A Version of Pragmatism” (Rorty 1999, chapters 2-4), Rorty proposes that hope should replace knowledge as a central goal and a key philosophical concept (cf. Rorty 2000). This is essential to the future-oriented approach of pragmatism, both classical and “neo”. Because pragmatists “do not believe that there is a way things really are”, they suggest replacing the reality–appearance distinction by the one “between descriptions of the world and of ourselves which are less useful and those which are more useful” (Rorty 1999, 27). Here the concept of hope becomes urgent, because “useful” means “useful to create a better future” (ibid.). Moreover, it is Rorty’s own meta-level hope that hope would replace the pursuit of knowledge.

Neither realism nor theism leaves room for the right kind of hope, in Rorty’s view. Citing Dewey’s claim, made in 1903, that Ralph Waldo Emerson should be seen as “the Philosopher of

Democracy”, Rorty says: “Hope – the ability to believe that the future will be unspicifiably different from, and unspicifiably freer than, the past – is the condition of growth. That sort of hope was all that Dewey himself offered us [...]” (Ibid., 120.) He also speaks about “romantic hope” as a “willingness to substitute imagination for certainty, and curiosity for pride”, connecting this to the Deweyan rejection of the distinction between contemplation and action, and to the more general pragmatist rejection of the dichotomy between theoretical and practical approaches to reality (ibid., 88). He further notes that, with the romantics, history “began to replace God, Reason and Nature as the source of human hope” (ibid., 265).

Religion offers “hope for redemption through entering into a new relation to a supremely powerful non-human person”, while philosophy offers hope for redemption through “acquiring a set of beliefs that represent things in the one way they truly are” (Rorty 2007, 91). Philosophers’ “Love of Truth”, the urge to get something (knowledge, mind, morality, or something else) “right”, is the secular version of traditional religious hopes (ibid., 35). These hopes should be abandoned, because in a “literary culture”, both philosophy and religion are “optional literary genres” (ibid., 91). Again, the problem is the one we already raised above: how can Rorty argue for these hopes being wrong or misguided? How does his preferred view get its normative force?

Through his pragmatic hope, Rorty (2003) joins Gianni Vattimo’s efforts to reinterpret the Christian tradition in terms of secularization, attempting to save religion from “onto-theological” metaphysical assumptions and doctrines: “To save religion from onto-theology you need to regard the desire for universal intersubjective agreement as just one human need among many others” (ibid., 42). Rortyan hope is, then, thoroughly secularized: “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.” (Ibid., 44.) It remains unclear whether this admirable hope should be called “religious” in any sense.

Nevertheless, many pragmatists undoubtedly applaud Rorty’s emphasis on hope. In James’s (1907, chapter 3) pragmatic examination of metaphysical problems, there is also an implicit current of hope running through the discussion. Pragmatism, for James, “shifts the emphasis and looks forward into facts themselves”, asking, “What is this world going to be? What is life eventually to make of itself?” (Ibid., 62.) Metaphysical puzzles are not viewed as conflicts between complete, finished views. Rather, they are individual attempts to come to terms with different considerations reason may offer in favor of one or another way of interpreting

experience. For instance, the theory of the free will (contrasted to determinism), is “a general cosmological theory of *promise*” and thus “a doctrine of *relief*” (ibid., 61). Turning toward the future is as essential here as in Rorty’s neopragmatism, and therefore hope also is.

However, Jamesian pragmatists may hold that hope should *not* be disconnected from metaphysical pursuits, as in Rorty’s pragmatism. They may understand hope as a pragmatic way of approaching metaphysics, as an irreducibly ethical attitude to the study of metaphysical puzzles. A “Jamesian” neopragmatist attempts to make both metaphysics and ethics more relevant by reconnecting both with the hope for a better future. Such a metaphysically pregnant hope, which may, according to Cooke (2006), even play a “transcendental” role, being constitutive of any humanly possible inquiry or even thought, is “social hope”, too, but not exactly in the Rortyan sense. Arguably, if such a social hope is genuine, then it is in touch with the way(s) the world is, from the perspective of the social practices engaged in, transformed, and redescribed by those embracing it. Rorty’s dichotomy between hope and knowledge is one of the dualisms he – as many critics have pointed out – is unpragmatically committed to, despite his pragmatic urge to destroy dichotomies.

Thus, according to Rorty’s critics, his neopragmatism fails to sufficiently account for the role played by hope in inquiry, religious “inquiries” included, although his emphasis on this concept is certainly highly relevant to neopragmatist philosophy of religion. Furthermore, Rorty’s (1999, 2003, 2007) way of locating religion exclusively in the “private” sphere of individuals’ lives, instead of the “public” sphere of common concerns, is also, for many critics, an utterly unpragmatist one. Pragmatists have since Peirce, James, and Dewey pictured the human individual as an individual-in-a-community, with no sharp separation between private and public issues. If religion is merely private, then, arguably, no genuine religious traditions – and, hence, no religious experiences either, if those experiences are “tradition-laden” – can arise. On the other hand, perhaps that is desirable from the perspective of Rortyan secularism. Yet, it is hard to understand how a thinker inspired as much by John Dewey as Rorty is can suggest that religion ought to be viewed as a merely private affair. Dewey’s *A Common Faith* (1934) is a key pragmatist text celebrating the profoundly communal nature of religious experience, albeit extending (like Rorty) the religious qualities of experience beyond traditional dogmatic, supernaturalistic religions and the often antidemocratic social structures they have been associated with.

Rorty's perspective on religion is resolutely antimetaphysical. Religion, like everything else, should be emancipated from foundationalist, essentialist, ahistorical pursuits. Here he follows Dewey but goes much further. "Literary intellectuals" and "ironists", according to Rorty, should not only transform culture into a "post-Philosophical" one; they should also bring religious experiences, needs, and interests into a "postmetaphysical" era. Very little remains from traditional theism in such a "religion after metaphysics". Very little, then, remains from the traditional science–religion contrast.

### **2.3. The question of God as a cultural-political question**

Rorty's atheism, secularism, or anti-clericalism can hardly be said to constitute a normatively defended or argued position, let alone a philosophical theory. In his last writings, Rorty emphasized the cultural-political status of his suggestions concerning religious (and other) ways of using language. Philosophical criticism of religion is, for Rorty, a matter of cultural politics, not of metaphysics or epistemology. It is a matter of what kind of vocabularies should be maintained in "our" culture (and of how to define "our" culture, or who "we" are). The meta-level issue of whether cultural politics should "replace ontology", as it in Rorty's view should, is itself a matter of cultural politics (Rorty 2007, 5), which is "the only game in town" (ibid., 8). The critical question is whether this view is coherent. Can Rorty consistently maintain that we should not argue for atheism, or any other philosophical view? Once more we encounter here the problem of normative force.

According to Rorty, "the question of whether or not to talk about the existence of immaterial and infinite beings is not one of transcendental philosophy but rather one to be turned over to cultural politics" (ibid., 19). Debating over concrete political questions related to religious ways of life, such as whether female Muslim students should be allowed to wear veils on campus, is "more useful to human happiness" than debating over the existence of such beings (ibid., 25-26). Furthermore, Rorty "drops" the idea that theology employs special kind of "symbolic forms", along with "the idea that God requires to be talked about in a special way because he is a special kind of being" (ibid., 22).

For Rorty, as already emphasized, religion is a private matter: "our religion is our own business – something we need not even discuss with others, much less try to justify to them, unless we feel like doing so" (ibid., 25). He claims, controversially, that this is what "most

intellectuals” today hold. Again the critic who wonders how Rorty gets the normative resources to render his position plausible may point out that people, at least reflective people, have an intellectual duty to justify their views about religion, or at least a duty to discuss those views as critically and rationally as possible with others. This is not to say that people ought to engage in evidentialist philosophy of religion, or in the religion–science debate. Yet, political issues surrounding religion can hardly be debated if religion is thoroughly privatized, moved beyond the public use of reason.

Rorty’s account of religion as private is illuminated through his curious comments on *polytheism*. Echoing James and Nietzsche, Rorty characterizes polytheism as the view that there is “no actual or possible object of knowledge that would permit [one] to commensurate and rank all human needs” (ibid., 30). This is comparable to Rorty’s earlier (1989) ironism about “final vocabularies”. Yet, for a truly religious person, such an account may simply sacrifice the seriousness and profundity of one’s commitment. Religion, for such a person, is not a matter of sheer choice, like the choice of clothes or a personal style.

Rorty’s most sustained account of a pragmatist philosophy of religion can be found in his essay, “Pragmatism as Romantic Polytheism” (Rorty 2007, chapter 2). He offers five theses he believes the pragmatist ought to subscribe to (ibid., 34-35): (1) Antirepresentationalism: beliefs are habits of action. (2) Romantic utilitarianism: there is no competition between science and religion; nor should one draw contrasts between cognitive and non-cognitive or serious and non-serious matters or ways of speaking. (3) The distinction between projects of social cooperation and projects of individual self-development (largely paralleling the one between public and private matters) is important. (4) There is no “love of Truth”: “It is never an objection to a religious belief that there is no evidence for it. The only possible objection to it can be that it intrudes an individual project into a social and cooperative project, and thereby offends against the teachings of *On Liberty*.” (5) Religious fundamentalism is morally irresponsible, betraying the ideals of human fraternity and democracy.

This philosophy of religion is not identical to the classical pragmatists’. James, according to Rorty, *should* have said something like this: “[W]e are free to describe the universe in many different ways. Describing it as the drifting of cosmic atoms is useful for the social project of working together to control our environment and improve man’s estate. But that description leaves us entirely free to say, for example, that the Heavens proclaim the glory of God.” (Ibid.,

36.) James should *not* have talked about the literal and objective truth of religious beliefs but should have been satisfied with what he said in “The Will to Believe”: “we have a right to believe what we like when we are, so to speak, on our own time. But we abandon this right when we are engaged in, for example, a scientific or a political project.” (Ibid., 37.)

The problem here is whether reflective people, say, academics or intellectuals, shouldn’t *always* be “on their own time”, autonomous and independent. Rorty may not, then, be able to encourage intellectual *responsibility* through his private–public dichotomy. When contrasting “one’s own time” to public, cooperative projects, he is, arguably, unpragmatic. The critic may point out that one should, even when cooperating with others in shared projects, be oneself, taking responsibility for one’s commitments.

Rorty prefers Dewey’s (1934) philosophy of religion to James’s, because Dewey “was much less prone to a sense of guilt than was James” (Rorty 2007, 38). However, this sense of guilt may be what ultimately makes religion a deep issue in James, in a way it never is – from a Jamesian perspective – serious enough in Dewey. Rorty recognizes the role played by the concept of guilt in James’s pragmatism, but he overlooks the fact that this concept (or related ones, such as sin and evil) may be needed to make religion serious for James. If, “[i]n a democratic society, everybody gets to worship his or her personal symbol of ultimate concern” (ibid., 40), democratic worship may lack the kind of depth associated with religious ways of life. If everyone started to worship, say, money as a personal symbol of ultimate concern, this would hardly be a religious activity.

Rorty’s neopragmatist perspective on religion may thus have difficulties in maintaining the seriousness of (especially Jamesian) pragmatist philosophy of religion in which guilt plays a strong role. Thus, it may have difficulties in accounting for the fact that religious faith is, for many, truly an “ultimate concern”. Another worry that we have encountered – indeed, a worry repeatedly arising in Rorty’s neopragmatism – is that Rorty may have sacrificed the normative resources of critical philosophy of religion by reducing the problems of faith to mere cultural-political clashes of vocabularies. Such reductionism is not part of the classical pragmatists’ heritage. Rorty is not guilty of the “end of philosophy” line of thought sometimes associated with his neopragmatism, because he does maintain in an important, though primarily cultural-political, role for philosophy (cf. Brandom 2000); yet, it remains unclear whether there is any critical, normatively structured way to discuss religion (e.g., in dialogue with science) seriously and

argumentatively within Rortyan neopragmatism. In this regard, it seems to me that the “classical” pragmatist philosophies of religion offered by James and Dewey (cf. Pihlström 2008, 2010) are superior to their neopragmatist successor.

### 3. Putnam: synthesizing pragmatism and realism

#### 3.1. Metaphysical vs. pragmatic realism

Hilary Putnam’s work on realism is another key version of neopragmatism. Indeed, neopragmatism has largely emerged from a critical dialogue between Putnam and Rorty on realism and truth. Both have subscribed to pragmatism, citing classics like James and Dewey; yet, they disagreed with each other about the significance of this tradition. I will offer some brief comments on Putnam’s philosophy of religion in order to set Rorty’s above-discussed views in their proper dialogical context.

Putnam has progressed from a scientific (metaphysical) realism through what he used to call “internal realism” toward a commonsense realism, or “cultivated” naive realism, which he claims to find in the philosophy of the later Wittgenstein (see Putnam 1994). In his critique of metaphysical realism, Putnam employs the views of Immanuel Kant, the classical pragmatists (especially James and Dewey), and Wittgenstein. Instead of detailed interpretations of these thinkers, he creates and recreates his own conception of realism and truth, including realism about religion, drawing inspiration from their ideas.

For Putnam (1981, 1990), *metaphysical realism* is the conjunction of three theses: (1) there is a way the world is in itself, mind- and language-independently; i.e., the world consists of a fixed set of mind-independent objects and properties; (2) the world can, in principle, be described in a complete, unique, absolutely true representation (presumably an ideal scientific theory); (3) truth is a non-epistemic notion, correspondence between linguistic items (statements, beliefs, or theories) and objects and/or states of affairs existing in the mind-independent world. Putnam’s *internal realism* is, essentially, the denial of these theses. Claiming that the world can be correctly described from multiple perspectives, reflecting our interests and purposes, internal realism is a version of the *pluralism* one finds in pragmatists like James and Dewey. The internal realist joins Rorty in urging that no description of the world, not even the most advanced

scientific one, is the world's own. Descriptions available to us are grounded in human purposes and practices. Ontology, truth, and reference are internal to conceptual schemes serving different purposes. The upshot of this *conceptual relativity* is that we live in a human world; there is no "ready-made" world. It is, in Putnam's view, scientific – culturally harmful – to view science as a superior language-game describing absolute reality.

In the 1980s, Putnam characterized truth as idealized epistemic justification, rational acceptability, or warranted assertability, regarding truth as an epistemic notion contrasted to the non-epistemic correspondence concept of truth. More recently he has noted that his epistemic theory of truth (and internal realism) were misguided attempts to replace the unintelligible picture of metaphysical realism by a rival picture. We should, instead of succumbing to either metaphysical or internal realism, adopt a commonsensical "natural realism". (Putnam's other labels, "pragmatic realism" and "realism with a small 'r'", still apply to his views; cf. Putnam 1992, 1994.)

The metaphysical realist's theses cannot, Putnam holds, simply be denied: we cannot affirm their negations, because the negation of an unintelligible statement is equally unintelligible as the original one. The metaphysical realist does *not*, according to Putnam, reach out for something (i.e., an absolute conception of the world) which is a meaningful goal and which we fail to achieve; our inability to describe the world absolutely is no failure, because the very idea of such a description collapses into unintelligibility – as does the internal realist's view, if construed as the negation of such an idea. This change in Putnam's neopragmatism took place in mid-1990s (cf. his 1994). It has a pragmatist background, insofar as he finds James's natural realism, along with Wittgenstein's focus on the "ordinary", among his sources.

The relevance of these reflections on realism to the philosophy of religion is obvious. Religious statements or (in Rortyan terms) vocabularies should not be conceived of along the lines of metaphysical realism any more than scientific or commonsense ones should. If any realism is acceptable, it must be "pragmatic" (Pihlström 1996, 1999, 2009). Moreover, both scientific, commonsense, and religious (and other) perspectives on reality may contain some "truth", and so do our moral worldviews; Putnam accepts no gulf between facts and values (Putnam 2002).

Putnam's views on realism, especially internal realism, have been severely criticized both by realists affirming the existence of a mind-independent world and by more radical (Rortyan)

neopragmatists who want to set the issues of realism and truth aside as fruitless pseudo-problems. It has been argued, among other things, that metaphysical realism is not an “all or nothing” affair: one can endorse one or two among the theses 1-3 above, without endorsing them all. Putnam, however, has stressed that it is unclear whether those theses make sense in the absence of one another.

Even though Putnam rejects the internal realism he initially propounded, he continues to think that the metaphysical (scientific) realist’s attempt to find a privileged (scientific) standpoint for describing reality in itself, independently of practice-laden perspectives, hopelessly fails. His attacks on strong realism have turned into general attacks on the reductionist, scientific dream of representing ultimate reality in terms of physical theory. Thus his work on this topic has deep significance for the philosophy of religion. If scientism is rejected and no scientific perspective is treated as “absolute”, then religious perspectives are also allowed to enter critical, rational discussions. The pragmatist point here, echoing James (1907), is that both scientific and religious perspectives must be evaluated pragmatically, in terms of how well they satisfy human purposes.

It remains undecided whether Putnam’s rejection of metaphysical realism can be combined with a pragmatic (commonsense) realism affirming the objectivity and independence of the world or whether it leads to a conception of the world as dependent on human practices. Putnam has been interpreted as a relativist or even an idealist, but he has reminded his critics that he never regarded the facts obtaining in the world as dependent on how we use language (in any normal sense of “dependent”). Still, there is no privileged (scientific) perspective available for any absolute description of those facts. One option is to interpret Putnam’s view as “empirical realism” in Kant’s sense. The world is, according to such a (re)interpretation, constituted by purpose-oriented practices roughly in the manner in which the empirical world is a human construction, without being illusory or fictitious, according to Kant’s transcendental idealism.

Putnam’s views, in general, are thus a mixture of Kantian, pragmatist, and Wittgensteinian insights – and this holds for his neopragmatist philosophy of religion, in particular. There is a sense in which reality, and truths about it, are human constructions, but this does not entail a Protagorean relativism of individuals or cultures as “measures of what there is”. It is always from a purposive, practice-embedded point of view that we say whatever we say about the world we take to be real; following Wittgenstein, Putnam (2002) emphasizes the *context-sensitivity* of meaning, justification, and rationality. It is only in particular contexts of

philosophical bewilderment that, for instance, we are required to justify our beliefs about objective worldly facts. As there are several relevant contexts of investigation and justification, this view is close to pragmatic pluralism. In a religious or theological context – a context serving specific purposes – certain statements may be (held as) true, or rationally justified, even though they are not justified in a scientific context serving different purposes. Religious contexts do not require us to justify our views in the same way as scientific contexts do.

### **3.2. Putnam on religion: testing ideas “in the laboratory of life”**

Putnam has never been a secularist in Rorty’s manner, though it was late in his philosophical development – only in the 1990s – that he began to reflect on his religious views philosophically (Putnam 1992, 1997a, 1997b, 1997c). His neopragmatist treatment of the science–religion controversy integrates pragmatist (Jamesian-Deweyan) and Wittgensteinian insights. Together with Wittgensteinian philosophers of religion, Putnam argues that an evidentialist approach mischaracterizes religious faith. Religion is not a scientific theory intended to explain observable events; it is misleading to either support or criticize it on the basis of evidence (or lack thereof). Rather, religion is tied to deeply rooted forms of life within which we find significance for existence. Even if religious ideas can be said to be “empirically tested”, they must be understood differently from scientific theories. Religious views are tested “in the laboratory of life” (Putnam 1997a, 182), not in a research laboratory.

Some atheists maintain that “modern science has answered, or at least sketched a satisfactory answer to, *all* the problems with which metaphysics was traditionally concerned, and the answer simply leaves no room for religion [...] except as a historically and culturally important kind of *escapism*” (Putnam 1997a, 176). However, from Putnam’s pragmatist and Wittgensteinian perspective, the religious way of looking at reality is *not* “simply another scientific hypothesis, to be examined by the criteria of predictive accuracy, simplicity, and conservation of previous (scientific) belief” (ibid., 178). Religious statements can be neither refuted nor confirmed by evidence. The materialist, reductionist, scientific critic of religion fails to understand what religion – the religious form(s) of life – is (ibid., 178-180). The religious fundamentalist commits the same mistake.

Religious responses to life are, for Putnam, varied, but the “potentiality” for making religious language one’s own is “a basic human potentiality”, and it takes “something

experiential and not merely intellectual to awaken that possibility in a human being” (Putnam 1997c, 492). Religion should not be overintellectualized – as James argued a century earlier. Putnam, however, reserves a role for intellectual discussion of religion in a way different from Rorty’s reduction of philosophy (of religion) to cultural politics. Putnam summarizes his account of how to philosophize about religion into three principles: (1) The Principle of Experiment: “Ideas must be tested in practice.” (2) The Principle of Fallibilism: “No human being and no body of human opinion is infallible.” (3) The Principle of Communication: “Truth is by its very nature public. Whatever your existential commitments may be, if you claim truth for them, you must be willing to discuss them.” (Putnam 1997a, 182-183.) Following these principles is to be prepared to test religious views “in the laboratory of life”. While Putnam is sympathetic to Wittgensteinianism, he attacks “pseudo-Wittgensteinian ‘language game theologians’” for giving up the possibility of reasonably criticizing religious beliefs (Putnam 1997b, 419).

How a rational critique of religion ought to be conducted on a pragmatic basis is, however, not obvious from Putnam’s writings. There is an element of existentialism and even mysticism in his position. He draws inspiration from negative theology, particularly Maimonides (Putnam 1997b), and ultimately regards religious ways of life as individuals’ deep personal commitments – resembling Rorty’s privatized religion. Characteristically, Putnam (1992, 190-196) finds James’s perspective on religion superior to Dewey’s, though – in contrast to Rorty. Yet, Putnam’s mystical tendencies might also be compared to Dewey’s notion of “natural piety”, the awe we (may) feel when encountering the vast totality of nature and realizing our tiny role in its scheme of things.

As another difference to Rorty, Putnam does consider religious ideas and commitments deep, profound, ultimately significant. “There simply is no uncommitted place to stand with respect to the religious dimensions of human life”, he writes (Putnam 1997b, 408). Claiming to be “religious” is an “awesome responsibility” (Putnam 1997a, 185). The issue is existential in the sense of going deep into the very being of a human being: “*what it is to believe that God is personal and loves individuals depends on who one is all the way down and how one lives all the way down* (ibid., 184; original emphasis). How one uses the word “God” can only be explained with reference to who one deeply is, and how one leads one’s personal life (Putnam 1997c, 498).

The basic difference between the two leading neopragmatists’ views seems to be that Rorty opposes (traditional) religious ideas, whereas Putnam is a “believer”, a “practicing Jew”.

He even finds religious significance, though no sound philosophical theorizing, in the traditional proofs of God's existence (ibid., 490). While in Rorty's case it is unclear whether, and how, the suggested cultural-political replacement of religious (e.g., Christian) vocabularies by secular ones could be normatively supported, in Putnam's case the problem of normative force is slightly different. The problem now is whether his respect for individual, personal ways of living religious lives leaves room for any public discussion of reasons for preferring one such (form of) life to another. Putnam may in the end arrive at religious mysticism replacing rational argumentation by blind faith. This is another way of losing normative force, quite different from Rorty's.

#### **4. Concluding remarks on other neopragmatist philosophies of religion**

Notably, neopragmatism has over the past few decades spread from the United States, the homeland of pragmatism, to Europe and other countries. For example, Dirk-Martin Grube, a philosopher-theologian working in The Netherlands, has explored pragmatist themes in the philosophy of religion (Grube 2003), while Eberhard Herrmann, a theologian based in Sweden, has defended a "pragmatic realism" regarding religious belief indebted to Putnam (Herrmann 2003). Ulf Zackariasson (2002), in turn, has examined religion in the light of "pragmatic philosophical anthropology" (see also Zackariasson 2010). European scholarly communities such as the Central European Pragmatist Forum and the Nordic Pragmatism Network attract philosophers and other researchers working on the science–religion dialogue. Thus, while the leading neopragmatists have been American, inheriting and critically developing the essentially American tradition of pragmatism (albeit with its European, particularly Kantian and Hegelian, roots), this American way of thinking about religion is increasingly firmly established in Europe and elsewhere, too. The cultural contexts for the science–religion debate are, obviously, quite different in these different countries.

Major Peirce and Dewey scholars have so far only insufficiently focused on the philosophy of religion, however. It has mostly been the task of Jamesian pragmatists to continue religiously relevant philosophizing within the pragmatist tradition (cf. Pihlström 2008). However, the bearing of Putnam's and Rorty's neopragmatisms on the philosophy of religion still needs to

be examined. The interpretation and appropriation of their positions in this regard has barely begun.

Moreover, pragmatist philosophers of religion may, and should, work in close cooperation with other related currents, such as *religious naturalism* and *process philosophy* (including process theology). In some cases, it may be difficult to determine whether a particular thinker or position should be labeled “neopragmatist” or, say, “naturalist”. Pragmatism is an open-ended tradition with flexible boundaries. It may be a sign of its vitality that it has been able to accommodate both religious and secular viewpoints, attracting thinkers from both camps. In this sense, Rorty’s elaborations of neopragmatism, in philosophy of religion and elsewhere, are more than welcome, even though the pragmatist philosopher of religion definitely need not agree with his most problematic proposals, such as the sharp private–public dichotomy that seems rather unpragmatic, against the background of Dewey’s communally oriented philosophy of religion, in particular.

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