At first glance, neo-pragmatism seems a rather unlikely candidate for a religious “turn,” if only because its most illustrious proponents—among them Richard Poirier, Barbara Herrnstein-Smith, Stanley Fish, Walter Benn Michaels, and Richard Rorty—have been denounced as cultural relativists. Hence our surprise when we see someone like Stanley Fish—arch-debunker of the metaphysics of the text—defend the anti-liberal positions of religious fundamentalists and suggest that arguments based on religious belief should no longer be kept out of the public square (Fish, 1999 and “University”), or when Cornel West—advocate of a cultural politics of radical difference—emphasizes the Baptist Christian roots of his “prophetic pragmatism,” (359) or, better still, when Richard Rorty—who rereads Dewey and James in terms of Nietzsche, Heidegger, and Freud—declares that he wants to “start back-pedaling” on his more aggressively secular statements and concede that neopragmatism is indeed compatible with religious faith, recanting on his earlier view that religious believers should “leave their religion at home when discussing political questions in public” (Rorty 2003, 141). Yet it seems hasty to interpret these positions as conservative “turns” (or even religious conversions, as implied in Jason Boffetti’s absurdly titled recent essay “How Richard Rorty Found Religion”). For one thing, the connection between knowledge and religion has always been a core interest of classic pragmatism, perhaps since William James’s foundational *Varieties of Religious Experience* of 1902.\(^1\) For another, Rorty’s willingness to reevaluate his views may well be taken to signify a more general trend, in recent cultural theory, to reconsider the location of religious experience in contemporary culture.

At some level this trend might have to do with the emergence of fundamentalism—Lawrence Buell quipped recently that “US literary studies” may be “in danger of being ‘left behind,’” quite “like the earthlings stranded after the Rapture” in the best-selling *Left Behind* series of evangelical novels, because the secular humanism that defines the discipline may render it “seriously underprepared for a world in

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\(^1\) This core interest has remained central to the philosophical and theological trajectories of the neopragmatist revival. For a summary, see Gunn.
which it is increasingly obvious that religious convictions,” both in the Muslim world and the US, “can subsume secular interests as easily as vice-versa” (32-33). But the growing consensus that religion deserves more serious consideration also accords with recent shifts in intellectual tastes regarding which sort of cultural self-diagnosis currently seems cutting edge. At a time when the later work of Jacques Derrida and Slavoj Žižek features on theology syllabi, cultural critics have become impatient with classic theories of modernity that conceive of progress as a linear extension of rationality towards a completely “disenchanted” world where religious practice seems a collective neurosis best psychoanalyzed out of the collective mind. These theories have lost their persuasiveness with the increasing critical interest in the processes of re-enchantment through which modernizing societies relocate the numinous to new objects and practices. Buell speaks of a greater willingness to view “the ‘secular’ sphere [a]s suffused by the religious” rather than dismissing religious motives from the start as “nothing more than a cover for something else, e.g. economic self-interest, social conformity, etc.” (36). This makes religious pathos less a cultural embarrassment than an inevitable aspect of cultural world-making that merits a degree of rehabilitation in the face of modernist secularization fantasies. Hartmut Böhme recently proposed such a rehabilitation arguing that in order to appreciate the cultural relevance of fetishism we must disconnect it from its associations with flawed religion and primitive cult (22-25, 34, 488).

Böhme’s approach reflects a growing unease with the opposition between secular rationalists able to shake off their beliefs on the basis of fact-based knowledge, and religious believers caught in an irrationalist prisonhouse of faith. This opposition disregards the extent to which

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2 For the contact zones of radical theology and deconstructionist and Lacanian cultural theory, see Caputo, Mark Taylor, Winquist, Žižek (2000, 2006), Nancy.
3 The classic psychoanalytic statements are in Freud’s “Moses and Monotheism” (1934-8), and “The Future of an Illusion” (1927). For a more recent version of Weber’s disenchantment thesis, see Habermas (1987) on how modernity replaces the “authority of the sacred” by communicative reason, through a process of “linguistification” that disempowers the religious domain in favor of “criticizable validity claims” (II: 77), although Habermas’s later essays (2002, 2005) participate in the recent tendency to revaluate the religious.
4 Buell’s example is the methodology of “lived religion,” represented by Hall’s edited collection, Lived Religion in America whose view of religion as a social practice is influenced by Bourdieu.
5 On the current destabilization of the secular/religious distinction in literary studies, see Kaufmann. Kaufmann suggests that recent challenges to the “secularization narrative”—such as Asad’s important Formations of the Secular: Christianity, Islam, Modernity—proceed from “two linked pairs of assertions: (IA) There is no idea, person, experience, text, institution, or historical period that could be categorized as essentially, inherently, or exclusively secular or religious; (IB) Despite this first claim, we nevertheless act as if there is a meaningful difference between the secular and the religious; (IIA) Following the claims of (I), varying discursive contexts construct functionally meaningful differences between the two terms with differing motivations and consequences; what counts as ‘religious’ at one time and place may count as ‘secular’ in another; (IIIB) Not only does the context help to define the two terms, but the difference between the two terms also helps to establish the acceptable boundaries of a given discursive context” (608-9).
knowledge and beliefs interpenetrate each other. It overestimates people’s ability to dissociate themselves from their deepest convictions as much as it underestimates their capacity to participate seriously in religious practices with a certain level of detachment.\(^6\)

In what follows, I will explore how this contemporary reconfiguration of religious experience manifests itself in recent neopragmatist thought. I will begin by looking at how Richard Rorty (following William James and John Dewey) mediates secular notions of progress with the quasi-religious framework of what I will call the “pragmatist sublime.” I will then discuss how the pragmatist sublime affects America’s so-called “civil religion”—how it contributes to a sacralization of political discourse, at the same time as it seeks to ground religion in visions of social utopia. Finally, I will explore pragmatist views on how religion should figure in the public square, exemplified by Rorty’s and Stanley Fish’s questioning of the liberal “wall of separation” between the church and state.

Pragmatism and Secularization

In Richard Rorty’s work, the pragmatist road to social progress is often described in terms of a “radicalization of Enlightenment secularism” (Smith 79). Drawing from Blumenberg’s *Legitimität der Neuzeit*, Rorty has argued that the transition from an Age of Faith to an Age of Reason was merely a tentative secularization. Modern positivist science simply displaced the category of the divine onto notions of objective scientific truth, just as the romantic turn to the subject in the eighteenth- and nineteenth centuries projected divinity onto an inner nature, a deeper human self that could then become a new object of worship. In Rorty’s formulation: “The very idea that the world or the self has an intrinsic nature—one which the physicist or the poet may have glimpsed—is a remnant of the idea that the world is a divine creation” (Rorty 1989, 21). Thus, Rorty’s *Contingency, Irony, and Solidarity* (1989) defines the neopragmatist project as the attempt to “de-divinize” the world more thoroughly, towards “the point where we no longer worship anything, where we treat nothing as a quasi-divinity, where we treat everything—our language, our conscience, our community—as a product of time or chance” (21-2, Rorty’s emphases).

\(^6\) The idea of irrational faith (as it is often associated with the Muslim world, medieval Christianity or today’s millenarian fundamentalism in the US) presupposes a “naivety” that seems less an adequate description of believers than a strategic form of othering. Pfaller has recently discussed this problem, exploring the function of the “Illusion of the Others” as a tool for identity construction.
What would such a secularized culture be like? In his introduction to *Consequences of Pragmatism* (1982), Rorty invokes the concept of a “post-philosophical” culture, by which he means a culture that has relinquished the philosophical quest for epistemological foundations that provide non-contingent criteria for cognitive, moral or aesthetic knowledge. The skeptical questioning of objective truth-claims is a staple of post-romantic thought, but Rorty’s contextualism (or non-foundationalism) is rigorous enough to have been perceived (by his detractors) as an irresponsible neo-Nietzschean form of relativism. Rorty concedes that a post-philosophical culture may not be easy to live: “The most powerful reason for thinking that no such culture is possible,” he says, “is that seeing all criteria as no more than temporary resting places, constructed by a community to facilitate its inquiries, seems morally humiliating.” For it implies that when the secret police come, when the torturers violate the innocent, there is nothing to be said to them of the form “There is something within you which you are betraying. Though you embody the practices of a totalitarian society which will endure forever, there is something beyond those practices which condemns you.” This thought is hard to live with, [and it] brings out what ties Dewey and Foucault, James and Nietzsche, together—the sense that there is nothing deep down inside us except what we have put there ourselves, no criterion we have not created in the course of creating a practice, no standard of rationality that is not an appeal to such a criterion, no rigorous argumentation that is not obedience to our own conventions. [Such a culture], then, would be one in which men and women felt themselves alone, merely finite, with no links to something Beyond. (Rorty 1982, xlii)

In the existentialist terms with which Rorty envisions a completely de-divinized culture, the subject faces a world that does not speak, or at least not in a transcendental language, and this leaves an awe-inspiring moral and ethical void that is both empowering and humiliating, empowering because it implies radical freedom, humiliating because it provides no non-contingent reasons to believe that history is going to turn out well. Rorty suggests, then, that there are two options for dealing with this predicament: the more depressive one consists in creating visions of cultural and social dystopia (Rorty has accused Foucault and the American left of going down that road [Rorty, *Achieving our Country*]); the more optimististic option, which Rorty deems continuous with the pragmatist tradition, combines the existentialist recognition of the

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7 Here Rorty refers to Sartre’s *L’existentialisme est un humanisme* and quotes the following passage: “Tomorrow, after my death, certain people may decide to establish fascism, and the others may be cowardly or miserable enough to let them get away with it. At that moment, fascism will be the truth of man, and so much the worse for us. In reality, things will be as much as man has decided they are” (xlii).
absence of transcendental foundations with a faith in the redemptive power of the democratic process and its capacity to generate solidarity. I would like to call this faith a “pragmatist sublime” because it invokes a social utopia that eludes “current conceptual resources” (Smith 94), as it refers to possible worlds that are as yet unimaginable or unthinkable. In Rorty’s formulation, therefore, pragmatist concepts of social solidarity revolve around an “unjustifiable hope” (Rorty 1982, 208) that is as yet irrational—if it were rational (i.e. if it cohered with the conceptual horizon of our present standpoint) it would not be based on unjustifiable belief but on reasonable prediction, comparable indeed to the mechanical teleological constructs of social utopia associated with traditional Marxism. The point about unjustifiable hope is that it is closer to religious faith than argumentative reason. As Rorty puts it in 1999:

The kind of religious faith [suggested by pragmatism is] a faith in the future possibilities of moral humans, a faith which is hard to distinguish from love for, and hope for, the human community. I shall call this fuzzy overlap of faith, hope, and love “romance.” Romance, in this sense, may crystallize around a trade union as easily as around a congregation, around a novel as easily as around a sacrament, around a God as easily as around a child. (160-161)⁹

Hence a de-divinized culture is not necessarily a culture without religion but rather a culture without religion based on what Rorty calls Platonism, the belief in a transcendental spiritual foundation external to the contingencies of historical cultures. Rorty deems Platonism an undesirable type of religiosity (resulting from “the infantile need for security, the childish hope of escaping from time and chance”) that should be distinguished from what he considers a more legitimate “religious impulse” as “the impulse to stand in awe of something greater than oneself” (Rorty, Achieving our Country 17-18).

This distinction becomes clearer if we consider William James’s Varieties of Religious Experience, a foundational working out of pragmatism’s religious interests. James’s treatise is a defense of the religious against the claim that in an age of positivist science, religion has become superfluous, even unethical. But his argument shifts between pragmatist and Platonist accounts of religiosity, between emphasizing the beneficial effects of religious experience and grounding the “content of

⁸ This theoretical move has affinities to the deconstructionist interest in the “messianic” and the instable boundaries between faith and knowledge. See Derrida’s meditation on this opposition in “Faith and Knowledge: The Two Sources of Religion at the Limits of Reason Alone.” On Derrida’s essay, see also Terada (2007), and Sherwood/Hart (2004).

⁹ What makes this utopian hope a faith rather than a traditional political belief is that it is “carries us beyond argument, because beyond presently used language” (161). This is why Rorty stresses the similarity between religious faith and “being in love with another human being.” Love resembles faith in that it can provide an important redemptive force in our lives although it “is often not capable of being spelled out into beliefs about the character or the actions [of beloved people]” (158).
religious experience” “in the fact that the conscious person is continuous with a wider self from which saving experiences come” (460, emphasis in the original). This formulation recalls a more traditional religious sensibility, presenting religious experience as a form of knowledge that rational science tends to miss (cf. Kitcher). Thus, the “saving experiences” encountered by mystics and other religious virtuosi that James discusses at great length would be considered empirical evidence of a supernatural “wider self.” In Rorty’s view, this marks the point where James deals with his existentialist anxieties by turning from pragmatism to natural theology, Bergsonian metaphysics, and Arnoldian or Emersonian notions of spiritual presence (cf. Rorty, 2004, 91). In order to detach James’s pragmatist project from Platonic accounts of religious presences one would have to pull his idea of “a wider self through which saving experiences come” into the direction of John Dewey, who in his Terry lectures on Common Faith in 1934 describes the religious attitude as “the sense of awe” that rests “upon a sense of human nature as a coöperating part of a larger whole” (25). Neither a supernatural nor a transcendental entity, this “larger whole” depends on social practice and historical development (whatever we imagine as an ideal is “ideal only in contrast to our present estate”[42]). Following Dewey, Rorty redefines God as “all the various sublimities human beings come to see through the eyes that they themselves create” (Rorty, “Pragmatism as Romantic Polytheism” 34).

The pragmatist sublime participates in the discursive shifts connected to modern transformations of religious belief and practice to which most contemporary narratives of (de)secularization refer. As Charles Taylor pointed out recently, James’s Varieties reflects the subjectivization and individualization of religious experience that begins with sixteenth-century forms of denominationalism and culminates in today’s privatization of religious practice. While in earlier periods church membership was “co-extensive with society” (except for “tolerated outsiders” and “heretics”), denominationalism connected worshippers “to a broader, more elusive ‘church’” in which membership was increasingly considered a matter of choice and authenticity (characterized by a sense that the religion I join “must speak to me”). A further step towards subjectivization can be seen in late-eighteenth-century notions of

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10 Dewey reinterprets “the word ‘God’” in terms of communitarian relationality, as “the ideal ends that at a given time and place one acknowledges as having authority over [one’s] volition and emotion, the values to which one is supremely devoted, as far as these ends, through imagination, take on unity” and possess the force of “arousing us to desire and actions” (42). Dewey’s version of the pragmatist sublime refers to “the mysterious totality of being the imagination calls the universe,” and “the community of causes and consequences in which we, together with those not born, are enmeshed” (85). On this point see Rorty’s “Some Inconsistencies,” 9, and Truth and Progress, 196.
religiosity as “[d]eeply felt personal insight” (Taylor 2002, 93-4, 100). The romantic idea that religion consists mainly of an individual “sense and taste for the Infinite” (66), as Schleiermacher put it in 1799, further discredited religious creeds and institutionalized forms of worship. James’s debts to this sort of romantic religiosity can be seen in his interest in technologies of introversion that enable individual seekers to reach deep spiritual resources irreducible to scriptural dogmas. *Varieties* could be considered an early self-help manual anticipating the post-WWII shift from traditional forms of worship based on church membership to what Robert Wuthnow has called “a new spirituality of seeking” (3).

The image of the self-help manual runs the risk of trivializing James’ *Varieties*, but it helps us to identify two separate aspects of modern secularization in James. It reflects the modern shift from a theocentric public religion to a more diffuse rhetoric of the sublime, suited to private spiritual needs. While this shift has been characterized as an erosion of religious sensibility, it in fact often revolves around anti-clerical attitudes whose opposition to religious institutions does not entail anti-Platonic disenchantment. But another aspect typical of the religious self-help manual, the tendency to turn the religious dimension into a question of expediency, implies a stronger secularism. It disconnects the religious quest from the idea of an external spiritual presence by substituting Platonic questions of religious authenticity (“how do I connect with the One?”) with pragmatic queries about utility (“what can a religion do for me?”). James’s openness to both utilitarian and Platonic concepts of religious experience aligns his *Varieties* with the modern tendency to link spiritual and material manifestations in a symbolic relationship of mutual reinforcement (as in Max Weber’s reading of the Protestant work ethic). Thus, James has been seen as responding to an

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11 Taylor divides the process of subjectivization into three periods that he designates with variations on the term “Durkheimian,” following Emile Durkheim’s definition of religion as a collective phenomenon, where sacred and social spaces are closely tied together. Accordingly Taylor defines as “paleo-Durkheimian” the period of unchallenged Catholicism where “people could easily feel that they had to obey the command to abandon their own religious instincts, because these, being at variance with orthodoxy, must be heretical or at least inferior.” He then labels the denominationalist period “neo-Durkheimian,” since people felt “that their choice had to conform to the overall framework of the ‘church’ or favored nation,” although choice and intensity of personal feeling became increasingly important. In today’s “post-Durkheimian age,” where romantic views have become popular phenomena, “many people are uncomprehending in face of the demand to conform. Just as in the neo-Durkheimian world, joining a church you don’t believe in seems not just wrong but absurd, contradictory, so in the post-Durkheimian age seems the idea of adhering to a spirituality that doesn’t present itself as your path, the one that moves and inspires you. […] The injunction is, in the words of a speaker at a New Age festival: ‘Only accept what rings true to your own inner Self’” (100-1). The point of Taylor’s analysis is that the subjectification of religiosity is not as self-evident as it seems. It has an intellectual and institutional history that is worth considering, especially in order to understand James’ tendency to naturalize his liberalist and individualist bias, and his consequent inability to appreciate communitarian aspects of religious life more typical of Catholic traditions (23-4). Taylor has fleshed out his thesis recently in *A Secular Age* (2007).
emerging Horatio Algerization of religious experience that views the divine—in Peter Sloterdijk’s caricature—as “an inner Texas” whose “deep energies” can be “mined” for “fuel” to power our “life-motors,” and that regards religious practices as tools to be tried out and discarded if they fail to produce suitable results (28ff., my translation). Dewey and Rorty would agree with the tool-box image, but reject the metaphor of spiritual oil fields. In their social religion, sublimity does not emerge from a spiritual source (as in the natural sublime) or from a sense of human autonomy (as in the Kantian sublime) but from visions of yet unimaginable futures.¹²

Pragmatism and/as Civil Religion

Taylor reminds us that what Robert Bellah called the American “civil religion” has always included both a religious and a humanist variant (these now occupy opposite sides in the present US disputes between religious and secular political groups). The more religious interpretation of the Declaration of Independence is based on the idea of providential design, as reflected in the appeal to “the Laws of Nature and of Nature’s God,” in the opening of Jefferson’s document. From the viewpoint both of traditional theism and Jeffersonian Deism, these laws are true because they are God’s laws, and the pursuit of happiness of rights-bearing American citizens fulfills a providential purpose (the millennialist rhetoric of today’s political speeches often resonates with this idea). The humanist interpretation of America’s founding moment, on the other hand, constructs a civil religion using a strictly secular terminology, but retains the idea of millenarian purpose: the only difference is that now the sense of American mission is not grounded in the providence of a monotheistic God, but “in nature alone, or in some concept of civilization, or even in supposedly unchallengeable a priori principles” (Taylor 2002, 69-70). However, from Rorty’s and Dewey’s pragmatist points of view, both versions of the American creed are flawed, either because they are too religious in a Platonic sense or not religious enough in the sense of the pragmatist sublime. The theist or Deist narrative lacks a metaphysic of **democracy**, because it ties America’s mission to the idea of an anterior supernatural being; the secular narrative lacks a metaphysic

¹² For instance, when people “shudder with awe” upon realizing that “there is more to this life than they ever imagined” (Rorty, Achieving Our Country, 132-3). Note the similarities between Rorty’s pragmatist sublime and the Derridean concepts of the “undeconstructible” and the “messianic” potential of future justice. See also Nancy’s emphasis on hope in his Dis-Enclosure: The Deconstruction of Christianity (2008).
of democracy, for its reference to nature or principle leaves no room for a messianic sense of radical change.\textsuperscript{13}

By blurring the border between religion and politics, the pragmatist sublime transforms both domains, politicizing religion while sacralizing social practice. This double move has made pragmatist rhetoric controversial both for philosophers of religion and for political scientists. The main point of criticism against Dewey’s and Rorty’s attempts to reinterpret the divine as a process tied to social practice is that a religion refusing to “posit some transcendence of time and chance […] will be difficult to recognize as religion at all,” because it is doubtful “whether human co-operative efforts and achievements are as capable of inspiring awe as the traditional objects of religious inspiration: nature or God” (Smith 89-90).\textsuperscript{14} On the other hand, the pragmatist sublime can be said to fit Robert Wuthnow’s characterization of the “new spirituality of seeking” based on “fleeting glimpses of the sacred” and “partial knowledge and practical wisdom” rather than the coherent “metaphysical” generic to the traditional “spirituality of inhabiting sacred places” (3).

Further questions have been raised on the intrusion of religious pathos into the political domain. The main objection to the sacralization of social practice, as implied in the “unjustifiable hope” of social utopia, is that it opens political discourse to “celebrationist” and “triumphalist” readings of “American futurity” (Gunn 419) that can cause unease—the sort of unease we may feel with regard to the Whitmanian faith in, as Kenneth Rexroth puts it, the “realization of the American Dream as an apocalypse, as an eschatological event which would give the life of man its ultimate significance’” (qtd. in Rorty, \textit{Achieving Our Country} 16). One wonders whether this does not align the pragmatist sublime with socio-religious concepts of redeemer nation or contemporary Whig-histories of globalization.\textsuperscript{15} On the other hand, pragmatists would surely rejoin that

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\textsuperscript{13} See Dewey’s description of democracy as “neither a form of government nor a social expediency, but a metaphysic of the relation between man and his experience in nature” (1978, 6: 135; qtd. in Rorty, \textit{Achieving Our Country} 18).

\textsuperscript{14} See also Fish, \textit{The Trouble with Principle} 297; and Gunn, “Religion and the Recent Revival of Pragmatism” 404-17.

\textsuperscript{15} In his weaker moments, Rorty has indeed a tendency to phrase his visions of human history in narratives of progress that sound surprisingly enthusiastic (given Rorty’s consistent support of left-leaning social policy) in the way they present the accumulation of wealth as the key to human solidarity. Consider, for instance, how he explains the emergence of secularization from economic prosperity: “In past ages of the world, things were so bad that ‘a reason to believe […]’ was hard to get except by looking to a power not ourselves. In those days, there was little choice but to sacrifice the intellect in order to grasp hold of the premises of practical syllogisms—premises concerning the after-death consequences of baptism, pilgrimage or participation in holy wars […]. But things are different now, because of human beings’ gradual success in making their lives, and their world, less wretched […]—if only in those lucky parts of the world where wealth, leisure, literacy and democracy have worked together to prolong our lives and fill our libraries. Now the things of this world are, for some lucky people, so welcome that they do not have to look beyond nature to the supernatural, and beyond life to an afterlife, but only beyond the human past to the human future” (\textit{Philosophy and Social Hope}
the problem with celebrating neo-liberal visions of globalization using the rhetoric of the sublime is not the sacralization of political discourse but the sacralization of an undesirable political discourse. Arguably, complaints about a “return” of the sublime to a secular domain only make sense if one assumes that it is possible to separate faith-based metaphors from fact-based literal descriptions. Rorty’s Davidsonian view of metaphor as world-disclosure would contest that such a separation is viable. Moreover, if, as Hartmut Böhme has argued, contemporary culture inevitably relies on holy rituals, transitional objects and institutionalized technologies of transcendence that cut across the religion/politics divide, we should debate not the celebrationist aspects of political rhetoric but the political issues underlying any kind of rhetoric, religious or secular.

Pragmatism and the Liberal Wall of Separation

The tendency to blur the borders between the religious and political domains places pragmatism at cross-purposes with liberalism, and specifically with the liberal premises of the secular version of America’s civil religion. The Jeffersonian “wall of separation” between church and state rests on Enlightenment distinctions between faith and knowledge as well as the sacred and the secular: distinctions crucial to the ethic of tolerance and neutrality that underlies the idea of liberal government. Classic liberal theory since John Locke is aware that unqualified tolerance is impossible, that it is indeed difficult to create political consensus without barring certain forms of dissent. But if liberal theory can recognize the need to exclude dissenting voices (and use the “wall of separation” as an obvious method of exclusion) and still present itself as open-minded and tolerant, it is because it suggests that it is possible to create mechanisms of elimination that are procedural and thus virtually content-blind. The ethic of tolerance is consequently predicated on the creation of gate-keeping mechanisms able to shield the public square from discourses that either lack public relevance or reasonable common sense. The implication is that gate-keeping decisions can be made based on the genre of a discourse prior to any consideration of its propositional content: before you begin to look at the meaning and substance of a discourse...
political demand, you determine what type of utterance it is (private belief or public knowledge).^{17}

The pragmatist objection can be seen in Stanley Fish’s critique of what he considers “tenet[s] of liberal enlightenment faith,” the assumption that belief and knowledge are distinct and separable[.] that even if you do not embrace a point of view, you can still understand it […] [and that] an open mind, a mind ready at any moment to jettison even its most cherished convictions, is the very definition of “reasonable.” (Fish 1999, 247-48)^{18}

Fish contests this cognitive model by saying that “the difference between a believer and a non-believer is not that one reasons and the other doesn’t but that one reasons from a first premise the other denies” (263). Fish’s rejection of the rational/irrational opposition leads him to contend that “religion as a force motivating action [can] no longer be sequestered in the private sphere, where the First Amendment, as read in the light of John Locke and Thomas Jefferson, had seemed to place it” (Fish, “University,” n.p.),^{19} and that religious fundamentalists rejecting mainstream education for their children must be taken seriously.^{20}

Fish’s position on fundamentalism seems unusual for today’s left-leaning academics, but it is important to note that the pragmatist contestation of the wall of separation goes both ways: while it can be seen as a promotion of religious discourse, allowing it to reenter the political domain from whence the liberal faith had banned it, it is also tantamount to a demotion, because religious discourse is allowed into the political domain only after it has surrendered its claims to tolerance. Another way of putting this point is to say that religion enters the political domain only after it has been reduced to cultural politics (c.f. Rorty 2002), and forced to suffer the indignity of having to compete for political validity, since

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^{17} Rorty’s work has drawn a great deal of hostile critical attention because of its public/private split. But in contrast to classic liberal theory, Rorty views the public-private dichotomy in pragmatic rather than absolute terms, not as a boundary between genres of utterances or types of social being, but as shifting functions of social practice. On this point, see my “The Uses of Metaphor” 149-51.

^{18} Fish argues that this is “a model of cognitive activity in which the mind is conceived of as a calculating and assessing machine that is open to all thoughts and closed to none. In this picture the mind is in an important sense not yet settled. And, indeed, settling, in the form of a fixed commitment to an idea or value, is a sign of cognitive or moral infirmity.”

^{19} For a similar, if more moderately phrased argument against the exclusion of religious argument from the public square, see Stout’s Democracy and Tradition.

^{20} In a similar spirit, Fish criticized the US political establishment for failing to see, or for pretending they did not see, that the 9/11 attacks were part of a religious war whose motivations deserve our attention as religious issues (as opposed to irrational deeds of terrorist lunatics). He also accused the media of bad faith in the way they presented the publication of the Danish Mohammad caricatures as an expression of freedom in the face of religious bigotry. See, for instance, Fish’s “Our Faith in Letting It All Hang Out,” The New York Times, op-ed (February 12, 2006): http://www.nytimes.com; and “Postmodern Warfare: The Ignorance of Our Warrior Intellectuals,” Harper’s Magazine (July 2002): 33-40.
claims of religious validity meet the same fate as any other truth claims (such as that of the positivist sciences who, according to pragmatist opinion, wrongly insist on by-passing political consensus on the basis of “objective” facts). According to Rorty, therefore, religious motivation becomes legitimate in the public arena in the sense that if a religious group argues in favor of government-financed health insurance, the political content of this argument should be considered and discussed regardless of whether or not it is based on a reading of Psalm 72. By the same logic, however, religious groups that clearly violate the political consensus—for instance, by citing Leviticus 18:22 in order to make a homophobic case against gay rights—should immediately be charged for hate speech and not be allowed to “claim a right to express their homophobia in public” as a result of “their religious convictions” (Rorty 2003, 143).

This also means that religious argument cannot have it both ways: it cannot enter the public square and at the same time claim protection behind the idea of Free Speech. Consider, for instance, Stanley Fish’s standpoint in the recent debate on whether Intelligent Design should be taught at school. According to the pragmatist view, the choice between Intelligent Design and Evolution has to be fought out on the public square, and it is wrong to exclude arguments because they are based on religious belief. But it seems pretty clear that the public square has reached a consensus that Intelligent Design indeed lacks the scientific credibility necessary to be eligible to enter school curricula. Proponents of Intelligent Design therefore seek to short-cut this consensus by insisting that their arguments be heard simply on the basis of a liberal recognition of the right to free speech. This claim underlies President George Bush’s suggestion that Intelligent Design should be taught alongside the theory of evolution in schools, so that the students can understand what the “debate” is about (c.f. Blaker/Slevin). But as Fish points out, the very idea of a controversy is a sleight of hand: Intelligent Designers, having been allowed to compete on an open field of social practice—where “truth happens” (James 1907, 82) to a proposition, if it catches on with human agents and their institutions (biology departments, for instance)—have not persuaded the scientific community. They

21 I take this example from Richard Rorty’s “Religion in the Public Square,” where he discusses Nicholas’ Wolterstorf’s defense of the right to base political claims on Psalm 72. Rorty does not go quite as far as Fish. While he agrees that excluding religious motivations is problematic, he is “torn” between “agreement with Wolterstorf’s defense of his right to cite Psalm 72 and the feeling that religious believers should not justify their support of or opposition to legislation simply by saying ‘Scripture says’ or ‘Rome has spoken; the matter is closed’ or ‘My church teaches…’ It is one thing to explain how a given political stance is bound up with one’s religious belief, and another to think that it is enough, when defending a political view, simply to cite authority, scriptural or otherwise. […] I would not consider myself to be seriously discussing politics with my fellow-citizens if I simply quoted passages from Mill at them, as opposed to using those passages to help me articulate my views” (147).
therefore seek to evade the public consensus by playing the free-speech card, turning the issue into a question of liberal tolerance and openness to dissenting opinions. Fish describes this move as a typical case of how the religious right appropriates the rhetoric of liberalism for anti-liberal ends (c.f. Fish, “Academic Cross-Dressing”).

Fish’s and Rorty’s arguments show the need to reexamine received views on the politics of religion, especially if they are predicated on the assumption of natural affinities between political and religious stances, which typically equates radical secularism with left-leaning theoretical subversiveness, and religious vocabularies with political and epistemological conservatism.

Works Cited


