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Rorty as a Public Intellectual

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For What Has Already Been Given: Religion and the Rorty Papers

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“Time Will Tell But Epistemology Won’t”

Celebrating the Rorty Archive Collection at UCI

May 14, 2010

One of Rorty’s last publications is an afterword he contributed to an updated edition of the 1907 classic *Christianity and the Social Crisis* written by the Social Gospel giant, Walter Rauschenbusch, who was Rorty’s maternal grandfather. In it, Rorty in his characteristic sweeping narrative style writes, “One can imagine a twentieth century in which the two World Wars and the Great Depression were avoided, the Bolshevik Revolution collapsed, and social democrats like Eugene Debs and Jean Jaures were elected to high office,” a century in which “Decolonization and the entrance of India and China on the international stage could [...] have taken place against the background of a consensus, in the West, that building a global egalitarian society was a moral obligation.” Rorty writes all this could have happened *if* a Social Gospel Christianity, rather than Marxism, inspired radical socio-political change. “With a bit more luck,” Rorty continues, his grandfather’s “dream could have come true [...] But our luck was bad, and Christianity has probably missed its chance. The likelihood that religion will play a significant role in the struggle for justice seems smaller now than at any time since *Christianity and the Social Crisis* was published,” says Richard Rorty.

Rorty was an atheist, and sometimes, depending on the rhetorical situation, described himself as a militant one. His influence on philosophy and critical theory is well known. Less often mentioned is his impact on theological seminaries and divinity schools. In *Democracy and*

Tradition (2004) Jeffrey Stout, a former colleague at Princeton, argues that the rise of anti-liberal movements such as John Milbank's Radical Orthodoxy, as well as the New Traditionalism of Alasdair MacIntyre and Stanley Hauerwas has coincided with the strong influence of John Rawls and Richard Rorty these last thirty years. When Stout told Rorty that these figures have been gaining influence over Walter Rauschenbusch and Reinhold Niebuhr, Rorty wrote elsewhere in 2003 that he feared for the republic.

It was at Fuller Seminary in Pasadena that I first came across Rorty's writings. I was warned by some of my more, shall we say, "anxious" seminarians to beware of the secular humanism of Rawls and Rorty, and instead seek the light through MacIntyre, Hauerwas, and especially Karl Barth. By then, I had already come under the influence of two very different religious camps that made me wary of these cautionary tales. One was the influence of Rorty's own students, the religious pragmatists Cornel West and Jeffrey Stout at Princeton, and the other was the neo-Calvinist tradition perhaps most visibly advocated by Nicholas Wolterstorff at Yale and Mark Noll at Notre Dame. Rorty, I knew, was in conversation with both groups; in fact, it was Wolterstorff and Stout who got Rorty to reconsider his earlier stance against religion in the public sphere and clarify that his qualms were not with religious arguments in the public as such, but with "ecclesiastical institutions." I knew they were all in conversation, but I didn't know about what apart from their publications. I wanted to know how you go from Walter Rauschenbusch to Rorty to West, Stout, and others who are respectfully working to prove Rorty wrong about today's role of religion in the struggle for justice.

As a result of the archive, the letters Rorty wrote to or about these figures have given me a glimpse into their relationships. Some of them are honest critiques of their work, while most others reveal Rorty as a great mentor and friend even to those who disagreed strongly with his

views on religion. While I don't have time to share the many remarkable letters that went back and forth, I did bring one he wrote to Cornel West in 1982:

Thanks very much for the review of my book. I blushed at the compliments, though it was nice to think of myself as hoeing the same row as my grandfather. I think that the only difference between us is that you know what it would be like to have a better society than ours and I don't. I just feel thoroughly confused on how anything might be changed without making everything worse, and thus take refuge in an apolitical insouciance.

I think it's worth making explicit that Rorty does not say he wishes he could believe what West knows. The liberal atheist-ironist could believe in no such thing, as his subsequent review of West's genealogy of pragmatism confirms. Nevertheless, twenty-five years after this letter, Rorty apparently sent an email to Stout, only "a few months before his death, saying that while he didn't wish he were back at Princeton, he did wish that he could be at the same university where Cornel West and [Jeff Stout] were teaching [their] graduate seminar on Christianity and democracy, so that he could join in." In the piece recalling this email from Rorty, Stout writes,

"His only demand [...] would be that [...] his [...] grandfather [...] be included on the reading list. When I read aloud that e-mail to Cornel, he cried, and so did I. It would be fair to say that Cornel strives to practice the social gospel that Rauschenbusch preached, whereas Dick followed Dewey in trying to secularize it."

As a self-described non-Christian Christian philosopher who subscribes to a kind of Emersonian religiosity, Stout might be said to be somewhere between West and Rorty. The born-digital files that might include such emails end at 2003, so I don't have access to it. But for a young graduate student who is still finding his place somewhere along this spectrum, I'm hoping that email will be available at some point in the future, though I'm grateful for what has already been given.