

BOOK REVIEW:

**RICHARD RORTY. AN ETHICS FOR TODAY: FINDING
COMMON GROUND BETWEEN PHILOSOPHY AND RELIGION.
(New York: Columbia University Press, 2011. 76 pp.)**

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In his professional career Richard Rorty stirred up the waters of almost all philosophical disciplines from metaphysics and epistemology through political philosophy, up to philosophy of law and ethics. Indeed, hardly any branch of philosophy remained completely untouched after what Richard Rorty has done to our Western intellectual enterprise called the „love of wisdom.” However, some areas of philosophical inquiry seem to have been off Rorty’s primary focus during his lifetime; and one of these is philosophy of religion. When we consider Rorty’s philosophical and political stance it is hardly a surprise after all. In his work, a social democrat Rorty, raised in the house where it was „The Case of Leon Trotsky” (not the Bible) that occupied the most honorable place on his parents’ bookshelves¹, apparently has nothing much interesting to say about religious belief. Apart from a few essays² devoted to the subject of religion, Rorty seems to be more interested in political dimension of religion than in the phenomenon of religion as such. However, not only Rorty’s thoughts concerning the relations of politics and religious belief but also his ideas on the very project of Western metaphysics and epistemology bear a great load of intellectual material that can be (if seen from proper perspective) actually utilized in thinking about religion.

¹ Cf. Rorty, R.: *Philosophy and Social Hope*, Hardmondsworth: Penguin Books, 1999, p. 5.

² See his papers „Religious Faith, Intellectual Responsibility and Romance” or „Religion as Conversation-stopper” in: Rorty, R.: *Philosophy and Social Hope*, Hardmondsworth: Penguin Books, 1999, pp. 148-175.

This project has been recently taken up by authors like Gianni Vattimo, G. Elijah Dann or Jeffrey W. Robbins, all of whom contributed to the book called *An Ethics for Today: Finding Common Ground Between Philosophy and Religion*. This book is an outcome of a common project of the abovementioned authors, which started with Rorty’s public lecture in Torino on 21st September 2005. The lecture was held on the occasion of Gianni Vattimo’s invitation of Rorty to the Italian philosopher’s *alma mater*. Symbolically enough, Rorty carried out this speech only a few months after the new Pope Benedict XVI was elected³. In this respect (and as we shall see below) Rorty’s speech „An Ethics for Today” can be interpreted as a dialogue with some of the Pope’s doctrines and contentions, shared by millions of Catholics and other Christians all over the globe.

The foreword for this concise but none the less immensely thoughtful book is written by a young American scholar Jeffrey W. Robbins. Robbins is currently an associate professor of religion and philosophy at Lebanon Valley College, where he also serves as the director of the college colloquium. He is the author of two books, *Between Faith and Thought: An Essay on the Ontotheological Tradition (2003)* and *In Search of a Non-Dogmatic Theology (2004)*⁴, and numerous article on the subject. From the very first pages of his foreword Robbins leaves little doubt that the hermeneutic activity of both him and G. E. Dann in the conclusion is centered around interpreting Rorty’s work as conducive to their own philosophical enterprises of postmodern Christianity. Whether this endeavour is a successful one I will leave (for now) an open question. The fact is that Robbins depicts the main traces of Rorty’s thought in a clear and quite an insightful way without dragging them to dimensions where Rorty himself would not be happy to find them. As Robbins

³ Joseph Ratzinger was elected the new Pope on 19th April 2005 in a papal conclave, and celebrated his Papal Inauguration Mass on 24th April 2005.

⁴ He also edited, along with Gianni Vattimo and John D. Caputo, the important book of the postmodern christianity’s doctrine named *After the Death of God (2007)*.

correctly points out, the central theme of Rorty's thought, regardless whether we relate it to epistemology, ethics or theology, is a thorough rejection of metaphysical foundationalism in all its forms. It is an ultimate refutation of the idea that at some point in the human history we will find some kind of a proof (either empirical or philosophical) of how things really are.

The project of Western Platonic metaphysics is nothing more than an attempt to escape from time and chance to the godly world of the eternal Truth that will finally tell us who we really are. At this point we notice, that the classical philosophers' endeavour is in fact existential⁵ in nature. We do not look for the truth day and night „just because“ or out of mere curiosity – we long for the Truth to find peace with ourselves. From this perspective we can see that philosophy, despite its explicit proclamation of hanging only upon the process of rational speculation, is at its very core also a religious project. This characteristic of philosophy's search for the immutable and eternal was thoroughly addressed by Heidegger in his critique of ontotheology. The destruction of metaphysics carried out in Europe by thinkers like Nietzsche, Heidegger or Derrida found an analytic echo in the work of Richard Rorty. As Chantal Mouffe⁶ thoughtfully noticed, Rorty as well as Derrida, both rejected the idea that there is some kind of a necessary link between democracy, rationality and universalism which represents the intellectual route of mankind to the ultimate happy-end of human history. On the contrary, what Rorty apparently wants to underline in his texts is that democracy, rationality⁷ and some kind of universalism are to a crucial extend

dependent on our social institutions as well as our abilities to foster them in the future by means of free and open communication. The work of Richard Rorty, Robbins holds, leaves us at the gates of thoroughly contingent world where (in Freud's words) chance is treated as worthy of determining our fate.⁸

Danny Postel once wrote that Richard Rorty can be probably best described as a „boring atheist.“⁹ Now, can we hear anything interesting about religion from a boring atheist? In the case of Rorty, we surely can, at least in two respects: a) by reading his papers on religion we can get a picture of his opinions on the role of religious experience in the lives of human beings that is far from trivial; b) by using „redescription“ as Rorty's most powerful weapon in advancing our intellectual and moral standards, we can reformulate some of his ideas as being able to enter a conversation with the kind of thinking known as postmodern Christianity (or weak theology being its instance). Rorty's atheism definitely does not fall into the same category as the atheism of Richard Dawkins or Daniel Dennett. Rorty seems to perfectly understand the broadness¹⁰ of religious experience and its various contexts, although, for himself, religion is not a live option. His growing willingness to enter into debate with religion, as we saw it in the last several years of his life, is supposedly an inevitable conclusion of contentions published in his earlier papers¹¹ where he called religion a „conversation-stopper.“ It may well be the case that religion sometimes is a conversation-stopper, but as Rorty himself holds, it is

⁵ As already Dewey noticed in: Dewey, J.: *The Quest for Certainty: A Study of the Relation of Knowledge and Action*, Carbondale: Southern Illinois University Press, 1988, pp. 24-25.

⁶ Mouffe, Ch. „Deconstruction, Pragmatism, and the Politics of Democracy“ in *Deconstruction and Pragmatism*, New York: Routledge, 1996, p. 1.

⁷ In the sense presented for instance in his essay „Rationality and Cultural Difference“ in Rorty, R.: *Truth and Progress*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998, pp. 186-201.

⁸ Cf. Rorty, R.: *Contingency, Irony and Solidarity*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1989, p. 22.

⁹ Postel, D.: „High Flyer: Richard Rorty Obituary“ in *New Humanist* 122, no 4, 2007. Available online: <http://newhumanist.org.uk/1440/high-flyer-richard-rorty-obituary> [cited 04. 16. 2011].

¹⁰ Cf. his paper „Religious Faith, Intellectual Responsibility and Romance“ in: Rorty, R.: *Philosophy and Social Hope*, Hardmondsworth: Penguin Books, 1999, pp. 148-168.

¹¹ See his essay „Religion as Conversation-stopper“ in: Rorty, R.: *Philosophy and Social Hope*, Hardmondsworth: Penguin Books, 1999, pp. 168-175.

our (philosophers') responsibility to maintain the discussion even with these sometimes „unwilling” forms of discourse. Since we know that when discussion ceases, other forms of persuasion come into play, we must make sure it will carry on.

The topic of Rorty's speech called „An Ethics for Today” is spirituality and secularism. From the very beginning of his lecture it is quite clear that Rorty wants to shape it according to the framework of European realia. This is also why he chose to address the words of Papal inauguration homily of Benedict XVI. In this sermon Ratzinger said: *„Having a clear faith, based on the creed of the Church, is often labeled today as a fundamentalism ... Whereas relativism, which is letting oneself be tossed and swept along by every wind of teaching, looks like the only attitude acceptable to today's standards.”* These words make the central points of Rorty's attention and actually the whole lecture revolves around them. What is interesting, in this case Rorty accepts the label of a relativist, although he obviously rejects the definition of relativism presented by Ratzinger. Rorty depicts¹² his relativist stance as openness to new possibilities and willingness to consider all suggestions about what might increase human happiness. On the other hand, he refuses to call Ratzinger a fundamentalist. If we define fundamentalism as an absurdly uncritical invocation of scriptural texts it becomes obvious that no one could possibly accuse a sophisticated theologian Ratzinger of this (p. 11). However, if we define fundamentalism as an opinion

that our moral judgments are valid only insofar as they are grounded in the objective reality, totally independent of us, than Ratzinger apparently falls into this category. We now see that the core issue of the imaginary Rorty-Ratzinger dispute is actually the question of where we are to find the source of our moral judgments. Is it in God? In the idea of natural law or maybe is it not the case that moral judgments are nothing but a matter of our arbitrary emotional decisions? Rorty says that no one of these alternatives is the right one. Fundamentalists clearly try to manipulate us into a false dilemma of Ivan Karamazov that if God (or anything of this transcendent kind) does not exist, everything is permitted. Rorty asserts that all attempts to find some neutral court of appeal for validating our moral opinions must necessarily end up in failure. After all, is it not the case that the fundamentalists' search for absolute certainty might be only a way of dispelling their own doubts on the matter of objectivity of moral values? There seem to be no other means of justification than the conversational ones.

As N. H. Smith correctly points out¹³, in this issue, Rorty draws on the inferentialist philosophy of Robert Brandom to argue that the preoccupation with the existence of some „higher order” standards is simply misplaced within our public debates. According to Brandom, there is nothing outside the argumentative exchanges of human inquirers that could possibly lend authority to our beliefs. Appealing to God is not going to do its work here because the community of inquirers is not likely to share the same religious opinions (the question of the existence of God cannot be authoritatively settled). And this is exactly when there is a danger that the conversation will cease. As mentioned above, Rorty does not act as an enemy of religion; according to him, there are some kinds of religiosity that actually contribute to democratic societies' well-being. So, again, it is not due to metaphysical criteria that Rorty

¹² It should be underlined that the definition of relativism presented here by Rorty is in full accordance with one of the most influential ones, presented earlier in his career – see: „'Relativism' is the view that every belief on a certain topic, or perhaps about any topic, is as good as every other. No one holds this position ... So the real issue is not between people who think one view as good as another and people who do not. It is between those who think our culture, or purpose, or institutions cannot be supported except conversationally, and people who still hope for other sorts of support.” In: Rorty, R.: *Consequences of Pragmatism*, Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1982, pp. 166-167.

¹³ Cf. Smith, N. H.: „Rorty on Religion and Hope”, *Inquiry*, 48, 2005, p. 80.

wants to challenge religion but rather on the background of their „cultural desirability.“ The existence of certain forms of religion is perfectly justifiable so long as it does not interfere with political life of a society (anticlericalism¹⁴). From Rorty’s perspective, then, religion is to be taken as just another worldview competing for success in the free market of ideas – if it wins out eventually – so much better for it. In this sense, Rorty presents himself as a downright utilitarian. The only political and social ideas worth their salt in the life of society are those that contribute to the increase of total human happiness.

As well as other currents of moral philosophy, also utilitarianism (especially when related to pragmatist philosophy¹⁵) has got some problematic issues. On the other hand, if we try to see Rorty’s utilitarianism in the context of his whole philosophy, it makes a perfectly good sense. If there are no metaphysical groundings for any of our moral judgments then the only reasonable escape from the threat of all-devouring blunt relativism is the contention that in absence of the Absolute the best way of organizing our lives is a mutual and constant effort to make our lives happier than before. The key competence in our strives of achieving this goal is inclusivity; it is the matter of what Peter Singer calls „enlarging the circle of the ‚we‘ – in other words, enlarging the circle of people whom we think of as „one of us“ (p. 15).

As we saw earlier, Rorty’s main problem with religion is not of the same (at times a little superficial) nature as that of Daniel Dennett or Richard Dawkins, for instance. Rorty, although being religiously unmusical, displays quite an accomplished understanding of many aspects of

religious experience.¹⁶ In his opinion, religion as a phenomenon, constitutes a part of human character that is hardly eliminable. After all, for him, elimination of religious belief is not even desirable – as well as Dewey, he would prefer its transformation and reconstruction. Going back to the difference between Rorty and thinkers like Dawkins we see that it is not religion as such but rather its metaphysical and foundational form that could be seen as a source of trouble in political life of our society. From this point of view, the anti-foundationalist and anti-platonic philosophy of Richard Rorty may well be perceived as a neo-pragmatist perspective out of which a new and fruitful discourse on religion could blossom. I guess that this is the point where the „weak thought“ of religious thinkers like Gabriel Vahanian, Gianni Vattimo or John D. Caputo comes into play.

The crucial question of our post-secular era, according to these intellectuals, is the following: Is religious belief possible after the proclaimed death of God in the work of Nietzsche, Heidegger and others? At first glance we might say that if we take seriously Nietzsche’s critique of religion (Christianity, to be more specific) there seems to be almost no option of how to sincerely restore the notion of belief in God. Thinkers like the ones mentioned above, however, read Nietzsche in a very different manner. From their point of view, through unmasking human, all-too-human foundations of Christian morality and theology, Nietzsche did Christianity an incredibly useful service at least in two ways: a) in showing that a great deal of our moral judgments might be an outcome of bilious resentment rather than of saintly intentions of following God’s word he has challenged Christians towards more authentic and humble picture of their moral lives; b) it is due to Nietzsche’s destructive critique of its metaphysical foundations that Christianity can finally throw off the burden of defending its existence in the dialogue with science and the rest of the culture. By the light of ideas of Nietzsche, Heidegger or Derrida the

¹⁴ Cf. Rorty, R.: „Anticlericalism and Atheism“ in: Zabala, S. (ed.): *The Future of Religion*, New York: Columbia University Press, 2005, p. 33.

¹⁵ To learn more on this subject see for instance: Pappas, G. F.: *John Dewey’s Ethics: Democracy as Experience*, Indianapolis: Indiana University Press, 2008, pp. 99-101.

¹⁶ Cf. Rorty, R.: *Philosophy and Social Hope*, Hardmondsworth: Penguin Books, 1999, pp. 151-153.

strong God of metaphysics seems to be dead for good. We can no longer think of God as an Ultimate Being waiting behind the curtain of history for his „time of revenge“ to come. The representatives of weak theology find such militant conceptions of religion as childish, resentful and what is worse – violent and dangerous forms of discourse.

In contrast to traditional „strong“ notions of religion understanding God as an Ultimate Force scholars like Vattimo or Caputo propose to view God rather as a weak force characterized by compassion, empathy and power of powerlessness. Authentic religiousness does not have much to do with naive escapism and triumphalism of fundamentalist Christianity but on the contrary with a complex moral shift of human community as a whole. What does, after all, have Jesus of Nazareth on the cross (being the central symbol of Christianity) have in common with the notion of God as an all-powerful being? Is it not the case that the crucifixion of God should actually change our perspective on him? In fact, thinkers like Vattimo hold that it should. In this context Vattimo reformulates the key notion of self-emptying of God – *kénōsis* (gr. *κένωσις*) of Paul of Tarsus. Vattimo views the self-emptying and self-abasing of God as a special moment of human history when God assigned all his power to human beings. The death of God on the cross, then, should be rather interpreted as a radical social appeal and also God’s ultimate condemnation of suffering of the innocent. Moreover, it may be viewed as a historical reference to all the victims of an unjust punishment and cruelty challenging us not to remain indifferent to any of them.

According to Richard Rorty, the worst thing we can do to other beings is cruelty¹⁷ or indifference to it: „*In my utopia, human solidarity would be seen nor as a fact to be recognized by clearing away ‚prejudice‘ or burrowing*

down to previously hidden depths but, rather, as a goal to be achieved. It is to be achieved not by inquiry but by imagination, the imaginative ability to see strange people as fellow sufferers. Solidarity is not discovered by reflection but created. It is created by increasing our sensitivity to the particular details of the pain and humiliation of other, unfamiliar sorts of people.“¹⁸ In this respect we can see how close Rorty’s philosophy can find itself to some postmodern conceptions of Christianity. If we stop perceiving God in the metaphysical terms we will discover a new field of experience both social and individual. Actually, if we try to conceive of religious faith in radically existential, non-cognitive terms as a belief without knowledge we are likely to return to the notion of religion characteristic of the biblical and pre-philosophical era.¹⁹

Taking up this form of Rortyan discourse we can start to speak of the movement called „edifying theology.“²⁰ This intellectual enterprise neither tries to prove the existence of God by coming up with irrefutable logical constructions nor does it claim to be the only possessor of the Truth. It does not rebuke other forms of religious discourse as long as their project of increasing human happiness leads to the same goal. However, it realizes that we cannot step outside our own skin and tradition; thus, it builds its stories on the background of the Christian tradition out of which our cultural values stem. In this sense, edifying theology is ethnocentric for it believes that the Christian tradition of faith, love and hope, once freed from metaphysics, provides probably

¹⁸ Rorty, R.: *Contingency, Irony, and Solidarity*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1989, p. xvi.

¹⁹ „... this lack of a robust metaphysical theology was no impediment to faith and religion; it was a characteristic of biblical faith, both Hebrew and Christian. The metaphysical theology had come later when Christianity, having become the established religion of the Roman Empire, had come to terms with Hellenistic learning, a program that had first gotten off the ground with Philo Judaeus back in first-century CE Alexandria.“ Caputo, J. D.: *On Religion*. New York: Routledge, 2001, pp. 57-58.

²⁰ Cf. Dann, G. E.: *After Rorty: The Possibilities for Ethics and Religious Belief*, New York: Continuum, 2006, pp. 160-163.

¹⁷ For Rorty’s extensive analysis of this issue see: Rorty, R.: *Contingency, Irony, and Solidarity*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1989, pp. 141-189.

the best democratic tools of improving human condition.

I am convinced that the philosophy of Richard Rorty has

shown us new horizons in thinking about religious belief.

It is also owing to him that we can speak about religion

in the age that has come after the „death of God.“ Let us

never forget to conduct our discussions on religion in the

edifying manner.