

# *Bleating Sheep & Shattered Mirrors*

*An Introduction to Ironic Theology*



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# Bleating Sheep & Shattered Mirrors

An Introduction to Ironic Theology

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In loving memory of  
Kathy Sundh

“Few things have done more harm than  
the belief on the part of individuals or groups  
(or tribes or states or nations or churches)  
that he or she or they are in *sole* possession of the truth.”

– Isaiah Berlin, *Liberty*

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## **Introduction.**

In the last two millennia what has been accomplished in the world of theology? Have theologians discovered previously unknown truths about the divine? Have they developed a more efficient way of saving souls from damnation? Have they really made progress at all, if so is there a means of measuring such advances?

These questions, while phrased above with tongue firmly in cheek, are serious and lack any readily accessible and easy answers, and the answers we do possess often find themselves spilling from volume to volume. The history of theology, and philosophy of religion if we look more broadly, has been plagued by such questions. After the rise of linguistic philosophy in the early 1900's, philosophy and theology were filtered through the popularized forms of linguistic analysis. The most damning of these filters was presented by the school of thought known as Logical Positivism. Rudolf Carnap's definition of this rigorous form of scientism is as follows:

“The researches of applied logic of the theory of knowledge, which aim at clarifying the cognitive content of scientific statements, by means of logical analysis, lead to a positive and to a negative result. The positive result is worked out in the domain of empirical science; the various concepts of the various branches of science are clarified; their formal, logical and epistemological connections are made explicit. In the domain of *metaphysics*, including all philosophy of value and normative theory, logical analysis yields the negative result *that the alleged statements in this domain are entirely meaningless.*”<sup>1</sup>

With this way of thinking on the rise the future of theology and philosophy of religion stood face to face with the problem of religious language.

Before proceeding further it is necessary to define the problem of religious language. The problem does not surround the existence of G-d directly. Questions surrounding religious language hold a logical priority, because questions of G-d's existence depend upon our ability to meaningfully articulate any, and all, religious statements. The problem of religious language can be roughly understood as whether or not a human language has the ability to make a meaningful claim about a god or gods. One example of the type of religious language in question can be found by in Wittgenstein's *Lectures and Conversations on Aesthetics, Psychology and Religious Belief*:

“If Mr. Lewy is religious and says he believes in a Judgment Day, I won't even know whether to say I understand him or not. I've read the same things as he's read. In a most important sense, I know what he means.

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1 Carnap, Rudolf, *The Elimination of Metaphysics Through Logical Analysis of Language*, in “Being and Reality”, p. 117.



If an atheist says: “There won't be a Judgment Day, and another person says there will,” do they mean the same? - Not clear what criterion of meaning the same is.”<sup>2</sup>

Questions surrounding the possibility of religious disagreement have historically been depicted as following the model of ordinary disagreement. “The formal model of this doxastic situation can be expressed by using standard tools offered by epistemic logic: (1)  $B^a p \ \& \ B^c \neg p$  reads 'a believes that p, and c believes that not p'.”<sup>3</sup> The problem that we find, however, is that this model does not cover the entirety of possibilities regarding religious disagreement. This ordinary model falls victim to lazy and dogmatic thinking, which often manifest in the wider pop cultural discussions of religion and atheism. It is our task to examine the wider range of logical possibilities, the one which I will argue in favor of being the position of religious Ironism.<sup>4</sup>

The strongest rejection of religious language and most restricted concept of meaning was promoted in the work of the previously mentioned Logical Positivists of the Vienna Circle. Building upon the American pragmatist tradition's “extension of instrumentalism to the theoretical realm...the analytic philosophy to which Carnap's logical empiricism gave birth supplanted and largely swept away its predecessor.”<sup>5</sup> They applied what is known as the verifiability theory of meaning which asserted that, for a statement to have meaning, its truth value must be empirically verifiable. Under this principle it would follow that our previous religious statement would be found empty of meaning, due to the inability to provide any solid evidence or valid argument for the existence of any god.<sup>6</sup> This stymies the religious belief systems of the world's billions of religious practitioners. This attack is especially potent against the three Abrahamic religions<sup>7</sup> which understand the divine to possess specific properties and follow certain rules. If it were the case that there can be no intelligible discourse within any of these traditions, then the whole organized structure of their religions could be stripped of all validity.

The task of this present work is to examine the argumentation of those who assert that religious language is in fact meaningful, while noting the ways in which they still fall short of addressing the problem raised by the Logical Positivists. When this is complete I will turn towards formulating a response which avoids the logical pitfalls of the historical approaches and provides an epistemic platform which can foster interreligious dialogue. The ability to promote dialogue stands as something of an icing

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2 Wittgenstein, Ludwig, *Lectures and Conversations on Aesthetics, Psychology and Religious Belief*, p. 58.

3 Koistinen, Timo, *Wittgenstein on Religious Disagreements*, p. 87.

4 The program of Ironic Theology which is developed within this text must be differentiated from Stanley Hauerwas' description of “theological ironism” in his 2015 book *The Work of Theology*. Hauerwas begins with the starting thesis of Rorty's mistaken account of language. The program developed in this text places Rorty's account of linguistic contingency as the central kernel of its thrust. More on Hauerwas' approach can be found in Chapter 8 (pp. 147-170) of his book.

5 Brandom, Robert, *When Philosophy Paints Its Blue on Grey: Irony and the Pragmatist Enlightenment*, in “boundary 2”, p. 2.

6 Ayer, A.J., *Language, Truth, and Logic*, p. 144.

7 Weed, J.H., “Religious Language” in *Internet Encyclopedia of Philosophy*, §1.

on the cake, as this is becoming an increasingly necessary issue within the 21<sup>st</sup> century. This approach grows out of Richard Rorty's work within epistemology and the philosophy of language. Following in his post-philosophical declaration of widespread linguistic *contingency*, I apply this same method to the disciplines of systematic and interreligious theology.

From antiquity to the present day, epistemology has stood as a cornerstone of the philosophical discipline. "Put most simply, what Rorty argues is that contemporary philosophy is the victim of a tradition of philosophical thought that wrongly elevates philosophy into a privileged place among intellectual enterprises because it investigates the foundations of all human knowing."<sup>8</sup> The approximately 2500 year discussion has, sadly, failed to move forward, but rather has undergone a series of metamorphosis. Each epoch reformulated and recast what was in truth the same fundamental dualism lurking in what is referred to as the correspondence theory of truth. The correspondence theory holds, in a variety of terms, that there is something within us which must match up with something external to us in order for us to accept it as 'truth'. This notion of truth, while delightfully intuitive, has caused nothing more than a mass historical emergence, and inevitable retreat of theories which claim to escape the many skeptics objections.

In the last few decades a group of scholars, loosely categorized as neopragmatists, have argued that questions surrounding the relation between internal/external are not meaningful to ask. They call for an acceptance of our intellectual limits and argue we replace correspondence, and all of its baggage, with what is understood a coherence or holistic theory. Some go as far as to throw out the very notion of theory as well. The key thinker who made this leap was Richard Rorty.

Rorty's collective work argues for a shift away from the traditional discussions within philosophy and truly embraces Wittgenstein's suggestions that philosophy should be a form of therapy.<sup>9</sup>

"He argues that the move from thinking of moral norms in terms of divine commandments to thinking of them in terms of social compacts should be followed by a move from thinking of the truth of belief in terms of correspondence with reality to thinking of it in terms of agreement with our fellows."<sup>10</sup>

We philosophers are called to formulate an endless stream of new vocabularies which enable us to engage the world and others in novel ways. Each vocabulary, according to Rorty, has developed contingently and will likely vanish in future centuries. We cannot assume that our vocabulary has a privileged status among the world's many vocabularies, nor can we claim to reach an endpoint of knowledge. Plainly put, there is

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8 Lauritzen, Paul, *Philosophy of Religion and the Mirror of Nature: Rorty's Challenge to Analytic Philosophy of Religion*, in "International Journal for Philosophy of Religion", p. 30.

9 That the therapeutic approach in philosophy is already present in the work of the early American pragmatists is argued in the first chapter of Martin Halliwell's *Romantic Science and the Experience of Self*.

10 Brandom, *When Philosophy Paints*, p. 17.

no end point. According to Rorty we have to accept the free floating, foundation-less status of many of our most dearly held beliefs and adopt an ‘ironic’ relationship to them. The details of this process in regards to religious belief will be expanded upon in a later chapter.

Rorty used this position as a way to promote the values which compose Western liberal democracies. His later work found itself being poignantly political. I would like to apply his ideas towards epistemology, coherence, and ‘ironism’ towards the problem of religious language and formulate a position termed Ironic theology. The goal of Ironic theology is to continue the lifeworld shaping enterprise of theology, but do so in a way which allows for healthy interreligious dialogue which maintains the integrity of each represented religion. As it is described here, Ironic theology may appear to be nothing more than religious pluralism or philosophical relativism. These possible objections will be dissolved as products of misunderstanding in a later chapter.

Ironic theology, much like pragmatism although not quite identical, binds the theoretical to the practical in a dialectical manner so that one area cannot help but inform the other. The driving force behind Ironic theology stems from our ever changing historical situation and the needs of each new emerging culture. Rorty calls us to become “reconciled to the idea that most of reality is indifferent to our descriptions of it... truth is made rather than found... *languages* are made rather than found.”<sup>11</sup> Our descriptions of the *truths* of theology are made by man. We do not stumble across hidden religious truths, but rather understand such *truths* as necessary in order to fit our socio-historical needs and longings.<sup>12</sup>

This would appear to imply that there remains something behind language which we are forced to accept we cannot reach. However, this assertion would be a false one. In the discussion of Rorty's work and the introduction of the language of Ironic theology, we will come to see that this duality is nothing more than a linguistic mistake. A mistake which, once set it aside, ceases to cause problems and allows us to move forward into a world which is filled with a multitude of races, creeds, genders and sexual identities in earnest engagement with one another.

The approach taken in the following pages will embody the spirit of the philosophical ‘linguistic turn’ and examine the benefits which can be found by applying some of the findings from this movement to the world of analytic philosophy and theology. My hope is to find a synthesis point between the two, often opposing, disciplines which offers a platform for rational and healthy dialogue. In order to accomplish this task my project will proceed in two general sections, one historical, the other constructive. The historical section consists of two chapters presenting a philosophical comparison of the works of Richard Rorty and Johann Gottfried Herder.

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11 Rorty, Richard, *Contingency, Irony, and Solidarity*, p. 7.

12 This view has widely been accepted as a corner stone of liberal Jewish theology. Eugene Borowitz writes in his *Liberal Judaism*, “Jews seem to have taken a rather historical view of demonstrating the value of a given way of talking about God. Ideas were permitted to come into the community with some freedom. If our people found them worthy, it tried to live by them. If the ideas survived over generations or centuries, they became a living part of our tradition. Most new ways of talking about God simply came and went. They did not pass the test...” (pp. 14-15)

The theoretical system developed by Rorty will be utilized to form my own discussion in the constructive two-part chapter which aims to construct and historically situate the approach of Ironic theology. The choice to compare Rorty's work to Herder's was made in order to link post-analytic philosophy to the pre-existing antifoundationalist forms of philosophy and theology. This link is attempted to downplay the potential radicality of my own proposed approach to theology. Not only was antifoundationalism found in enlightenment era German philosophy, but it was also present within the theological writings of that period. While this does not prove the validity of my final thesis, it does reduce the unorthodox odor that may emanate from the chosen name of this system.

The second half of this dissertation is the creative and positive aspect of the work. The aim of this section is to present a novel post-theological contribution to the existing literature. This system is built upon Richard Rorty's philosophical writings, especially his *Contingency, Irony, and Solidarity*. This basis is mirrored in my approach as maintaining a critical distance, while simultaneously forming a positive platform for interreligious dialogue. Embodying the full force of postmodernism, interwoven with the tradition of American pragmatism the positions of Rorty and my own approach to the problem of religious language holds the possibility of epistemic openness while maintaining the values of liberalism and democracy. American pragmatism is a perfect starting point for such an endeavor as "pragmatism is above all about the idea that changing circumstances require changed ideas, that flexibility and experimentation are the essence of rationality, not the discovery of truths or principles one can hold on to."<sup>13</sup> This positive aspect of Ironic theology escapes the problematic traps of postmodern thought, by offering a practical platform for social progress through an evolution of language.

This positive platform is of particular importance in the current decade with the global resurgence of populist nationalism. This form of ethnic nationalism stands in radical opposition to the values of liberalism and plurality which have enabled the social progress of the last century. Rorty's liberal ironism offers a form of pluralism, which is not self-defeating and has a 'backbone' fixed 'semi-foundational' position. This gives the themes and overarching goal of this dissertation additional relevance. Ironic theology is fluid and non-domineering, but also willing and able to decry the social legitimacy of oppressive new vocabularies. Unlike the earlier forms of postmodern theology, Ironic theology can critique or promote new social vocabularies rather than collapsing into relativism. It is my hope that the meager suggestions which follow may enchant some readers within our current violently reactive cultural climate.

This dissertation will proceed as follows:

Chapter One: Richard Rorty and the Apex of Irony.

Chapter Two: Herder, Contingency, and Humanität.

Chapter Three, Part One: An Ironic Theology.

Chapter Three, Part Two: Applying Ironic Theology.

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<sup>13</sup> Brandom, *When Philosophy Paints*, p. 28.

Chapter One will examine the breadth of Rorty's philosophy beginning with his early critical works and concluding with his attempts to reconcile postmodern critique and progressive social liberalism. The critical period aims to discredit the epistemic 'mirror' metaphor that has been perpetuated since the birth of Plato's allegory of the cave. The positive period presents Rorty's arguments from *Contingency, Irony, and Solidarity* and *Philosophy and Social Hope* which aimed to provide a platform for secular societal progress. Unfortunately, "...little attention has been given to the fact that he produced a novel and intricate philosophy of religion in the last decade of his life."<sup>14</sup> The following work attempts to build upon Rorty's writing in hopes of expanding the scope of his philosophy of religion. It must be said that the theory presented within only attempts to extend his thought from within the theological vacuum. Whether Rorty himself would agree with my approach is up for debate, but its pragmatic value is undeniable.

Throughout history there have been a great variety of approaches to answering the problem of religious language stemming from the major historical theories of truth (correspondence, coherence, and hermeneutics) which all sought to circumvent the skeptics challenge. Before proceeding further it is necessary to provide examples of these theories and situate them into wider epistemic categories. These theologians were chosen as they each represent different theories of meaning and truth which consist of the Via Negativa, Analogy, Symbolic, and Myth approaches. When the historical background as been set, I will proceed to give a brief overview of the work of Rorty in order to formulate my own ironic approach to religious meaning which aims to explain away the problem of religious language by moving beyond the foundationalist concept of meaning. It also in this section where I will address objections that may be raised to this view of ironic meaning and truth. Our next task is to briefly examine the historical concepts of how to meaningfully ground religious statements.

The first of these originated in the work of Maimonides. He argues in the *Guide for the Perplexed* that our language is not truly capable of describing, in any precise manner, what or how G-d is. However, we find ourselves able to speak about the divine qualities negatively. We cannot say, for example, that "G-d is wise," but we can say that "G-d is not ignorant." This allows us to form something of an outline around what G-d is, while still preserving the complete incomprehensibility of the divine nature. This method also has the benefit of avoiding the projection of finite and human attributes onto G-d.<sup>15</sup> Despite these positive aspects, his method of theological negation leaves us begging the question, "if G-d is not X, then what is G-d?" This approach can only bring us to knowledge of G-d in the same way "The Tomb and Shade of Napoleon" brings us to knowledge of Napoleon.<sup>16</sup> This strong limiting of meaningful religious language fits within Maimonides overall claim that "theological language is important to the degree

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14 Frankenberry, Nancy, *The Study of Religion After Davidson and Rorty*, in "American Journal of Theology and Philosophy", p. 206.

15 Maimonides, Pines, S. (trs.), *Guide for the Perplexed*, §1.58.

16 Further explanation of this relationship between irony and truth can be found in Søren Kierkegaard's doctoral dissertation *On the Concept of Irony with Continual Reference to Socrates*.

that it eliminates error and sets us along the path of recognizing God's transcendence."<sup>17</sup> We are to trust theology to direct us away from error, not to expect the formation of detailed intricate systems providing us with secret access to knowledge of the divine. Theological language does not enable us to become voyeurs of the divine, its limitation keeps G-d hidden behind the changing curtain.

The second historical response to the problem was articulated by Thomas Aquinas in the *Summa Theologiae*, and he understands religious language as an analogy. He begins by asserting that "G-d exists" is a tautology because existence is contained within the very concept of G-d. However, human beings cannot directly know what this concept, or to use Aquinas' own language 'essence', consists in. This raises problems for believers because we claim to know or have faith in something, when we cannot state anything meaningful about the thing in question. Aquinas' response is that we can come to know something about the divine essence through analogous naming.<sup>18</sup> Analogous naming functions by applying characteristics of earthly things to the divine. What is important to note is that the meaning understood when the statement's subject is earthly remains the same when applied to G-d. Let's look at this in action with the example of wisdom:

"What can we mean when we say that God is wise? Not the same thing as when we say that Socrates is wise. Socrates became wise and wisdom is a trait which with age and forgetfulness he could lose. Thus to be Socrates and to be wise are not the same thing. But in the case of God, 'wise' does not signify some incidental property He might or might not have. This is captured by noting that while we say God is wise, we also say he is wisdom."<sup>19</sup>

Simply put, he is stating that G-d is similar to man, but always transcends human limitation by properties. We are taking the human or earthly condition as a near-sighted point of reference to attempt to speak about something which cannot be encompassed by human perspective.<sup>20</sup>

The third response looks to answer to the problem in a manner somewhat similar to the second method. Understanding religious language as being a symbol which points to something transcendent is the proposal we find in the work of Paul Tillich. When we look to the cross, the symbol points us towards an event which we cannot fully understand. We have 'access' to the divine via the comprehension and engagement with these symbols. This source of meaning leaves much to be desired. It would seem to depict religious language as a road sign which points us towards an unreachable destination. An interesting point within Tillich's system is the finitude of religious

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17 Seeskin, K., "Maimonides", in *The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy*, §4.

18 Aquinas, Thomas, McDermott, T. (ed.), *Aquinas Selected Writing*, pp. 214-230.

19 McInerney, R., O'Callaghan, J., "Saint Thomas Aquinas", in the *Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy*, §11.2.

20 Weed, "Religious Language", §2.b.iii.

symbols. They inhabit a specific period of history, before which they lack any meaning and after which they cease to denote sufficient meaning.<sup>21</sup>

The fourth and final response claims that religious language provides a sort of mythical meaning. This was an approach promoted by the German theologian Rudolf Bultmann. He claims that religious language holds meaning, not verifiable in positive or negative truth value, but in its ability to provide existential meaning to those reading the scriptural text.<sup>22</sup> Its meaning is found in its ability to provide a life affirming narrative structure for the believer. My own response draws upon this foundation-less approach. Rather than focusing solely upon the binary ‘yes-or-no’ concept of meaning, I will adopt a stance that incorporates both the living approach to meaning with the true/false theory of meaning.

The discussion in chapter one which flows from these historical theories is a critique of their implicit adherence to either the correspondence, coherence, or hermeneutic theory of truth. The first theory holds, loosely, that a statement is true if it matches up with its referent which exists, in some way, outside of itself. After my analysis of the correspondence theory of truth, the Continental theory of hermeneutic truth maintained by Heidegger and later developed by the work of one of his students Hans Georg Gadamer will be addressed. Just as we cannot escape the body, neither can we escape the bounds of our own languages. Learning other languages may broaden the ways we can engage other speakers, but nevertheless we cannot escape some form of our linguistic prisons. Heidegger stands as a precursor to the later developments made by Rorty in his *Philosophy and the Mirror of Nature* and *Contingency, Irony, and Solidarity*. In the latter, Rorty holds Heidegger as an example of what a true ironist looks like. He gave us a new language with which to understand this situation which we find ourselves hurled into. “He would like to recapture a sense of *contingency*, of the fragility and riskiness of any human project – a sense which the ontotheological tradition has made it hard to attain.”<sup>23</sup> From Heidegger we not only find this healthy reminder, but also a powerful wrecking ball which we may in turn swing towards the discipline of theology. Unfortunately his writings do little beyond this destructive impact and we are forced to look elsewhere to find the necessary tools for both treating the problem of religious language and providing a positive contribution to the future of theological discussion. The final mainstream theory of truth discussed will be that of the coherence theory which was popularized by the work of Donald Davidson. Davidson draws the conditions of truth back from a referent and designates them solely to the linguistic utterance itself. The truth value of a sentence is found within the semantic structure of the sentence itself and not in the elusive relationship between the sentence and its referent.

Rorty, drawing upon the work of his linguistically minded brethren, pushes away from the theoretical pursuits of the study of language and takes up the task of applying it to the political and social realm. A lifelong advocate for plurality and democracy,

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21 See Rees, p. 80.

22 See Bultmann, p. 4.

23 Rorty, Richard, *Heidegger, Contingency, Pragmatism*, p. 35.

Rorty's academic career can best be described as “a historicist quest for human happiness that abandons a search for universal truth and timeless goodness in favor of what works.”<sup>24</sup> His rejection of universal truth stands in line with our own theory of floating, unbound poetic language, and his theory of contingent final vocabularies places us on a track where we can bring differing religious traditions to the same table for discourse. Rorty claims that there can be no “meta-vocabulary to distinguish the adequacy of one final vocabulary above others. Nor is there any non-linguistic, pre-cognitive access to an already present Being that underscores some narrative as preferred.”<sup>25</sup> It is this antifoundationalist approach to truth which allows us to raise different religious traditions to an equal standing. They come together and are not judged upon something which stands behind them, they come to be adjudicated based upon their practical and benefit to societal health and personal well-being. One must note that Rorty formulated this position as a manner of escaping dogmatism, with a particular attention paid to escaping the epistemic dogmatism which developed within the analytic philosophical tradition. With this in mind persons must come to understand their own religious contingency. Our own vocabulary holds no more traction to the world than the vocabulary held by the religious other. This recognition of contingency and the push for social progress are the two pillars for the development of an Ironic theology in chapter three, but we will return to this discussion after briefly outlining the direction of chapter two.

Chapter Two will compare Rortyan antifoundationalism to the writings of the 18<sup>th</sup> Century philosopher Johann Gottfried Herder. This comparison draws an historic lineage of antifoundationalist thought and presents hints of what religious antifoundationalism might look like. It is also included to dismiss the charges that a non-foundationalist religion is absurd, such accounts of religion are not particularly new, but were part of a hushed response to the influence of Kantian philosophy. Herder provides the ‘religious’ thought upon which Ironic theology attempts to stand. This chapter follows both the critical and constructive schema beginning with Herder's philosophy of language and history, before transitioning into his social philosophy of Humanität. This chapter will conclude with an analysis of how these two approaches manifest in Herder's *Theologische Schriften*. These texts provide us with a brief look at an Enlightenment era approach to non-dogmatic religious belief which does not collapse into a thin deism.

Chapter Three, Part One brings us into the constructive portion of this dissertation and the theoretical structure of an Ironic theology is presented therein. This section carefully applies and synthesizes the theories of Rorty, complimented by Herder's theological views, in order to form the basic skeletal structure of theological ironism. “[Rorty] wants to show that only a certain conception of religion, one distorted by the influence of Platonism, rather than religious faith as such, is undermined by the Enlightenment’s critique of theism.”<sup>26</sup> The inclusion of Herder presents a critical

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24 Grippe, E., “Rorty”, in the *Internet Encyclopedia of Philosophy*, §1.

25 Ibid., §3c.

26 Smith, Nicholas H., *Rorty on Religion and Hope*, in “Inquiry”, p. 82.



Enlightenment figure who maintains such an anti-Platonic form of religious belief. This chapter also sets Ironic theology among the larger theological traditions and the Exclusivism-Inclusivism-Pluralism spectrum found within the theology of world religions. It is shown that Ironic theology is a radically nominalist form of religious pluralism that highlights the foundationalist short-comings of other pluralist thinkers.

Ironic theology stands on the assertion that all language is limited in its ability to find reference in the world, not because it is impossible or difficult to find a connecting point, but because the metaphor itself is broken! There cannot be fully comprehensible language about the divine, and neither can we reach the true being of everyday objects through language. The metaphor of knowledge as a mirror of the world is misguided and problematic. Rather than focusing upon languages ability to stick to something external to it, we content ourselves with its being a pragmatic tool for social progress. Language cannot not find meaning due to its reference (there is no reference), but through its usage within a context specific language game. All language games are contingent upon their historical situation. There is no final vocabulary which grants a vantage point closer to 'truth'. Once the human limit of language is accepted interreligious discourse can move forward in an honest manner.

Chapter Three, Part Two ends the body of this work by comparing the structural contents of Ironic theology to the writings of other theologians specializing in interreligious dialogue. It will be argued that these thinkers do not provide an honest epistemic space for the religious other because of their inability to bracket their commitment to foundationalist religious belief. If we can untangle our beliefs from the falsehood of permanence or finality we can provide a truly open platform of discussion with other world religions. Once this is achieved I present the works of several theorists whose work can be interpreted, in some manner or another, as an Ironic theology.

I must acknowledge that there are multiple strong objections which will stand against this theory of meaningful contingent language. This understanding would appear to directly oppose any religious tradition's claim of possessing a divinely inspired scripture. However, one can still regard this belief to be meaningful and true to the believer, what I am claiming is that belief exists within a language game<sup>27</sup> which is contingent upon the place and time in which the speaker finds themselves. The contextual truth of scripture is already something which is opposed within conservative religious traditions, and this theory will likely be rejected due to a superficial misunderstanding. However, for those groups which are open-minded and willing to engage in dialogue, this theory allows for regarding the others tradition as possessing meaning in its own right, without forfeiting the integrity of their own religious beliefs and practices.

Judged upon its practicality this theory promotes tolerance and does not attack any tradition or methodology beyond a request for humility with regard to the scope of the truth claims of their enterprise. This theory is understood to be extending an epistemic hand-up to religious traditions which are becoming more and more regarded

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27 Richter, D.J., "Wittgenstein", in the *Internet Encyclopedia of Philosophy*, §3.

as superstitious nonsense. The goal is to allow for the return of religious discourse into debates from which it has become excluded.

This theory may also be attacked for its limiting of the range of linguistic meaning. Rejection of the idea that there is some standpoint which grants better access is in direct opposition to the reemerging scientific positivism that seems to be dominating 'pop' discussions of science and religion. The Ironic theory does not demean or deny the value of the scientific enterprise, but simply attempts to keep it from biting off more than it can chew. There is a reductive problem<sup>28</sup> facing the intellectual field in which scholars try and boil truth down to a single fact and find one discipline which gives better access to it. I only wish to claim that different areas of knowledge have a methodology and language which best fits their pursuits. For example it would not be practical to apply the methodology of macro-economics to answer questions about Himalayan geology. This is obviously counter intuitive, and yet it is becoming more and more common to try and answer normative questions by appealing to specific natural sciences. In its most basic sense this mentality simply ignores the famous is/ought problem as it was stated by Hume.<sup>29</sup>

The proposed Ironic theory of meaning stands to provide a platform which allows for the meaningful discussion of religious beliefs and concepts. This theory takes in the concerns of previous systems and avoids falling into the logical snares in which they found themselves. The goal of the following discussions is to shift away from the search for an absolute truth, and follow Rorty's lead, pursuing mutual awareness and understanding of the religious other. Not only is the focus theoretical, but sets its sights on the practical application of discourse and its ability to shape and offer hope for a healthy and religiously plural global community.

This work will conclude with a brief discussion of some contemporary movements within academic theology and takes account of their fruitfulness through the lens of Ironic theology. This analysis also stands to present a few areas which offer potential grounds for the continuation of Ironic theology. This is seen primarily in the genres of 'X and theology'. I will conclude by providing a glance of the shrinking venue for theological thinking and close with a humble suggestion for future areas of religious and theological writing.

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28 Grippe, "Rorty", §3e.

29 Hume, David, Selby-Bigge, L.A. (ed.), *A Treatise of Human Nature*, §3.1.1.26.

Chapter 1:  
Richard Rorty and the Apex of Irony

# **1. The Question of Genre: Anglo-American Philosophy and Systematic Theology.**

## **1.1. Analytic Philosophy, Post-Analytic Philosophy and Theology.**

Writing during the fledgling years of postmodernism, in a world questioning its own bearings, Richard Rorty was a standard bearer for the rejection of pure scientism and logical positivism. Drawing upon the plethora of works of Ludwig Wittgenstein, Willard van Orman Quine, and Donald Davidson, he moves away from the philosophical quest for universal answers to humanity's pressing questions, aiming rather for a goal of foundationless human solidarity. Taking up the Wittgensteinian banner, for Rorty, the task of philosophy becomes nothing more than a therapeutic cleansing of language. We are to recognize the limits and frequent meaninglessness of philosophical questions. In place of pursuing the ever elusive truths which lay external to us by trying to bridge the historical dichotomy of objective/subjective, he calls us to see through this illusory distinction and recognize that such a solution is nothing more than a snipe hunt. Instead of continuing our ancestors' great chase, he suggests we turn our attention to a more readily available 'source' of meaning. The following chapter will introduce the philosophical ironism which Rorty asserts should supersede the traditional task of the epistemologist. I will later argue in chapter three that the position of philosophical ironism can, and should, be applied to our understanding of the theological enterprise. In doing so I will formulate the skeleton of what I call Ironic theology.

First, the method of appealing to thought beyond the theological realm should be addressed. I will then, briefly restate the problem of religious language and attempt to show the manner in which ironism offers us an escape from the skeptics charge of meaningless religious language. It is upon completion of this philosophical side-step that we find ourselves free to better engage the religious other. A complete definition of my understanding of theological ironism and its application in the public sphere of interreligious dialogue will comprise the final closing chapter.

It is not unreasonable to ask why it is valuable to appeal to work beyond the traditional theological realm. After the rise of logical positivism, discussion of religion, let alone normative theological statements, had little to no representation within the serious philosophical arena. Such utterances were quickly dismissed as being nonsensical. If this wasn't enough, "...the philosophical theologian is often viewed with suspicion by both religious folk, who see 'worldly' philosophy as tendentiously atheistic..."<sup>30</sup> Despite the hostility of philosophers towards theology, theological problems can benefit from the usage of the philosophical vocabulary. This is not unlike the historical usage of poetry and myth to address questions of how our ancestors came to be. The language of philosophy stands to speak to us about these issues in a way that would appear to offer a neutral position. This (alleged) neutrality speaks to those who

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30 Nelson, Derek C., *Inquiry, Conversation and Theistic Belief: William James and Richard Rorty Get Religion*, in "The Heythrop Journal", p. 495.

stand on the fence and have not yet declared an allegiance to one answer to the problem of religious language. Analytic philosophy, with its emphasis on clear articulation of one's thoughts falls on receptive ears in our current global climate of scientism. In trying to speak to a new community, it would seem best to speak their language. The usage of contemporary philosophical argumentation is one attempt of doing just that. It is worth recognizing, as my central theorist does, that my own addition to this discussion is itself a contingent one. It is my hope that the tool which I am offering is one which will retain its usage beyond the present moment, and does not quietly fall by the wayside like the eight-track tape or the horse and buggy.

The relationship between analytic philosophy and theology is not a novel area of discussion. A fine collection of work delving into this matter, titled *Analytic Theology: New Essays in the Philosophy of Theology*, was recently published by Oxford University Press in 2009. In the introductory chapter Michael C. Rea examines the historical relationship of the two fields and points out the major points of objection against their merging. His essay is trying to examine why it is the case that “the climate in theology departments for analytic theologians is much like the climate in English-speaking philosophy departments for continental philosophers: often chilly.”<sup>31</sup> He is quick to point out that much of the discrepancy between these areas rests on the major players' intentional ignorance of the work within the other field. This willful ignorance does nothing but hinder what could be an otherwise healthy and mutually informative relationship. Beyond the standoffish nature of major players within each discipline, Rea points out two major objections to the practice of analytic theology. The first objection holds that the theologian's task is “not to 'think God's thoughts after Him' (pace Berkhof) but rather to serve the life of faith.”<sup>32</sup> The quest to try, as a created humanity, to pursue reaching the thoughts of G-d is understood to be an affront to the transcendent nature of the divine. This task could be viewed as man, yet again, trying to construct the Tower of Babel. When we take the practice of analytic philosophy to be the formulation of clear and explicit statements of truth and knowledge, we would appear to find ourselves in a position of conflict. How do we balance the aims of the analytic tradition, with the respect towards G-d which theologians demand?

Here it is important to point out variety of positions within analytic philosophy surrounding the issue of the foundations of knowledge. As Rea points out, there is not a single unified position of what constitutes ‘foundationalism’. The classical understanding was that there would be one single, or set of truths, which stood as the foundation of all of our knowledge. This quest is greatly exemplified in the work of the early Modern philosophers. However, this position has fallen by the wayside and there are relatively few scholars who argue for the existence of such facts. Rea defines the contemporary view of foundationalism into two categories: *doxastic foundationalism* and *source foundationalism*.

Doxastic foundationalism is “the view that some of our beliefs are *properly basic*. Basic beliefs are those that are not based on other beliefs. Properly basic beliefs

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31 Crisp, Oliver (ed.), *Analytic Theology: New Essays in the Philosophy of Theology*, p. 1.

32 Crisp, *Analytic Theology*, p. 10.

are those that are rationally or justifiable held in the basic way.”<sup>33</sup> This form of foundationalism, in my reading, does not disqualify analytic philosophy from being applied to areas of theology. One can hold properly basic beliefs without claiming to have access to the mind of G-d. Rea cites perceptual experience as a commonsense examples of this form.<sup>34</sup> Believers may feel the presence of G-d through prayer or meditation, in art or in nature, and this does not overstep the theologically recommended humility.

The next form of foundationalism, Rea terms *source foundationalism*. It is in this manifestation which the strongest opposition can be hurled. It is defined as:

“...the view that some of our sources of evidence are privileged in the sense that (a) they can rationally be trusted in absence of evidence of their reliability, and (b) it is irrational to rely on other sources of evidence unless they are somehow 'certified' by the privileged sources.”<sup>35</sup>

This mindset appears in the assertions raised against metaphysics and religion which were promoted by the Logical Positivists in the early 20<sup>th</sup> century. For the Positivists the principle of verifiability stood to be the source of privileged knowledge, and truth claims were only granted meaning if they could satisfy the criteria of this principle. This form of foundationalism, while still somewhat present in the analytic landscape, has found itself harshly critiqued by what is now known as anti-foundationalism. This rejection of the old guard, would seem to allow analytic philosophy an entry point into the theological discussion on the same grounds that continental philosophy was granted membership.

One example of this hidden foundationalism can be seen in the work of Richard Swinburne. Paul Lauritzen draws this point out, writing:

“The book [The Coherence of Theism], Swinburne says, is concerned with the core belief of traditional theism, that God exists, but, ‘it is not concerned,’ he writes, ‘with whether this belief is true or with whether we can know it to be true, but with the prior questions of what it means and whether it is coherent.’... truth is distinguishable from coherence and coherence, at least, can be considered independently of truth.”<sup>36</sup>

This passage smuggles into the discussion the assumption that we possess or may come to possess the necessary criteria to evaluate such a claim. It takes the leap beyond linguistic analysis and appeals to metaphysics. Lauritzen continues, “for Rorty there is just no test for truth other than coherence, and to think that there is is to run afoul of the

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33 Ibid. p. 12

34 This appeal to the empirical realm will also be seen as a recurring element in Herder's theological writings.

35 Crisp, *Analytic Theology*, p. 13.

36 Lauritzen, *Philosophy of Religion and the Mirror of Nature*, p. 34.

arguments of Quine on the analytic/synthetic distinction and of Sellars' on the framework of givenness."<sup>37</sup> These two theorists have come to stand as continual pitfalls for a great majority of scholars attempting to form an analytic philosophy of religion.

Regardless of its historical sidestepping of foundationalism, postmodern theology itself would seem to hold premise (b) of source foundationalism. Contemporary Christian theologians, must place particular emphasis upon the written sources of scripture. This is not a claim that all theologians view it in the same manner, that could not be farther from the truth. Rather, fundamentalist and liberal scholars alike, place the biblical texts as a foundation upon which they may choose to construct (or deconstruct) a given theology. If theologians cannot avoid the criteria by which they reject certain analytic philosophical ideas, then their criticism is moot.

Rea also acknowledges the criticism of the analytic style of writing. It is a common stereotype that analytic philosophers dedicate so much attention to minute detail, that they tend to miss the forest for the trees and this emphasis on clarity seems to be "*at the expense of everything else*, and it ignores the fact that sometimes, in order to attain wisdom and understanding, we have to rely substantively on metaphor and other literary tropes."<sup>38</sup> I think there is some credence to this criticism, but in light of other recent developments in the post-analytic tradition this point would also appear to fall flat. The work of Richard Rorty combines both the rigor and attention to detail of analytic philosophy with the poetic flexibility of language found in the continental camp.

Both Rea and Rorty recognize Heidegger's claim "Theology, even more than philosophy, one might think, ought to be aimed at the pursuit of wisdom, right living, and related ideals."<sup>39</sup> Rorty, following the influence of Ludwig Wittgenstein<sup>40</sup>, wishes that we go as far as abandoning the quest for the foundations of knowledge and "simply like to change the subject' from questions about Truth and Goodness to questions about coping and usefulness."<sup>41</sup> A form of philosophy like the one which Rorty is promoting does not neatly fit within the analytic genre, but rather twists around it morphing into what some scholars have dubbed post-analytic philosophy.

For the theologian, the language of post-analytic philosophy is an offering of yet another linguistic implement which can be used to express one's heartfelt beliefs and emotions in a manner which is clearly understandable to readers. For the philosopher, the turn towards the theological is a chance to humbly acknowledge the legitimacy of a different language and Lebenswelt. An honest philosopher will keep an open ear towards the assertions of the theologian, just as a devout theologian is also called to the position of openness towards public dialogue with the religious *other*. Public discourse has become a focal point within the movement which has grown from the analytic

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37 Ibid.

38 Crisp, *Analytic Theology*, p. 18.

39 Ibid.

40 A nice cursory sampling of Wittgenstein's colossal influence on theology can be found in Gordon Kaufman's article "Reading Wittgenstein: Notes for Constructive Theologians" in *The Journal of Religion* Vol. 79 Issue 3.

41 Bouma-Prediger, Steve, *Rorty's Pragmatism and Gadamer's Hermeneutic*, p. 315.

tradition. The ideal example of public dialogue finds its best depiction in the John Rawls' famous Veil of Ignorance.<sup>42</sup> Along with the work of Rorty, Rawls paved the grounds for the return to political philosophy within the American tradition. Rawls' work offers a thought experiment in which we strip ourselves of our identity and social standing, and from this point formulate the principles for a society which we believe to be in the best interest for ourselves if we were unable to see where we fit into this newly constructed society. Rawls' work was not accepted unilaterally across the discipline, but it did take a brave leap forward in how scholars went about discussing the topics of equality and social justice. Rather than appealing to the discussion surrounding human nature and other untouchable metaphysics, he turned his attention towards making progress. In similar step, there was a group of thinkers, those opposed to traditional representationalism, who worked to move beyond the standard analytic "problem of how words 'hook onto' the world."<sup>43</sup>

In the collection of essays, *Post-Analytic Philosophy*, John Rajchman opens the series with an introduction which highlights the multitude of directions which philosophy is taking. The three central areas he discusses are literary theory, scientific theory, and moral theory. Each of these new strains of thought stem from the assertion that vocabularies are mortal. This principle stands as the strongest breaking point from the analytic period. Rorty, in discussing literary theory, writes "We don't *want* works of literature to be criticizable within a terminology we already know; we want those works, and the criticism of them, to give us *new* terminologies."<sup>44</sup> Each of these new terminologies, Rajchman says, are likely to be seen by the previous mainstream vocabulary as misreadings or misunderstandings of their central premises. However, the post-analytic movement aims for these productive mistakes rather than continually rearranging our words and theories into similar boring structures.

Beyond the philosophical academic sphere, we can see similar movements within theology. The past thirty years have seen the rise of a wide variety of new perspectives which cut against the traditional lens of theological writing. Liberation theology in Latin America and within the African-American community pushed back against economic and racial inequality; Feminist theology has questioned the historical male centered nature of Christianity; and, most recently, Queer theology has attacked the presumption that heterosexuality and traditional binary gender roles were the only forms of gender and sexual identity throughout the historical narrative of humanity. While making a move whose consequences parallel to the post-analytic step beyond analytic philosophy, these new sub-fields in theology leave open and accept the traditional theological enterprise. Within the postmodern developments in theology, emphasis upon the importance of context has become a forefront and pressing issue. This is a step in the right direction, however we must acknowledge that there will come a point when it is not enough to simply let the horse out to pasture. The following

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42 See Rawls, John, *A Theory of Justice*, p. 118.

43 Putnam, Hilary, "After Empiricism." in *Post-Analytic Philosophy*, p. 20.

44 Rajchman, John, *Post-Analytic Philosophy*, p. XV.



constructive aspect of my work, building an Ironic theology, hopes to shoot and bury the old (traditional) horse of theology.

This is a bitter pill to swallow, but it necessarily follows from the acknowledgment of contextual theology. Rather than anchoring these new movements in theology to an orthodox set of principles, the introduction of Rorty's ironism stands to cut the rope and proceed with the theological pursuits but allow for the old cluttered vocabulary to be left behind. The move away from strict dogma stands to open ourselves to the possibility of engaging the religious other to a much greater degree than was previously possible. Rorty quips, "...our certainty will be a matter of *conversation* between persons, rather than a matter of interaction with non-human reality."<sup>45</sup>

It may be claimed that if one strays too far from our strong theological principles (for example the doctrine of the Trinity) one would cease to be a Christian and become something else entirely. This is a perfectly valid claim, but it fails to recognize how far the contemporary Christian community has already moved away from the theological points followed and understood twenty-five, three hundred, or one thousand years after the death of Christ. Rather than resisting progress and avoiding the wonderful spiritual gems we can learn from non-Christians by clinging to unverifiable dogmatic claims, we should focus on what it means to be a Christian and what it means to be a Christian living in a world of vast religious plurality. It is my strong belief that some form of theological ironism will enable us to engage and learn from others, while still maintaining our own religious identity.

Having now completed with our discussion of the relationship between the analytic and post-analytic philosophical traditions in relation to theology, I turn my focus towards restating the problem of religious language and showcasing the mainstream pseudo-solutions which remain active within theology. First, I will show that the traditional correspondence theory of language cannot be applied within theology. Second, I will shift away from the English-speaking traditions and show the short-comings of the continental inspired work in existentialism and hermeneutics. Finally, I will repeat this process with coherence theory which has gained wide popularity within the philosophical mainstream. When this has been completed and these philosophical ghosts have been exorcised from our present vocabulary I will formulate what I understand to be the next phase in theological development, an Ironic theology.

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45 Rorty, *Philosophy and the Mirror of Nature*, p. 157. Quoted in Nelson, *Inquiry, Conversation and Theistic Belief*, p. 500. Italics added by Nelson.

## **2. (Im)possible Solutions to the Problem of Religious Language.**

### **2.1. The Problem and Its Pseudo-Solutions.**

Before proceeding to discussion of the attempted solutions to the problem of religious language it is worth once again restating the problem in relation to a few definitions of religion. Nancy Frankenberry claims that definitions of religion tend to come in two varieties, the social scientific and the theological. Theologians may claim, “Religion, therefore, as I now ask you to arbitrarily to take it, shall mean for us the *feelings, acts, and experiences of individual men in their solitude, so far as they apprehend themselves to stand in relation to whatever they may consider divine.*”<sup>46</sup> While the social scientist might hold the position:

“...religion can be defined as a system of myth and ritual. The long version has three parts: (1) Religion is a communal system of propositional attitudes (i.e., beliefs, including hopes, fears, and desires) and practices that are related to superhuman agents. (2) Myth is a story with a beginning, middle, and end, which was or is transmitted orally about the deeds of superhuman agents... (3) Ritual is a system of communal actions consisting of both verbal and nonverbal interactions with a superhuman agent or agents.”<sup>47</sup>

For the remainder of this work ‘religious language’ is understood to be any meaningful speech act relating to the above quotation, additionally extending it to the questions asked within the discipline of systematic theology. (One example of this can be found in the sub-discipline of religious anthropology. When scholars begin discussing sin and its affect upon humanity, they are using religious language in an attempt to describe the human condition.) With this loose definition we can now look at the problem of religious language. The problem arises when we try to disprove or validate such religious statements. If we are presented with the conflicting statements, (a) it is the case such that an entity, understood as the Christian Trinity, exists, and (b) it is not the case that an entity, understood as the Christian Trinity, exists, how are we to go about determining which of these statements are true? This problem has traditional importance due to the philosophical discipline's eternal fear of relativism.

A great deal of ink has been spilled in the hopes of finding a way to either completely verify these statements or to at least make some step beyond being forced to remain silent in face of such claims. Four major historical approaches to this problem have been discussed in the earlier introduction of this work, for our purposes, it is enough to simply mention that these are the Via Negativa, Analogy, Symbolic, and Mythic approaches to religious language. In this section we will examine three most predominant philosophical theories of truth, the positivist correspondence theory, the

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46 James, William, *The Varieties of Religious Experience*, p. 36

47 Frankenberry, *The Study of Religion after Davidson and Rorty*, p. 196.

continental hermeneutic movement, and what I understand to be something of a synthesis between these positions, coherence theory. I will continue by examining the underlying theories of truth that function within the aforementioned theological responses to the problem of religious language. Due to the problems found within these philosophical theories of truth, we must search for an alternative to the theological theories as well. It is my hope that lining these positions up will allow for a clear refutation of their shared endeavors and favor the adoption of Rorty's post-philosophical position of *ironism*. The third and final chapter will include the formation of what will be called *theological ironism*.

## **2.2. The Correspondence Theory of Truth.**

Correspondence theory became the mainstream epistemic theory predominately because of the work of Descartes. His emphasis on the dual nature of man demands an explanation of how the cognitive can match-up with the physical. Simply stated the correspondence theory of truth holds that “to know is to represent accurately what is outside the mind; so to understand the possibility and nature of knowledge is to understand the way in which the mind is able to construct such representations.”<sup>48</sup> It then becomes the overall task of philosophy to form “a general theory of representation, a theory which will divide culture up into the areas which represent reality well, those which represent it less well, and those which do not represent it at all (despite their pretense of doing so).”<sup>49</sup>

According to this basic formulation truth consists in our thoughts, statements, or beliefs somehow accurately matching up to some fact which exists in the external world. The question of what this fact is has varied widely throughout the historical discussion. Some claim that it is the matching of thought with an object, while others claim that it is a matching with some form of a true sentence.

This view was first introduced in Plato's *Theaetetus* through the examples of the wax tablet. Socrates suggests that “we have in our souls a block of wax... We make impressions upon this of everything we wish to remember among things we have seen or heard or thought of ourselves.”<sup>50</sup> Here we see the internal represented by the wax tablet and the external world stamping itself upon the tablet. Socrates then introduces what I understand to be the biggest challenge to the correspondence theory of truth. “I know both you and Theodorus; I have your signs upon that block of wax... false judgment arises in the following manner: you know both men and you are looking at both...and you don't hold the two signs each in line with its own perception...”<sup>51</sup> While focusing his attention on the problem of false belief, Socrates has expressed the problem of adequately explaining the relationship between our internal thoughts/states/beliefs and the world of external entities. Socrates is unable to provide an acceptable

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48 Rorty, Richard, *Philosophy and the Mirror of Nature*, p. 3.

49 Ibid.

50 Cooper, John M., *Plato Complete Works*, p. 212, 191d-e.

51 Cooper, *Plato*, p. 214, 193c-194a.

explanation, and his interlocutor agrees that all of their intellectual “offspring are wind-eggs and not worth bringing up.”<sup>52</sup>

The inability to account properly for this internal-external relationship was the ground for the later developments within the era of modern philosophy. Descartes attempted to circumvent this problem with the introduction of the pineal gland as link between matter and mind.<sup>53</sup> Berkeley threw out the notion of matter entirely, asserting that only mind and thought exist.<sup>54</sup> Finally, Kant accepted that we can never come to know things in the external world in-themselves, but are limited to our experience of the phenomenon. After Kant's *Critique of Pure Reason*, this debate led to a major schism of the philosophical world into what eventually became the analytic and continental schools of philosophy.

The major problem with the correspondence theory of truth is that in order to show its validity, supporters must somehow manage to explain the relationship between an external and internal world.<sup>55</sup> Maimonides' theory of *Via Negativa*, mentioned above, is trying to circumvent just this problem. He claimed that our language was incapable of reaching *out* and accurately describing G-d. His introduction of negative description, however, cannot make the leap from internal thoughts and beliefs to the external G-d in the traditional subject/predicate sense. In claiming that “G-d is not evil” we still find ourselves positing a positive truth claim from within some inner theoretical framework (soul/mind/language/conceptual schema) onto something external without any explanation of the relationship between inner/outer or how we can verify such a claim. However, this isn't exactly what Maimonides intends when he begins using double negatives to speak of G-d. “What Maimonides has in mind is a more extreme form of negation. Thus 'God is powerful' means 'God does not lack power *or* possess it in a way that makes it comparable to other things.’”<sup>56</sup>

From across the ocean two alternative ways of skirting the problematic explanation for the relationship between the internal world and the external. These were the existential and hermeneutic movements which find their roots in the writings of Martin Heidegger. These are necessary to discuss mainly due to their similarity to Rorty's position of ironism. The following section will draw attention to the differences between these positions.

### **2.3. Heidegger's Mistaken Successors.**

The hermeneutic explanation of truth function has become somewhat outdated in the world of professional philosophy, being criticized largely for its lack of objectivity. From within the continental schools of philosophy the work in hermeneutics has moved to account for our inability to latch on to the world through language, and shifts our

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52 Ibid. p. 233, 210b.

53 See Rene Descartes, *Meditations on First Philosophy*.

54 See George Berkeley, *A Treatise concerning the Principles of Human Knowledge*.

55 We must point out that this dichotomy is not necessarily restricted to the physical or mental realms. The ‘inner’ realm can also stand in relation to the language used by a given society.

56 Seeskin, Kenneth, “Maimonides”, in *The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy*, §4.

attention the plethora of subjective vantage points for any given truth claim. After Kant and Hegel, the works of Edmund Husserl and, in particular, Martin Heidegger paved the grounds for the development of contemporary hermeneutics. The most prolific among our hermeneutical forebears is Hans-Georg Gadamer. His work is a crucial point of discussion for the project of forming an ironic theology, as there stands a great deal of similarity between Gadamer's hermeneutics and the position of philosophical ironism which is promoted by the later work of Rorty.

Gadamer was directly influenced by Heidegger and his magnum opus, *Truth and Method*, stands as an explicit development of the nuggets of hermeneutical theory which were sporadically dropped in the German existentialist thinker's *Sein und Zeit*. In the introduction to *Truth and Method*, Gadamer writes that the task of hermeneutics as “an attempt to understand what the human sciences truly are, beyond their methodological self-consciousness, and what connects them with the totality of our experience of world.”<sup>57</sup> In brief, Gadamer argues that in relation to any text or artwork 'Y', the truths which we as an audience find within 'Y' are tied to an ever expanding horizon of understanding. By engaging with a piece of art or a text we find ourselves directly faced with an “experience of human finitude.”<sup>58</sup> When we are exposed to such a medium we cannot help but come up and against our own contingent historical situation. Harkening upon the work of Hegel, Gadamer understands the scope of our possible interpretations of 'Y' to be limited to the scope of knowledge within our given epoch. A crude example of this would be a pre-Copernican astronomer looking at a drawing of the Sun and Earth, they would be limited by a geocentric understanding of what is being depicted on the tapestry. If an astronomer were to examine the same drawing today, she would see two celestial bodies which exist in a heliocentric orbit. As the historical developments of physics and cosmology came to pass our horizon of understanding grew wider. History directly shapes and limits our ability to interpret the world, and our ability to understand and interpret moves parallel to the motion of history.

The horizon of understanding is explained as “understanding and interpretation thus always occurs from within a particular ‘horizon’ that is determined by our historically-determined situatedness.”<sup>59</sup> This strong emphasis upon the idea that “all knowledge and indeed all experience is historically conditioned” is the greatest link between the views of Gadamer and Rorty. We approach every medium with what Rorty would describe as a contingent vocabulary, and operating within this historically situated system of meaning we cannot help but interpret it in a certain manner. Because of the inseparable nature of truth and history, both Gadamer and Rorty claim that “the *moral* task of the philosopher or cultural critic is to defend the openness of human conversation against all those temptations and real threats that seek closure.”<sup>60</sup>

While these two thinkers are promoting extremely similar goals, Rorty does not call for the adoption of hermeneutics as the replacement of epistemology. As such, we cannot call for the hermeneutic tradition alone to replace the historical responses to the

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57 Gadamer, Hans-Georg, Weinsheimer, J. (trans.), Marshall, D.G. (trans.), *Truth and Method*, p. XXII.

58 Ibid. p. 351.

59 Malpas, Jeff, *Hans-Georg Gadamer*, The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy, §3.2.

60 Bernstein, Richard, *Beyond Objectivity and Relativism*, p. 207.

problem of religious language. The points of disagreement between Rorty and Gadamer are largely a matter of degree. Regarding the anti-objective historicism, a commitment common to both theorists, the consequences which they draw are very different. Gadamer holds on to the optimistic view that through dialogue and constant expansion of our horizon of understanding we can “in some non-trivial sense overcome the constraints of historical particularity.”<sup>61</sup> He hopes that eventually through the exposure to the languages and variety of experiences of others, we can find some position which can lift us away from our limited historical vantage points.

Rorty is not so hopeful. In his view, we are completely locked in our own contingency and because of this “there is no way to argue for one's own position. The best one can do is to 'show how the other side looks from our own point of view.’”<sup>62</sup> Bouma-Prediger argues that this pessimistic view towards the outcome of dialogue “dissolves any expectation of mutual understanding...” but this misses the pragmatic constructive essence of Rorty's philosophical goals. The idea that we can have some higher vantage on ourselves and others is rejected because it is unnecessary for the task of bettering society. Rorty claims that we do not need an objective position in order to respect the other and form a society which behaves in an ever increasingly just manner. He understands this solidarity of humans as “the ability to see more and more traditional difference (of tribe, religion, race, customs, and the like) as unimportant when compared with the similarities with respect to pain and humiliation.”<sup>63</sup> He is calling us to abandon the notion that we need to find some sort of common truth, when we already have such concepts inherent within our contingent vocabularies.

Gadamer's hopeful search for mutual understanding is such because of his building upon a Heideggerian ontology. “Following Heidegger, Gadamer views truth as a manifestation or revelation of being. Understanding is 'an encounter with something that asserts itself as truth...’”<sup>64</sup> Gadamer is holding onto the old dogmatic metaphor that there is a thing-in-itself out *there* that somehow we can map our language upon. This simply must be the case for Gadamer's positive view towards the expansion of the horizon of understanding. Through history we uncover more and more of the truth about things-in-themselves, so the process of dialogue and expanding one's horizon is making progress towards something better. Rorty calls into question precisely this notion. Why does there need to be a thing-in-itself out there which we are coming to discover in ever increasing detail? The burden of proof for a concept such as this remains firmly in the court of the hermeneutic theorist, and it is one to which they cannot present a doubt-free answer. Rorty throws aside the idea of hidden things which we search for and declares truth to be “*merely* a name for certain statements that we agree to call true because they help us cope with reality...”<sup>65</sup>

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61 Bouma-Prediger, Steve, *Rorty's Pragmatism and Gadamer's Hermeneutics*, Journal for the Academy of Religion, LVII/2, p. 321.

62 Ibid., p. 320.

63 Rorty, *Contingency, Irony, and Solidarity*, p. 192.

64 Bouma-Prediger, *Rorty and Gadamer*, p. 321.

65 Ibid.

If we look at how these theories of truth can relate to the practice of interreligious dialogue it may seem that Gadamer's approach provides a more peaceful coexistence. However, this surface notion can be shown to be false. Due to the buried truth of an existent thing-in-itself, our dialogue should lead to the result of someone holding mistaken beliefs in their religious tradition. It cannot be that contradictory systems of belief can simultaneously be correct. This stands against the theological ironist's position where both of these can exist simultaneously because their truth is not what matters, but their ability to help an individual cope with their existence. Participants in dialogue can adhere to their tradition faithfully and without doubt, while granting the same status to the beliefs held by the religious other. As we have now laid the foreground of the philosophical hermeneutics that grew out of the influence of Martin Heidegger we are now in a position to examine the theological existentialism/hermeneutics of Rudolf Bultmann and his response to the problem of religious language.

Bultmann is known for his method of biblical exegesis known as demythologization. This method was an "attempt to clarify the truth-contents of the scriptures by eliminating the historical or mythological elements of the New Testament, and by concentrating, in an existentially intonated exegesis, on the perennially valid and present aspects of the Bible."<sup>66</sup> This method, when applied to the problem of religious language, gives us a response which is quite similar to that of Richard Rorty. Bultmann would argue that the truth of a religious claim would stand on its usefulness or practicality in our own lives. Can the religious sentence shape our actions and, most importantly, grant a sense of meaning to our existence? If so, it is taken as a truth; if not, a falsity. Rorty would agree somewhat with this position, for he maintained the position that truth is nothing more than an agreed upon coping mechanism found within any given society.

The differences between the two stand in response to the charge that they may be seen as relativists. Bultmann, on my reading, does not possess much of a counterargument to this attack. The usefulness and applicability of a biblical text will of course be relative to a believer's context and one cannot determine truth beyond mere subjectivity. Rorty's ironic neopragmatism calls into question the need for the traditional concept of truth. If we abandon it we can avoid the problem of relativism by showing it to be internally inconsistent.<sup>67</sup> His approach holds that certain cases of religious language do have a functional value that extends beyond personal meaning. The meaning of a given statement has larger usefulness to the society in which one is situated. Rather than comparing our readings of a given text and declaring one to hold more inherent truth than another, their usefulness is viewed in the public sphere by how it succeeds or fails to reduce the pain and suffering of others. This is what Rorty would call changing our goal of reaching objectivity with chasing the expansion of human solidarity. "Insofar as a person is seeking solidarity, she does not ask about the relation

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66 Thornhill, Chris, *Karl Jaspers*, The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy, §3.

67 The validity of Rorty's position of ironism will be examined in section three of this chapter.

between the practices of the chosen community and something outside that community.”<sup>68</sup> These practices, or for our purposes statements of religious language, are not taken to be compared to some hard objective standard which exists external of the community. This is extremely similar to the position of Bultmann, however it is not identical due to his “not holding a positive theory which says something is relative to something else. [Rorty] is, instead, making the purely *negative* point that we should drop the traditional distinction between knowledge and opinion.”<sup>69</sup> Ironic neopragmatism views the concepts of truth and knowledge as little more than “a compliment paid to the beliefs which we think so well justified that, for the moment, further justification is not needed. One example of religious language which fits within this approach is the command in Exodus 20:13, “You shall not murder.” The disapproval of murder, be it religious or secular, is a value agreed upon within our community, and as such requires no further effort of justification. Bultmann's exegetical method would claim that this is a truth found in the text, Rorty only asserts that it is a point of solidarity amongst our peers.

Before further explaining the system of ironic neopragmatism, we must examine one final mainstream alternative theory of truth and its response to the problem of religious language, that of the coherence theory of truth.

#### **2.4. Donald Davidson and the Coherence Theory of Truth.**

Donald Davidson, following in the footsteps of Willard van Orman Quine, focused his philosophical efforts on tackling the problems of translation and radical interpretation. Davidson's attention, however, was not aimed directly at epistemology, but rather questions of semantics. In his famous essays *Truth and Meaning*, *Radical Interpretation*, and *On the Very Idea of a Conceptual Scheme*, Davidson argues that what we are searching for when we ask questions of meaning can be satisfied by answering questions of semantic truth value. Within this body of work we find his famous argument against the concept of alternative conceptual schemes, drawing heavily from the work of Alfred Tarski, Davidson's general argument against radically different languages, which leads to the incoherence of alternative conceptual schemes, begins by introducing the Principle of Charity.<sup>70</sup> The principle holds that we “make L-speakers maximally rational by our own standards. That is, we must assume that they have a practical grasp of elementary rules of inference, so that one won't believe both *S* and  $\sim$ *S*, that if he believes *S* and *T*, he'll also believe *S*, and so on.”<sup>71</sup>

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68 Rorty, Richard *Objectivity, Relativism, and Truth*, p. 21.

69 Ibid.

70 John Allen Knight calls into question Davidson's understanding of Tarski in his article *Why Not Davidson: Neopragmatism in Religion and the Coherence of Alternative Conceptual Schemes* published in *The Journal of Religion*. He writes “Davidson's argument against alternative conceptual schemes and his theory of meaning have been subjected to criticism in the philosophical literature... Such criticisms show that Davidson relies on a confused understanding of the relationship between Alfred Tarski's formulation of truth for formalized languages and our ordinary, pretheoretic notion of truth.” p.159.

71 Baillie, James, *Contemporary Analytic Philosophy*, p. 352.



By charitably assuming that the speakers of another language are rational, we can view their utterances as linguistic indicators of some understandable (matches our own logical operators) truth value. One example showcasing the usage of T-sentences<sup>72</sup> and the usage of the principle of charity is found in the case of Kurt uttering “Es regnet.” We find evidence that this utterance translates to “it is raining” by noting that: “Kurt belongs to the German speech community and Kurt holds true ‘Es regnet’ on Saturday at noon and it is raining near Kurt on Saturday at noon.”<sup>73</sup> If we wish to push a form of radical skepticism we can argue that just because this was the context of Kurt's utterance, it does not mean that this is the precise meaning Kurt wished to convey. However, pushing such a counterargument is of use to no one. Davidson circumvents the skeptic by implementing his principle of charity and searching for similarity between Kurt's language and our own. In cases of radical translation, we begin by “assigning truth conditions to alien sentences that make native speakers right when plausibly possible, according, of course, to our own view of what is right.”<sup>74</sup> We have seen how the principle of charity can be used to find the meaning of sentences uttered by someone from another linguistic community, but we have yet to discuss the challenge Davidson's theory raises for the notion of alternative conceptual schemes.

If we look to the example of Kurt saying “Es regnet” and ourselves saying “it is raining” and it is in fact raining, it would seem that the logical structures of our respective languages hold at least some deal of similarity. Davidson extends this to the concept of conceptual schemes. I live in the conceptual scheme of a native English speaker, if my partner lives in the conceptual scheme of a native German speaker, and we are able to have meaningful (in the non-philosophical, everyday usage of the term) discussions over a variety of topics it is necessary that our languages share a common logic. The logic of these languages is built into the logic of a given conceptual scheme. Following the same argument that two different languages hold a great deal in common, it must also be the case that our conceptual schemes do, as well. Davidson holds that these radically alternative conceptual schemes cannot exist due to our shared physical universe. If the environment which we share is similar enough than our conceptual framework should operate and a reasonably similar manner, enough so that we are able to translate each others languages. “If we cannot find a way to interpret the utterances and other behaviour of a creature as revealing a set of beliefs largely consistent and true by our own standards, we have no reason to count that creature as rational, as having beliefs, or saying anything.”<sup>75</sup>

This theory seems quite reasonable, and we must acknowledge that it does not fall into the trap of a correspondence theory of truth due to it holding truth to be a value found in a sentence fitting into the larger web of beliefs of a given language. For

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72 T-Sentences were first introduced in the work of Alfred Tarski. The form of a T-Sentence is “X is true if and only if p.” On the left side of the biconditional we find the name of a sentence within a given language; on the right we find the sentence from the left side being used. The example commonly used by Davidson is: “Snow is white” is true if and only if snow is white. See Baillie p. 325 for further introduction to Tarski's work.

73 Davidson, Donald, “Radical Interpretation”, in *Contemporary Analytic Philosophy*, p. 377.

74 Ibid. p. 378.

75 Ibid.

Davidson, truth is not *out there* in the world, but rather it is found through the coherence of the meaning of our sentences to the larger linguistic world in which we reside. It would seem though that Davidson is still hanging on to what he calls the third dogma of empiricism. This dogma is that there must be some way of explaining the relationship between the brute materiality of the empirical world, and our own conceptual schemes. (This is essentially a re-naming of the old Kantian dualism of noumena and phenomenon.) Taking Davidson in such a shallow reading would fail to move our discussion forward, but when we are more gracious in our reading we find that:

“What the Davidsonian account of knowledge and interpretation demonstrates however, is that no such distinction can be drawn. Attitudes are already connected – causally, semantically and epistemically – with objects and events in the world; while knowledge of self and others already presupposes knowledge of the world. The very idea of a conceptual scheme is thus rejected by Davidson along with the idea of any strong form of conceptual relativism.”<sup>76</sup>

It is at this point when we can question the central theological work presented by the symbolic theorists, such as Tillich. Frankenberry uses Davidson’s work to examine the faulty steps of claiming that theological language must be understood symbolically. She writes:

“...theologians have treated symbolization as a special instance of the semiotic, and have indulged in opaque claims, such as ‘the symbol participates in that to which it points’ (Tillich), or ‘in hermeneutics symbols have their own semantics; they stimulate an intellectual activity of deciphering, of finding hidden meaning’ (Ricoeur)... Davidson allows us to correct the entire tradition of hermeneutical theology by seeing symbolic or metaphorical utterances as having to do with *use* or *force*... No matter how you *use* sentences, they can only *mean* what the words themselves mean literally.”<sup>77</sup>

Frankenberry continues with the example sentence, “The Lord is my shepard”, noting that regardless of personal interpretation, the meaning of the words within the sentence have not changed from their definitions within the English language. Davidson’s coherence theory, under Frankenberry’s usage, acts as a powerful tonic against sentences which are overextended by their creators.

Working contemporaneously with Davidson, Rorty was sympathetic to his work on language and conceptual schemes. Rorty’s own position leans heavily upon the Davidsonian rejection of the correspondence theory, and as a result of this it is somewhat difficult to disentangle the Davidsonian strands of thought from Rorty’s

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76 Malpas, Jeff, *Donald Davidson*, The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy, §4.3.

77 Frankenberry, *The Study of Religion after Davidson and Rorty*, p. 201.

stance of *ironism*. In a filmed discussion between the two thinkers, *The Rorty Discussion*, we find both thinkers discussing their differences which mainly boil down to their views on the necessity of a theory of meaning for other aspects of the philosophical enterprise. Rorty begins the discussion by briefly mentioning an attempt at writing a segment on Davidson and Tarski stating, “I found myself saying 'You go for formal systems. I don't...You have constructive projects in philosophy and I don't... I never really wanted a theory of meaning... I just wanted ammunition to use against the philosophical tradition.’”<sup>78</sup> Davidson, in Rorty's understanding, is still clinging to the notion that we can have or need certain true systems of describing the function of language and truth. As pragmatists “we will not initially be concerned... with questions about what entailments this proposition has or with whether these entailments are or are not self-contradictory. Rather, we must ask whether this supposition has any practical application, and, if so, how useful the application is.”<sup>79</sup> Prior to the interview he had written, “The quest for a theory of reference represents a confusion between the hopeless 'semantic' quest for a general theory of what people are 'really talking about,' and the equally hopeless 'epistemological' quest for a way of refuting the skeptic...”<sup>80</sup> Rorty sees Davidson as committing both errors.

Rorty is a thinker who places himself in the position of largely doubting the value of the project of foundational epistemology. Davidson, while not himself a foundationalist, is still captivated by questions of truth, reference, and meaning. Rorty claims “the question 'What determines reference?' is ambiguous between a question about the best procedure for comparing large coherent sets of false beliefs (other epochs, cultures, etc.) with ours and a question about how to refute the skeptic.”<sup>81</sup> He continues by asserting that there is nothing that can ever refute the skeptic's argument. No matter which angle we approach the problem the skeptic can always cast some doubt upon our claims. We must accept that “we discover how language works only within the present theory of the rest of the world, and one cannot use a part of one's present theory to underwrite the rest of it.”<sup>82</sup>

We have now discussed the three mainstream approaches correspondence, hermeneutics, and coherence theory. We find ourselves in the position to move forward and beyond the pursuit of epistemological foundations to which the tradition has been bound. If there are major flaws in these historical positions, then we must doubt and reform the answers to any and all theological questions which have been built upon similar structures. The next section will present in detail Rorty's alternative approach to the questions of truth and meaning in philosophy.

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78 Philosophy International. *In Conversation: Donald Davidson, The Rorty Discussion*. London School of Economics, Sept. 1997.

79 Lauritzen, *Philosophy of Religion and the Mirror of Nature*, p. 38.

80 Rorty, *Philosophy and the Mirror of Nature*, p. 293.

81 *Ibid.*, p. 293.

82 *Ibid.*, p. 294.

### **3. Richard Rorty: Rejecting Representationalism.**

#### **3.1. Metaphilosophy and Methodological Ironism.**

Towards the end of the 1950's there was a large backlash within academic philosophy against the work of the Logical Positivists. Thinkers such as W.V.O. Quine, Thomas Kuhn, and Donald Davidson were attacking the principles which stood at the heart of the positivist doctrine. By calling into question the principle of verifiability, these theorists were able to finally dethrone the reigning titan of philosophical approaches. While these philosophers differed somewhat in their approaches their general dissent against positivism opened the door to new avenues of positive philosophical exploration. This was not the case with Richard Rorty.

After an exemplary early career contributing to the field with constructive projects in the philosophy of language and philosophy of mind, Rorty made a strong turn towards questions of metaphilosophy and what it means to make philosophical progress. Drawing upon the work of his predecessors, Rorty took their views and turned them back upon themselves. Rather than working to raise the discipline out of a positivist fog and continue the quest for truth, his central goal was to turn the gun on philosophy itself. In doing so, Rorty hoped that a recognition of the limits of philosophy, and especially that of epistemology and metaphysical philosophy of language, would lead to theorists turning their attention towards pursuing goals of solidarity rather than objectivity. The following section will elaborate on Rorty's criticism of the philosophical method and clearly state the post-philosophical position he dubbed *ironism*. We will proceed by working through these themes in an order which parallels Rorty's own literary development. This task will conclude the chapter and we will then turn to questions of earlier instances of antifoundationalism within the work of Johann Gottfried Herder, before returning to how to apply Rorty's *ironism* to the problem of religious language and also to the discipline of systematic theology as a whole.

#### **3.2. Shattering the Mirror of Nature.**

The central thesis of Rorty's breakthrough philosophical manuscript is that, from its earliest moments to its present status, philosophy has aimed to answer questions of how our knowledge of the world can *mirror* the world itself. As mentioned above in the discussion of correspondence theory this found its first breath in the work of Plato's *Theaetetus*. The goal of explaining the mirror continued through the work of modern

philosophy<sup>83</sup>, and survives today in the work of phenomenologists and a great deal of analytic philosophy.

Epistemology, in its most recent form was the target for Rorty's deconstructive usage of the history of philosophy. In describing his prey he writes, "I shall try to back up the claim (common to Wittgenstein and Dewey) that to think of knowledge which presents a 'problem,' and about which we ought to have a 'theory,' is a product of viewing knowledge as an assemblage of representations..."<sup>84</sup> It is Rorty's hope that there may be some way we can resist the temptation to lose ourselves to such a viewpoint. On Rorty's reading, this flawed understanding of knowledge has something of a well trod path<sup>85</sup> which philosophers continue to follow. First, (I) we form a belief through immediate experience. Second, (II) we take 'better understanding' to consist in knowledge being accurate representation of the experienced object. Third, (III) there must be some special type of representations which give us a privileged position of knowledge. Fourth and finally, (IV) this privileged position will become the foundation of our knowledge, which then extends itself into our culture beliefs and values.<sup>86</sup>

If we manage to find the strength to escape this progression, Rorty believes epistemology becomes an optional task, which if abandoned will drastically shake philosophy's view of itself. His critique proceeds by attacking (II) and (III). If these premises are removed one cannot make sense of the traditional search for foundations of knowledge, and philosophers are forced to find a better use for their time.

If knowledge of object 'Z' is not to be understood as having an accurate formal/structural/phenomenological/grammatical/logical/conceptual/mental/spiritual representation of 'Z', then how are we to conceive of it? This task is conceptually difficult as children of the enlightenment, because we have been spoon fed this view of knowledge from an early age. The most recent major historical support for this thesis was found in the work of Russell and the Vienna Circle. They held that by highlighting the difference between necessity and contingency, we were thus enabled to see "the distinction between 'true by virtue of meaning' and 'true by virtue of experience'..."<sup>87</sup> This position came under fire in the late 1950's through Quine's famous critique *Two Dogmas of Empiricism*. He notes that we cannot easily draw this distinction due to flaws in our method which fail to allow us to differentiate between when we are examining language or experiences. Without this ability the systems presented by the

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83 Though this was a mainstream endeavor in Modern epistemology there were counter movements which attempted to shift the discussion to new metaphors. Beate Allert writes in her essay *Herder's 'Sonnenspiegel' and 'Sonnensiegel'*, "Herder continues by shifting attention from seeing to sensing and hearing..." p. 97. Herder was one of multiple authors who strove to break with the commonly held view that sight was the premier way of encountering the world and played a privileged role in the development of language.

84 Rorty, *Philosophy and the Mirror of Nature*, p. 136.

85 Paraphrasing of Rorty's PMN, p. 163.

86 A modern example of this can be seen in the way certain physicists present their discipline to the broader public in Western society. For them, physics gives us *the* most definite and precise description of the universe, and it should stand as the foundation of all other disciplines. Any cultural or religious beliefs which do not cohere with the *special* truths provided by physicists must be discarded as nonsensical hogwash.

87 Rorty, *Philosophy and the Mirror of Nature*, p. 169.

ideal language philosophers fall flat. Rorty agrees, so far, with Quine's critique and moves forward to casting doubt upon the quest for a theory of knowledge. In his eyes, every historical attempt to ground the foundations of our knowledge of the world collapse precisely because they cannot describe how words latch on to objects without slipping into paradox. Until foundationalist thinkers can muster an argument which can leap the pitfall of paradox, we can reserve the right to ignore their arguments and focus on other tasks. We now find ourselves ready to discuss the alternative to (II).

Rorty writes, "In order to defend Sellars and Quine, I shall be arguing that their holism is a product of their commitment to the thesis that justification is not a matter of a special relation between ideas (or words) and objects, but of conversation, of social practice."<sup>88</sup> Language is not something which hovers objectively above society and culture, but rather, twists and writhes within these norms and values. We cannot assume that we have stumbled upon a language (formal or otherwise) which will stand over and above all other languages, granting us *the* clearest view of things as they are. There is no such platform to grant us sights of the elusive truths, nor are there elusive universal truths to be found. We are locked within amorphous, ever evolving linguistic frameworks and cannot transcend them. Our problem stems from our inability to determine the criteria for progress regarding the projects found within epistemology. With the introduction of each new and *better* epistemic theory, philosophers find themselves playing with a new set of rules even though "we will not know what epistemology's goal or method could be."<sup>89</sup> We have found ourselves continually struggling to draw the line between our internal concepts and whatever may (or may not) exist external of our minds/languages/experiences. Despite the limitations of our cages of language, we can expand the walls of our prison through ongoing conversation. It is precisely this point which Rorty champions as the future of philosophy. Only if we turn aside from the Sisyphean task of grounding all knowledge, can philosophy have a future different than running on a hamster wheel. This problem would seem to grow to extreme proportions when we begin trying to grant meaning to statements referring to things that exist outside of the standard word-object form, such as statements of religious language.

If we abandon the hope for some final language which grants us a privileged access to what may (or may not) lie beyond our perception, we will certainly be faced with the question of what other alternative we have. Philosophers still struggle with a great phobia of relativism which held the attention of our ancestors, and it presents us with pragmatic as well as traditional problems. In cases of religious discussion, political debate, and ethical discourse relativism gives us no assistance in moving forward. (In light of the current political climate one could argue that relativism has been weaponized.) Rorty's alternative to traditional epistemology and relativism is termed *epistemological behaviorism*.

Following in the footsteps of Wittgenstein's therapeutic approach to philosophy and Dewey's tendency "to shy away from speaking to what a belief would have to do in

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88 Ibid., p. 170.

89 Ibid., p. 169.

the future to show itself to be true and sticks, rather, with a belief's ability to solve a problem in the present."<sup>90</sup> Rorty hopes that he can provide a dissolution to the traditional work in epistemology without being forced to appeal to the troublesome field of metaphysics and sticking only with an approach to truth common to the American pragmatists. He asserts that "if we understand the rules of a language-game, we understand all that there is to understand about why moves in that language-game are made...it will not occur to us to invoke either of the traditional Kantian distinctions."<sup>91</sup>

If we proceed by bracketing the traditional questions that arise from Kantian philosophy and begin from Wittgenstein's claim that meaning and truth occur only in the manner in which words are used in a language game, we find ourselves with a completely satisfactory theory of meaning.<sup>92</sup> Everything which we can demand from a theory of meaning is found within the Wittgensteinian project. If we take this approach we find ourselves led towards a "pragmatic view of truth and a therapeutic approach to ontology (in which philosophy can straighten out pointless quarrels...but not contribute any arguments of its own for the existence or inexistence of something."<sup>93</sup> Rorty's rejection of epistemology and metaphysics is not an omission across the board, but is simply a call for silence in regards to the overly constructive projects which have dominated the discipline. Thus, in Rorty's eyes philosophy does have a future, but it is one which is limited to critical inquiry and review of claims presented by others through playful linguistic creation. In one sense it can appear to be a return to the form of dialogue which was practiced by Socrates prior to "Plato [inventing] 'philosophical thinking'..."<sup>94</sup> Rather than promoting any one doctrine, we should press those who claim to hold the one true doctrine on their assertions in an attempt to form more humble limits surrounding statements of things as they are.

One might ask, what does this position demand of us other than to promote relativism with a new and polished vernacular? Relativism, as Rorty understands it, is nothing more than an illusory challenge. Philosophers who hurl the title of relativist at those who would appear to reject the search for some objective vantage point of the world, can only do so due to their own commitment to their Platonic and Cartesian ancestors. "To see relativism lurking in every attempt to formulate conditions for truth or reality or goodness which does not attempt to provide uniquely individuating conditions we must adopt the 'Platonic' notion of the transcendental..."<sup>95</sup> We have already seen that accepting the notion that we may achieve some sort of transcendental objective world view, leads us into the problems which have plagued the epistemologist's search for a way to hook our words/thoughts/ideas onto something out *there* in the world. Relativism only exists as the shadowy opposite of the certainty that we can achieve some privileged representation of reality. If we are to remove this certainty and opt for an alternative, the shadow of relativism will disappear entirely.

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90 Misak, Cheryl, *The American Pragmatists*, p. 127.

91 Rorty, *Philosophy and the Mirror of Nature*, p. 174.

92 For more on 'language games' see Ludwig Wittgenstein, *Philosophical Investigations*.

93 Rorty, *Philosophy and the Mirror of Nature*, p. 175.

94 *Ibid.*, p. 166.

95 *Ibid.*, p. 374.

The position of Rorty's edifying philosophy can thus skirt the charges of relativism, because the charge is nothing more than an absurd response to an absurd view of truth. Rather than struggle to provide logical responses to inherently illogical questions, Rorty suggests that philosophy needs to take another path. Philosophy must become "reactive, having sense only as a protest against attempts to close of conversation by proposals for universal commensuration through the hypostatization of some privileged set of descriptions."<sup>96</sup> Philosophy must abandon its quest for a final foundation for knowledge and through promoting the constant search for new directions in which to turn our conversations. "Such new directions may, perhaps, engender new normal discourses, new sciences, new philosophical research programs, and thus new objective truths. But they [objective truths] are not the point of edifying philosophy, only accidental byproducts."<sup>97</sup> Philosophy returns to its initial gadfly-like practice. It exists to stir the pot and keep culture from becoming a constant stagnant repetition. Here Rorty appeals to Dewey's understanding of philosophy's social function consisting in "breaking the crust of convention,' preventing man from deluding himself with the notion that he knows himself, or anything else, except under optional descriptions."<sup>98</sup>

We must now turn our attention to what this new edifying philosophy looks like in greater detail. What does this future society shaking figure look like? To answer these questions we will now examine Rorty's development of ironism, the position adopted by the individual who can take up this banner and decry the continual hunt for hidden Platonic truths.

### **3.3. The Ironist: Accepting Contingency and the Search for Solidarity.**

What does a philosopher, who does not practice philosophy, look like? Rorty's champion of postmodernism, the Ironist, is a figure who seems to fit this description. Continuing the practice of philosophy, without pursuing the goals of the traditional philosopher, the Ironist acts as a critical guardsman against the temptations of dogmatic metaphysics and epistemology. She stands by repeating the claim that "*languages* are made rather than found, and that truth is a property of linguistic entities..."<sup>99</sup> The Ironic philosopher is one who will accept the limitations of her language and will come to view truth as nothing more than "an empty compliment – one traditionally paid to writers whose novel jargon we have found useful."<sup>100</sup> This is not to say that we are adopting a strong position of nihilism in relation to truth claims. The Ironist does not say that truth does not exist, but rather says that our time is better spent working towards social progress.

The traditional arguments surrounding truth and how we may stumble upon it are ultimately paradoxical. When we attempt to present a formal logical argument against truth values we are inevitably using these same values to voice our criticism.

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96 Ibid., p. 377.

97 Ibid., pp. 378-379.

98 Ibid., p. 379.

99 Rorty, *Contingency, Irony, and Solidarity*, p. 7.

100 Ibid., p. 8.



While this may have been necessary at one point in the history of philosophy, and Rorty understands the linguistic turn to be such a philosophical dead end, the next generation of philosopher should adopt a new method. “The method is to redescribe lots and lots of things in new ways, until you have created a pattern of linguistic behavior which will tempt the rising generation to adopt it... It does not pretend to have a better candidate for doing the same old things...it suggests we might want to stop doing those things and do something else.”<sup>101</sup> Rather than kick around the same old problems, which likely have little impact on the broader society, Rorty is calling philosophers to come down from their ivory towers and work towards cultural progress.

We can measure social progress in a much easier manner than we can measure the progress towards truth. It is not difficult to look around and see the suffering of others, but it is rather difficult (and arguably pointless) to measure the pursuit of an objective criteria of truth. We should form “a picture of intellectual and moral progress as a history of increasingly useful metaphors rather than of increasing understanding of how things really are.”<sup>102</sup> This metaphor keeps alive all of the progress which has been made in the natural sciences, but also extends itself to the practical work that has developed within the Geisteswissenschaften. All that this approaches lacks in comparison to the traditional view of progress as coming closer to how things really are, is that this view cannot be targeted as easily by positions of skepticism. Rorty's ironist view, is not a closed system. It accepts, to an extreme extent, that what we *know* now will not be an end all worldview. In the future we will find ourselves to no longer hold the right answers to questions of science, politics, religion, and morality. The concept that the vocabulary we currently hold is correct and the closest to truth, Rorty terms *final vocabulary*.

Before we can further discuss the position of ironism, we must first elaborate on this notion of a final vocabulary. Rorty claims, and I believe uncontroversially, that every individual carries with them a vocabulary which stands as the ground for their actions, beliefs, and meaning in their lives. This vocabulary, be it religious, philosophical, aesthetic, or scientific is understood to be the final vocabulary of each respective individual. When persons are offended or come into conflict over their beliefs it is because their final vocabularies do not overlap in an effective and functional way. It is at this point when dialogue often shuts down and people simply agree-to-disagree or resort to force in order to persuade their conversational partner. The problem of collapsing dialogue only occurs in instances in which both parties assert that their final vocabulary is a more accurate description of how things are. In order to shift around this problem Rorty argues that we must move beyond the chains of our own final vocabularies and become Ironists.

Rorty states that the Ironist can be defined by a person who fulfills the following three conditions:

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101 Ibid., p. 9.

102 Ibid.

“(1) She has radical and continuing doubts about the final vocabulary she currently uses, because she has been impressed by other vocabularies, vocabularies taken as final by people or books she has encountered; (2) she realizes that argument phrased in her present vocabulary can neither underwrite nor dissolve these doubts; (3) insofar as she philosophizes about her situation, she does not think that her vocabulary is closer to reality than others, that it is in touch with a power not herself.”<sup>103</sup>

This definition leaves us with a bit to unpack. Our next task will be to discuss these three conditions in relation to the discipline of philosophy, before transitioning in the closing chapter to how this position impacts the problem of religious language, the task of theology, and interreligious dialogue.

The first condition of being an Ironist highlights moments of doubt regarding one's own final vocabulary. This condition is interesting in that it presupposes an openness to dialogue. One could not achieve this first point without having already allowed themselves to be influenced by those who hold differing belief systems. Of course, this predisposition to intellectual openness should not disqualify Rorty's position of ironism from being a next stage in philosophy, nor for our purposes in theology and interreligious dialogue. In our contemporary world it is inevitable that we encounter groups and individuals who hold views which differ from our own. From our own experience each one of us can attest to the ways in which an outside perspective causes us to re-evaluate our own positions. However, this only occurs if one can reflect upon their own final vocabulary in an honest way. This honest reflection includes the possibility that our beliefs could be misguided. One cannot question that honest dialogue includes the willingness to change one's position when presented with a satisfactory argument, but we are much less clear on how to foster such an openness.

The answer to this question of temperament can be found in Rorty's previously mentioned vision of what it means to do philosophy.<sup>104</sup> Philosophers, and theologians, can only continue forming new vocabularies with the hope that they may fit our certain social situation and offer some new function which the previous language did not. By repeatedly presenting those who may not be open to dialogue with a variety of new examples and languages, eventually one may resonate within them.

The second condition of being an Ironist is the recognition that one cannot argue for the superiority of their final vocabulary without appealing to their own vocabulary. One can describe to their conversational partner the details and intricacies that compose the contents of their final vocabulary, however once they are pressed to argue why their view is better than others they find themselves unable to go any further. This mentality is exemplified in Wittgenstein's penultimate statement in the *Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus*: “My propositions are elucidatory in this way: he who understands me finally recognizes them as senseless, when he has climbed out through them, on them,

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103 Ibid., p. 73.

104 Ibid., p. 9.

over them. (He must so to speak throw away the ladder, after he has climbed up on it.)”<sup>105</sup> A single final vocabulary cannot escape itself. An argument within a coherent final vocabulary cannot be given which would cast doubt upon itself. We find examples of this within religious traditions, one does not foster an argument against the legitimacy of the Christian faith by working only within the Christian language-game, rather one must look for a source outside of the system itself in order to cast doubt and call the tradition into question. When we see members of another faith who are equally or more devout than ourselves this can be one source of doubt.

It will be argued in the final chapter of this dissertation that this doubt is something to be desired if we are going to have interreligious dialogue that is anything greater than a glorified version of show and tell. We must come face to face with a variety of final vocabularies in order to establish a faith which retains a healthy amount of doubt.

The third condition of being an Ironist is not assuming that one's own final vocabulary holds a position of epistemic superiority over another vocabulary. This condition follows from the first two in that it builds upon the doubt of one's final vocabulary. We come to doubt our own vocabularies through exposure to views which differ from our own, and if we accept condition (2) we cannot argue that our final vocabulary somehow fits or represents the world any better than the vocabulary of another. This calls us into a position in which we refrain from making dogmatically conclusive decisions regarding our own final vocabularies and those of others. We cannot attempt to stand over our conversational partners and convert them to our final vocabulary. At most we can express our own position, they can express theirs, and one side may say something which impacts the vocabulary of the other. Dialogue between Ironists is not an argument where one side triumphs over the other, but is a learning experience similar to visiting an art museum. Some vocabularies may captivate us and cause us to re-evaluate our own while others may fall upon deaf ears. These last two points appear to be problematic and as such deserve further discussion.

The first problem which demands our attention is the assertion that it would seem that we have no way of placing an obligation upon others to adopt the position of Ironism. This is a point of concession. While it is true that as Ironists cannot expect others to simply adopt their epistemic agnosticism, they can however show the benefits of adopting Ironism as a final vocabulary. Through highlighting the practical advantages and uses of such a mindset, conversational partners may adopt portions or the entirety of Ironism. The task of the Ironist is not to convert the initiate through beautifully simple logical argument, but rather to attempt to show how practicing ironic and edifying philosophy better addresses the needs of our current political and social climate. If a new edifying vocabulary is a better fit for our time, then it seems commonsensical to adopt it in order to continue the history of social progress.

The second problem arises when we acknowledge that Ironic philosophy is itself a historical contingency of our language. Ironic philosophy could not have arisen during the Enlightenment period as the grounds of its *foundation*, Enlightenment

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105 Wittgenstein, Ludwig, Ogden, C.K. (trans.), *Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus*, p. 111.

foundationalism itself, had not yet been laid. For the contingent philosophical worldview which is found in Rorty's Ironist figure could not have been held during the early stages of the realism-idealism debates. The contingency of Ironism is also recognized when we accept that the historical discussion of philosophy could have proceeded in another direction, and the development of Ironism could have never occurred. Ironism is not the next step towards reaching the true essence of things as they are, but is a contemporary form of philosophy which happens to have a great deal of use at the present moment. It is our task as Ironic philosophers to show that Ironic philosophy is something of a "philosophy for our time." We are called to understand the movement of philosophy, not as humanity creeping slowly towards eternal truth, but rather as "poetic achievements."<sup>106</sup> Playful use of language as a goal for the philosopher can also be found in the work of critical German philosophy. Lessing, for example, maintained philosophy to be a playful joke.<sup>107</sup>

Such achievements are to be understood as existing on both the personal and the public levels. "We ironists hope, by this continual re-description, to make the best selves for ourselves that we can."<sup>108</sup> This mentality extends itself to the broader public in the hope of creating the best possible society for ourselves and others. In Rorty's view, the principle on which we determine this should be by taking suffering to be the greatest "evil" or wrong to be prevented. We will continue to re-describe aspects of our society in such a way that we gradually minimize the amount of suffering in our world. A century ago the vocabulary surrounding racial equality changed the way we view humankind, today we see this re-description continue in the discussions of marriage equality. These are only two of the plethora of examples one could give to illustrate the ways that an ironic and edifying approach to discourse can change the larger social landscape in which we live, work, and worship. The goal of philosophy becomes working towards reaching points of solidarity with others, and not trying to establish an objective view of the world and starting a crusade to convert those who think differently than we do.

When it comes to comparing the ideas presented by competing vocabularies Rorty defines the process of criticism as follows:

"criticism is a matter of looking on this picture and on that, not of comparing both pictures with the original. Nothing can serve as a criticism of a person save another person, or of a culture save an alternative culture – for persons and cultures are, for us, incarnated vocabularies."<sup>109</sup>

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106 Rorty, *Contingency, Irony, and Solidarity*, p. 77.

107 Gerard Vallée writes in his *The Spinoza Conversations Between Lessing and Jacobi* :“Lessing’s friends, who esteemed him for his prodigious mixture of jest and earnest, were, for the most part, inclined to interpret the dialogue as one more typical exercise in thought in which Lessing’s real position is revealed only indirectly...” p. 18.

108 Rorty, *Contingency, Irony, and Solidarity*, p. 80.

109 Ibid.

When we begin comparing vocabularies it is impossible for us to appeal to anything beyond the usage and sensibility of the vocabulary itself. We cannot look to see how the vocabulary matches up with the brute materiality of things, simply because we can never entirely rid our experiences of language. Even if we could do so, we find ourselves stuck facing Meno's paradox.<sup>110</sup> We do not know what it would be like to possess a final truth, nor do we know how we could recognize when we have reached the point of final knowledge. Rorty's work calls for the ultimate abandonment of the quest for the foundations of knowledge which began with the dialogues of Plato. His work demands that we return to the philosophical approach of Socrates; one in which we raise our interlocutors out of rigid and dogmatic thinking without offering a new foundation for knowledge.<sup>111</sup> Ultimately Rorty concludes his work, *Contingency, Irony, and Solidarity*, by claiming:

“...there is such a thing as moral progress, and that this progress is indeed in the direction of greater human solidarity. But that solidarity is not thought of as recognition of a core self, the human essence, in all human beings. Rather, it is thought of as the ability to see more and more traditional differences (of tribe, religion, race, customs, and the like) as unimportant when compared with similarities with respect to pain and humiliation...”<sup>112</sup>

Philosophy's great quest for an absolute foundation to ground knowledge and morality has failed. Throughout the history of this search new ideas have been proposed and disposed. Rorty is taking the next step by setting this pursuit aside and focusing on the practical usage of philosophy for our world. Philosophical inquiry, like other literary genres, can show where human actions go wrong, and how we can hope to change them. Rorty drives this point home waxing:

“I shall call this fuzzy overlap of faith, hope and love ‘romance.’ Romance, in this sense, may crystallize around a labor 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... it does not greatly matter whether we state our reason to believe... What matters is the insistence itself... It thereby carries us beyond the imagination of the present age of the world.”<sup>113</sup>

This is achieved through the method of forming new vocabularies and exposing them to the world, widening the view of what we understand human experience to be. As the

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110 See Cooper, *Plato Complete Works*, p. 880.

111 This conception of the Socratic approach to philosophy is drawn from Søren Kierkegaard's *On the Concept of Irony with Continual Reference to Socrates*.

112 Rorty, *Contingency, Irony, and Solidarity*, p. 192.

113 Rorty, Richard, *Religious Faith, Intellectual Responsibility, and Romance*, in “American Journal of Theology and Philosophy”, pp. 135-136.

range of experience is broadened we come to change our views and understanding of the us/them dichotomy. This continued shrinking population of ‘them’ and the growing population of ‘us’ is the best possible form of moral progress that we can achieve. The category of ‘us’ becomes wider and wider by including those previously viewed as threatening and *other*. By abandoning the quest for objectivity, we can turn greater attention to de-escalating and eliminating the remaining tensions between ourselves and those who currently exist outside of the ‘us’ category.

### **3.4. Problems and Points of Criticism.**

Rorty's work and ideas do not stand without opposition. Considered one of the most polemic and contentious writers of 20<sup>th</sup> century analytic philosophy, a great deal of ink has been spilled within the analytic philosophical tradition trying to silence his opinions. Beyond the defenses found within his books, numerous contemporary philosophers have continued his work and attempted to dispel the attacks from critics. This final section will examine a few of the most recent criticisms which were raised against Rorty's philosophical positions and whether or not they discredit the arguments central to the task of this work.

Mark S. Cladis takes issue with what he describes as Rorty's “ill-mannered pragmatism” and maintains that “there are ways that we can remain committed to some good and sensible things found in *both* realism and relativism.”<sup>114</sup> Cladis outlines his softer form of pragmatism and urges us to resist the urge to view religion as a different form of knowledge. In addition to this he also highlights that “Interpretive communities are only relatively autonomous. People typically belong to a plurality of communities...”<sup>115</sup> These views do not run strongly against the position held by Rorty, but rather try and scale back Rorty's outright rejection of the compatibility between religious belief and liberal democratic values. The Ironic theology which is being formatted under the influence of Rortyan ironic neopragmatism focuses not on the truth-value of a religious claim, but adjudicates them based upon their impact on a person's behavior within the public sphere.

Cladis insists that he is promoting a pragmatic theology distinct from any theology that may follow from Rortyan ironic pragmatism, but his major commitments nearly mirror the three characteristic features of Rorty's Ironist figure. He writes, “Theological beliefs, like scientific beliefs, are argued about, weighed, and evaluated in a variety of ways, but always in the absence of a sure method or universal foundation.”<sup>116</sup> This assertion stands parallel to Rorty's own rejection of universal means of measuring truth. Cladis differs from Rorty only in his refusal to set aside questions of truth in favor of questions of societal usefulness.

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114 Cladis, Mark S., *Mild-Mannered Pragmatism and Religious Truth*, in the *Journal of the American Academy of Religion* LX/1, p. 19.

115 *Ibid.*, p. 21.

116 *Ibid.*, p. 20.

In a recent article, James Tartaglia discusses the stream of attacks against Rorty's philosophy.<sup>117</sup> He presents us with two major criticisms which reached their “most sophisticated expression with Boghossian's arguments.”<sup>118</sup> Tartaglia describes Boghossian's critique of Rorty's understanding of the debate between Galileo and Bellarmine as centering around two ideas<sup>119</sup>:

(I) A relativist position must commit to some absolute principle(s) in order to choose between alternative theories, but relativism opposes all claims of absolutism, and is thus incoherent.

(II) The controversy between Galileo and Bellarmine was a disagreement within the same epistemic system and not between alternative schemes.<sup>120</sup>

Additionally, Tartaglia questions the legitimacy of accepting Rorty's proposed approach to philosophy on its own merit. It would seem that if a theory's justification rests upon its acceptance within a community, then Rorty's position cannot be justified as it is clearly within the philosophical minority.

One might also question the validity of justification as usefulness. A great deal of critique from this angle can be found in the work of Susan Haack. Haack claims in a scathing review of Louis Renard's *Pragmatism: A Reader*, that “Vulgar Rortyism” is “the idea that 'what people believe to be true is just what they think it is good to believe to be true'; that 'the whole force of a philosophical account of anything ... lies in the advertised [*sic*] consequences of accepting it'; that 'if we do what is right, the metaphysics will take care of themselves.’”<sup>121</sup> This stands against the historical view in philosophy that we must follow reason as the sole dictator of action in a way which calls for radical reconfiguration of what it means to do philosophy.

Questions also arise surrounding the problems that stem from an apparent ethnocentrism which is found in Rorty's response against the claim that he is a relativist. It is essential that we probe through his usage of ethnocentrism to see if it leads to dangers in the philosophical or public spheres. If one can assert that the beliefs of their community are true simply because they happen to have emerged victorious from the evolutionary battle of ideas, this could lead to problems of prejudice, discrimination, and violence when engaging those who exist within a minority worldview. If we wish to utilize Rorty's work for the purposes of interreligious dialogue we must find a way around such pitfalls.

The first point of criticism, the charge of relativism and its incoherence, has been briefly discussed earlier in Rorty's own words. However, with the rise of new, more

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117 Tartaglia, James, *Does Rorty's Pragmatism Undermine Itself?*, European Journal of Pragmatism and American Philosophy, 2012, IV, 1.

118 Ibid., p. 285.

119 Rorty's discussion of the debates surrounding Ptolemaic and Copernican astronomy can be found in *Philosophy and the Mirror of Nature* on pages 327-333.

120 Tartaglia, *Does Rorty's Pragmatism Undermine Itself*, pp. 284-301.

121 Haack, Susan, “Vulgar Rortyism”, in *The New Criterion*, Vol. 16, Nov. 1997.

sophisticated arguments of Boghossian we must re-evaluate if Rorty must begrudgingly accept the title of relativist. The short answer to this charge is yes and no, Rorty's philosophy does contain elements of relativism, but what Tartaglia points out is that there are different shades of relativism. Rorty never assents to the belief that all epistemic systems are equal. If he did so this would jeopardize his practical project of using philosophy as a tool for supporting liberal democracy. Rorty is also adamant in his dismissal of the problem of relativism which can be found in the final chapters of his *Philosophy and the Mirror of Nature*.

In response to (I), Rorty's position commits him to the view that "the disagreement between Galileo and Bellarmine was not rationally resolvable: the arguments of each were justified relative to their own epistemic scheme, but not that of their interlocutor."<sup>122</sup> Despite this undeniably relativistic point of view, Rorty resists being bracketed by drawing upon his own brand of ethnocentrism. He claims that we must endorse the views of Galileo as they are understandable within our own epistemic system. The arguments presented by Bellarmine were at the time equally valid, but as the historical conditions changed they failed to cohere with the rising scientific worldview and its technological advances.

Under Rorty's understanding of ethnocentrism, epistemic systems are seen in a form of relativism which also provides standards of justification which foundationalist theorists so desperately seek. Later theorists building upon Rorty's patch-work philosophical writings state "beliefs acquire their justification from their usefulness in achieving some purpose or set of purposes, and it the possibility of these purposes varying from community to community that gives substance to the idea of justification being relative to differing epistemic systems."<sup>123</sup> On this reading, (I) holds no strength against Rorty's approach to epistemology. Rorty is walking a thin line between absolutism and relativism, by grounding justification in pragmatic use, but also limiting the definition of "useful" to each respective epistemic community.

The problem that arises in (II) consists in Boghossian disagreeing with the assertion that there are alternative epistemic schemes. On his reading of the controversy between Galileo and Bellarmine, the two men were operating within the same epistemic system and that one of them was *necessarily* wrong. However, when we look at the methods and purposes of their arguments the two men can clearly be seen as articulating different epistemic systems. Tartaglia writes:

"What lies behind Galileo and Bellarmine's different standards of evidence, Rorty seems to be saying is the different uses these standards subserve... This ties in perfectly with Rorty's Darwinian conception of cultural evolution, which portrays Galileo's ideas and the new epistemic principles underlying them as successful adaptations to the changing political and socio-economic environment of Europe."<sup>124</sup>

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122 Tartaglia, *Does Rorty's Pragmatism Undermine Itself?*, p. 287.

123 Ibid., p. 289.

124 Ibid., p. 290.



For Galileo, his ideas provided a better means of measuring the motion of the planets and other celestial bodies, it gave scientists a reliable and more accurate method of predicting planetary behavior. Bellarmine's purpose was not to discredit the accuracy of Copernican astronomy, but rather to address the relationship between such a theory and the reigning theological worldview of the time. We understand that "Galileo thought observation and mathematical argument should determine how we interpret the Bible, and Bellarmine thought the manifest meaning of the Bible should determine how we interpret observations."<sup>125</sup>

Because the two men were working with the same evidence and agreed upon their usefulness, they could only come to such disagreement because they did not inhabit epistemic systems which held the same standards. It is even acknowledged that Bellarmine was in agreement with the calculative accuracy of the new astronomy, his concern was the larger way this system would impact institutional Christianity. Galileo's ideas won the day simply because they were adopted by the changing times. There was nothing inherently more correct about his new system. It did not, and does not, describe the world in a more accurate and way than Bellarmine. It was adopted as part of the evolving culture of the early Enlightenment. The usefulness of Galileo's heliocentric system was more practical for the needs of the early Enlightenment period, social needs which were different than those of the Medieval period when Galileo's scientific 'advancement' could not have been accepted.

The next point of criticism surrounds whether Rorty's theory of pragmatic societal justification approves or disproves his own system. His heroic Ironist figure would understand that the truth of a statement or belief system consists in its usefulness which is determined by societal norms and values. "The problem with this, however, as critics have not been shy to point out, is that Rorty's position is manifestly controversial, and so cannot plausibly claim to have societal agreement on its side."<sup>126</sup> Rorty's own response to this charge, was to claim that he is not making a strong philosophical argument for adopting, but rather is making a suggestion for adopting his position on the grounds that it may be useful to contemporary society. If this is the grounds for justification it "immediately raises the question, however, of the status of the various arguments Rorty canvasses against representationalism...these are not arguments about social usefulness..."<sup>127</sup> Rorty's last ditch effort is to assume that future historical developments will provide justification for his philosophical views in retrospect. Sadly, this argument is extremely weak and will likely not persuade anyone to adopt his position, beyond those who are already committed to similar strains of thought.

Tartaglia attempts to redeem Rorty's position by claiming that simply sticking with coherence will remove the problem Rorty faces by grounding justification on usefulness. He claims that social use cannot be the sole ground for becoming Ironists because the major push to leave the traditional philosophical camp stems from Rorty's

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125 Ibid., p. 293.

126 Ibid., p. 296.

127 Ibid., p. 297.

work promoting anti-representationalism. My own reading of Rorty, however, doesn't lead to the abandonment of usefulness.

If we examine Rorty's approach to epistemology as a two-fold progression, we see that he first uses philosophy's own internal problems to show that its method is not as sound as we once thought. He does not privilege the methods of analytic philosophy as superior to other methods of discourse; it happened to be the majority practice in the philosophical world of his day. Only upon completing this step, at which point we stand at a sort of epistemic ground zero, does he begin looking around the rubble and offer something new.

If we accept the arguments found in *Philosophy and the Mirror of Nature* we find ourselves suddenly having no need to worry about the demands of the old philosophical establishment. This could be seen as analogous to the participants of the French Revolution overthrowing the monarchy and then structuring themselves according to the previous political system. If we take Rorty's assertion that he is not providing a substantive philosophical theory, only accepting his brand of Ironic neopragmatism as a suggestion, there is no contradiction with his earlier usage of philosophical argument. All Rorty does in utilizing the language of analytic philosophy is appeal to a wider audience, rather than limit himself to a smaller group of thinkers who already somewhat agree with him.<sup>128</sup> When we visit a foreign country to speak with the locals it is best to use their language, rather than to loudly shout at them in your native tongue trying to persuade them to learn a new language.

Ironism is simply another tool which can be used to perform certain tasks, just as analytic philosophy was also a tool used to accomplish specific tasks. We would not use a screwdriver to drive a nail, but instead a hammer. Not because we cannot accomplish the task, but it is cumbersome and inefficient. When we approach the task of theological discourse and interreligious dialogue, it would appear that Ironism is a better tool for the job, than the dogmatic screwdriver.

The resistance to the notion of justification as usefulness has also been voiced by Susan Haack. Her opposition stands against the view that Rorty is reducing truth to those actions which people believe to be true. At this point we are presented with a 'vulgar Haackist' reading which equates Rorty's work with the earlier pragmatist work of William James. This critique is a bit simplistic and ignores the light grounding which Ironic and edifying philosophy does retain. Rorty's approach to questions of truth is not based upon the contingent desires of individuals, but finds its ground in the slow development of larger societal standards. Ethical standards on Rorty's reading do not rest in the desires of each individual, but find their behavior constrained within societally accepted certain norms and values.

This societal restraint at first glance would seem to leave great difficulty for Rorty to explain why the values of free, liberal democracy should be understood as better than an oppressive fascist regime. At its root, this is the deepest difficulty with Rorty's form of philosophy. We understand liberalism to be *better* because we are the

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128 These thinkers being relativists, pragmatists, and other continental theorists who resisted the establishment developments of Anglo-American philosophy.

heirs to its tradition. As a sort of moral majority, we hold this as the highest standard. However, we do not, or should not, take our own ethical or political positions to be final. We are always searching for new ways in which we can limit pain and suffering. Rorty does not search for a metaphysical argument to determine pain and suffering as wrongs, but works with the assumption that we understand these aspects of human life and (with few exceptions) would not wish to extend them to others. Haack claims that Rorty's philosophy assumes that "if we do what is right, the metaphysics will take care of themselves."<sup>129</sup> But this assumption is far fetched as Rorty rejects any discussion of metaphysics as unnecessary! He is not being lazy or forgetful, but has moved beyond these discussions on the grounds that they cannot make measurable progress and are irrelevant for limiting suffering.

On the charge that for Western society to maintain its core liberal values it must have some foundational metaphysical principles which are applicable to all persons, Rorty compares the loss of metaphysics to the loss of religious sentiment:

"They thought that hope of heaven was required to supply moral fiber and social glue – that there was little point, for example, in having an atheist swear to tell the truth in a court of law. As it turned out, however, willingness to endure suffering for the sake of future reward was transferable from individual rewards to social ones, from one's hopes for paradise to one's hope for one's grandchildren."<sup>130</sup>

Just as the turn away from religion did not lead to the moral collapse of the West, neither will the turn from foundationalism result in epistemic degeneracy and moral debauchery. Rather, this hopeful minded turn away from foundations can foster the growth of religious pluralism as seen in the linguistic and theological works of Johann Gottfried Herder centuries earlier.<sup>131</sup>

We have now completed our explanation of the core aspects of Rorty's approach to philosophy and social dialogue. In the next chapter we will trace an earlier religious strain of antifoundationalism through the work of Herder and draw points of similarity of his theories to those of Rorty. In the final chapter we will turn our attention to mirroring Rorty's philosophical steps within the discipline of theology, moving away from the search to ground the nature of man's relation to the divine, turning instead towards the ways in which we can form models which fit the needs of the great variety of contexts. It is my hope that by blending Rorty's Ironism with theology we can begin doing theology in a novel and minimally dogmatic manner. Such an approach to theology will be shown to benefit not only the many needs of Christian mission, but also the ever increasing need for dialogue between the great faiths of our world.

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129 Haack, *Vulgar Rortyism*, The New Criterion.

130 Rorty, *Contingency, Irony, and Solidarity*, p. 85.

131 This mentality is not limited to the writing of Herder. There was a much wider critical movement within the history of Modern philosophy in Germany. Willi Goetschel remarks on the development of these pragmatic undertones on p. 247 of his work *Spinoza's Modernity*.

Chapter 2:  
Herder, Contingency, and Humanität.

# **1. Herder: Proto-Liberal Pastor, Philosopher, and Poet.**

## **1.1. Introduction.**

Johann Gottfried von Herder was a man of his time. As a philosopher he engaged in the infamous Spinoza pantheism debates; as a literary theorist he influenced some of the greatest authors in German history; and as a pastor he preached to the masses, both lowly and aristocratic. He was a thinker whose works were encountered at both the peak and the base of the ivory tower. Nevertheless, his contributions to the history of philosophy are remarkably similar to the apothecary's shop: nearly everyone has used them, yet very few publicly admit it.

His major works spanned the vast philosophical arenas of his time, and his influence spurred others to form great schools of thought such as: the Weimar *Sturm und Drang* movement, Wilhelm von Humboldt's development of historical linguistics, and Schleiermacher's work in biblical hermeneutics.<sup>132</sup> Despite these colossal contributions to the history of German thought, Herder has become something of a forgotten figure, doomed to remain in the shadows of those his work inspired (Goethe, Schiller, Schleiermacher, Nietzsche, and many others). In our own time much of his work still remains untranslated from its original German, and even the German texts were only recently re-published into a modern typeface. Many questions can be asked as to why his work fell by the wayside in the mainstream historical development of philosophical thought, but in our current period this omission is best expressed by a footnote found in Michael Forster's *Herder Philosophical Writings*:

“Two areas have been omitted (except insofar as they are touched on in passing) in order to keep the scale of the volume reasonable: Herder's philosophy of religion (very important for questions of influence, but less intrinsically relevant given modern philosophy's secular sensibilities) and his aesthetics (philosophically fascinating, but perhaps less fundamental, and also unimaginably extensive).”<sup>133</sup>

This analysis, in particular the exclusion of Herder's philosophy of religion, is ironically coherent with Herder's own historico-cultural form of nominalism. Because his theoretical work is discussed later in this text, I will continue to discuss Herder's minor, but growing, presence, or in some cases absence, from the Anglo-American philosophical world. Forster is correct in his claim that philosophy (at present) is primarily a secular discipline, but it remains an immense mistake to ignore Herder's philosophy of religion and theological beliefs if we wish to develop a clear and holistic understanding of his work. Taking only his philosophy of language or mind into account, as they are most relevant to *our* own (largely irrelevant) philosophical

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132 Forster, Michael, "Johann Gottfried von Herder", *The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy* (Summer 2015 Edition), Edward N. Zalta (ed.) § Introduction.

133 Forster, Michael, *Herder: Philosophical Writings*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2002. p. viii.

discussions, ignores the keystone of Herder's philosophical archway! The importance of theological thought and its relationship to language is evidenced in Herder's own words: "Jedwede Nation dacte sich also die Entstehung der Welt, und des Menschengeschlechts, und ihres Zustandes, und ihrer Völkerschaft in *Begriffen der Religion!* Alles bekam *theologische Farbe.*"<sup>134</sup> While it is impossible to read Herder's work through his own eyes, ignoring such a crucial element of early German philosophy and literature poisons the well of our future reading(s)! We will find ourselves drinking what appears to be nourishing water, but our incomplete knowledge, like a contaminated well, will only produce philosophical *durchfall*.

To avoid such a mess, I will be examining Herder's theological writings, in addition to his works on language, history, and politics. It is my intention to bring to light the overlooked similarities between Herder's linguistic liberal religion with Rorty's figure of the liberal ironist. The hopeful outcome of this combination will further validate my interpretation of Rorty's work as a potential form of liberal theology, which I term in this work Ironic theology, and that this Ironic theology can address critical problems facing our historically contingent context to a much greater. Before proceeding further I must make clear that I do not intend to offer an exhaustive account of Herder's philosophical project. His mass of work is too vast to be treated with any adequacy in a single chapter.

My analysis of Herder's work will proceed as follows: first, I will examine the relationship of his philosophy of language, history, and political theory for its acknowledgment of contingency. Second, I will argue that Herder's concept of *Humanität* is analogous to Rorty's position of philosophical ironism and solidarity. Finally, I will close this discussion by elaborating on Herder's major work on the concepts of religion, dogma, and how by acknowledging the emphasis upon contingency in Herder's philosophy we find something of an historical ironist theological thinker. For now, let us continue with a few cursory notes on Herder's literary style, methodology, and goals.

## **1.2. A Few Notes on Style.**

If anything can be unequivocally declared about the philosophical writings of the major German thinkers, such as Kant, Fichte, and Schelling, it must be said that they avoided literary extravagance like a plague. Herder, contrary to his contemporaries, was focused deeply "on the level of how the ideas and reflections are presented..."<sup>135</sup> In his essay, *How Philosophy Can Become More Universal and Useful for the Benefit of the People* (*Wie die Philosophie zum Besten des Volkes allgemeiner und nützlicher werden kann*), Herder drastically avoids, as he does in other writings, being trapped by the standard approach to philosophical writing; infecting his works with poetry, word-play, and copious amounts of metaphor. Unlike Kant, who meticulously pursued the

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134 Herder, Johann Gottfried, "Über die Ersten Urkunden des Menschlichen Geschlechtes", *FA* 5:13; *SWS* 32:149. Italics present in original.

135 Adler, Hans, "Herder's Style", in *A Companion to the Works of Johann Gottfried Herder*, eds. Hans Adler and Wulf Koepke. p. 331.

formulation of a clear and precise transcendental project, “Metaphors and tropes have their legitimate argumentative function within the semantic universe of Herder's texts...”<sup>136</sup> As Adler shows, the 'how' of Herder's philosophy is equally important as the philosophy itself. His stylistic differences, cannot be regarded as the result of the inability to write in a precisely boring manner, but rather they are a deliberate rhetorical choice made by the author. Katherin Arens notes the importance of genre for Herder's philosophical project writing:

“Herder, however, uses the form to reflect on the self as part of a specific scientific logic of creation and revelation, or as what we would call today the subject of knowledge. The Journal, then, is the example of a very particular hermeneutics of world and self-knowledge, taken up as part of an individual's journey to political and personal conversion...”<sup>137</sup>

This willful decision was made for a variety of reasons, one of which is to utilize the vast array of linguistically possible expressions.<sup>138</sup> Any work written by an author of language X is only bolstered by drawing from all of the possible linguistic novelties. “For Herder, human language was the most powerful and intrinsically complex cultural tool that humanity had ever developed. Hence, style as a 'secondary semiotic structure' based on everyday language was for Herder a crucial factor in the attempt to make one's ideas 'visible' in the arbitrary medium of language.”<sup>139</sup> Allert showcases the importance of genre and style to speaking to a specific context by noting that “Herder soon departed from his teacher Hamann by advocating prose over poetry because he found it more in tune with the current time of his culture in history.”<sup>140</sup>

Further criticism of his style is displayed by Adler's analysis of the two historical understandings of style. “On the one hand, style was considered an attribute of the author's character... On the other hand, style was considered the 'Kleid der Gedanken...”<sup>141</sup> Between these two views style and literary flair at best reflects a lack of the author's own seriousness and dedication to Sophia, and at worst unveils their devious intent to deceive the readers and turn their eyes away from the light of pure reason and return them to bondage in the darkness of the cave.

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136 Ibid., p. 331.

137 Arens, Katherine, »Das Schiff ist das Urbild einer sehr besonderen und strengen Regierungsform«: *Herder's Journey to Hermeneutic Conversion*, in the International Herder Jahrbuch, 2006, p. 43.

138 Beate Allert goes as far as claiming in *Herder's 'Sonnenspiegel' and 'Sonnensiegel': Metaphors of Visuality in Three Poems by Herder 1767-1772*, that “Even today Herder's poetry is in my understanding one of the most thought-provoking and innovative territories to explore in order to gain insights into the innermost working of Herder's unique theory formation.” p. 75.

139 Adler, Hans, “Herder's Style”, p. 334.

140 Allert, *Herder's 'Sonnenspiegel' and 'Sonnensiegel'*, p. 98.

141 Adler, “Herder's Style”, p. 333.

### **1.3. A Masterfully Messy Methodological Manner.**

The recognition that the philosophical language of his day, and the contingency of the value granted to clear and precise logical writing, places Herder in a position in which he can both sharply critique his contemporaries, but can also be read by those who may not be active participants within the philosophical world. His writing makes an egalitarian departure from the often authoritarian means of doing philosophy. Rainer Godel argues that “Herder’s main intention is to understand ‘truth’ and other abstract categories historically: ‘Being’... is not a static concept for Herder. It is... bound to the *dynamic* process of perception of every individual.”<sup>142</sup> Rather than dictating down *the* truths which he had unearthed, Herder:

“is aiming at a form of the written text that comes closer to oral presentation in order to reach the same level of rhetorical effectiveness. Similarly, the traditional dialogue form that he often chose...aims at making the audience an active participant in the process of reception by allowing them to follow the development of ideas and arguments as they are constructed.”<sup>143</sup>

Herder brings the reader into a position in which they are an equal partner within the discussion. He is not fostering a teacher-student, or lay-clergy relationship. Rather, he raises the reader into a position of equal dialectic capacity. In addition to this dialectic means of conveying his ideas, he seems to be cutting, to some degree, against the mainstream notion that philosophical truths are *found*. “According to Herder humanity advanced by trial and error based on experience rather than pre-knowledge.”<sup>144</sup> In his playful use of language Herder is trying to avoid “producing an ‘empty’ text or speech that does refer to anything ‘real’ and thus does not have any effect on the reader or listener. Herder’s criticism of ‘Wortwelten’ – philosophies consisting only of (empty) words – was at the core of his entire work.”<sup>145</sup>

Herder is skeptical of the traditional academic means of philosophical expression as being *the* proper means of conveying one’s thought and the only criteria of value. Corkhill reminds us that “As an orator, sermoniser, school master and poet, Herder was – on his own admission – acutely conscious of the persuasive and seductive weight of words.”<sup>146</sup> “It does not make much sense to patronize an author only because he does not meet certain allegedly valid standards.”<sup>147</sup> The style-centric attacks of the critics were not only an affront to his anti-hierarchical political dispositions, but also his understanding of language. The rigid formula carved into the sand of philosophical law strangles the natural growth of a nation’s voice.<sup>148</sup> Trabant draws this same conclusion

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142 Godel, Rainer, *Herder’s Concept of Truth*, in “Herder and Religion”, p. 27.

143 Adler, Hans, “Herder’s Style”, pp. 341-342.

144 Corkhill, Alan, *Herder and the Misuse of Language*, in the International Herder Jahrbuch 1996, p. 92.

145 Adler, “Herder’s Style”, p. 344.

146 Corkhill, *Herder and the Misuse of Language*, p. 87.

147 Adler, “Herder’s Style”, p. 332.

148 It should be noted that Herder’s concept of nation and national pride has often been radically misunderstood. It can best be understood as the culture which forms around a group of language



from Herder's passage "Jede Nation spricht also, nach dem sie denkt, und denkt, nach dem sie spricht. So verschieden der Gesichtspunkt war, in dem sie die Sache nahm, bezeichnete sie dieselbe."<sup>149</sup> These criteria of style only limit the theorist's ability to account for the world and its historical development. The Kantian aim of forming an ahistorical, transcendental philosophy, on Herder's reading, cannot account for the uncountable particularities of human history. He writes in his, *Auch Eine Philosophie der Geschichte zur Bildung der Menschheit* (Another Philosophy of History for the Education of Mankind):

"Endlich man faßt sie doch in Nichts, als ein *allgemeines Wort* zusammen, wo jeder vielleicht denkt und fühlt, was er will – unvollkommenes *Mittel der Schilderung!* wie kann man *mißverstanden* werden! –

"Wer bemerkt hat, was es für eine *unaussprechliche Sache* mit der *Eigenheit eines Menschen* sei, das *Unterscheidende unterscheidend sagen* zu können? wie Er fühlt und lebet? wie *anders* und *egen Ihm* alle Dinge werden..."<sup>150</sup>

Any manner of speaking in universal terms is doomed to fail to capture, in any meaningful way, the heart and feeling of humankind. Such theorizing produces a cold, sterile philosophy which will inevitably fail to impact the people who live outside of the world's philosophy departments. Stefan Greif highlights the fact that:

"Herder opposed any attempt to standardize the cultural sphere: on one hand, he regarded aesthetic thinking as a free realm that makes it possible to challenge the laws of logic as arbitrary, and on the other hand, he viewed it as a medium for criticism of the Enlightenment and science."<sup>151</sup>

Language can only function if its life blood is retained by keeping alive the strongly historical and contingent means of expression found within a given language. "As soon as it has been codified in grammars and dictionaries, the individual can no longer 'seine Sprache... [selbst] erfinden.'"<sup>152</sup> This deeply Protestant approach to language demands localized and pragmatic philosophical programs, not the ever elusive end-all be-all universal philosophical foundation which has intoxicated philosophers since Plato.

In addition to this rejection of foundationalist philosophy, Herder's own irregular mode of writing is intentional as:

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speakers. This linguistic pride is not vertical, but extends horizontally as well. German is not superior to French, nor is English inferior to Mandarin. Each *nation* is its own organic growth of one branch of humanity which should be fostered, not throttled, insofar as it does not restrict the wider aim of *Humanität*.

149 Herder, *FA 1:558*, as quoted in Jürgen Trabant's "Herder in Language", in *Companion to the Works of Herder*. p. 120.

150 Herder, Johann Gottfried, *Auch eine Philosophie der Geschichte zur Bildung der Menschheit*, *FA 4:32-33*.

151 Greif, Stefan, "Herder's Aesthetics and Poetics", in *Companion to the Works of Herder*. p. 142.

152 *Ibid.*, p. 148.

“he believes that such system-building leads to a premature closure of inquiry, and in particular to the disregarding or distorting of new empirical evidence... Herder's well-grounded hostility to this type of systematicity established an important counter-tradition in German philosophy (which subsequently included e.g. F. Schlegel, Nietzsche, and Wittgenstein).”<sup>153</sup>

This counter-tradition, primarily as pursued by Ludwig Wittgenstein, tends to be one of philosophical quietism which was adopted and adapted by Richard Rorty in his *Philosophy and the Mirror of Nature* and *Contingency, Irony, and Solidarity*. Marion Heinz and Heinrich Clairmont unearth this quietist impulse in Herder's own work claiming:

“Herder pleads for a self-restraint based on sober enlightenment about the human condition. For the natural human being, in contrast to the exaggerated philosopher, the sensuous certainty made possible by human nature is perfectly sufficient. Pointless attempts to solve the problem of truth as the central task of epistemology are to be renounced in favor of meta-reflection on which kind of certainty is possible and necessary for which kind of subject.”<sup>154</sup>

Herder himself “believes it to be an essential part of philosophy's vocation to have a broad social impact,” and not persist as an elitist self-indulgent theory.<sup>155</sup>

Herder's method of speaking to his countrymen through their own language is a methodological attack upon the concept of pure, ahistorical reason and morality. “Art that, in contrast, no longer touches the physical human being and only sends intellectual signals would, according to Herder, neither be able to arouse excitement nor set critical reflection in motion.”<sup>156</sup> A work of art that fails to touch the life of the viewer is much akin to Rorty's own admission of being religiously unmusical, religious language fails to touch his life in any formative manner. Through this messiness, “despite human's ignorance of the 'meaning' of the world and its development, their experiences teach them what is right and wrong. Thus through trial and error, humanity is finally provided insight into the existence of moral laws that are as rigid as the laws of the physical world...”<sup>157</sup> This organic *Bildung* comes about not through an abstract analysis of the purely logical, but through fulfilling one's own contextual and intimately personal sense of *Humanität*. “For Herder it is weighted heavily in favour of bequeathed semantic associations and conventions: »Alle kommen wir... zur Sprache durch Tradition, durch

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153 Forster, Michael, "Johann Gottfried von Herder", *The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy*, §2.

154 Heinz, Marion, and Heinrich Clairmont, “Herder's Epistemology”, in *Companion to the Works of Herder*. pp. 46-47.

155 Forster, “Johann Gottfried von Herder”, §2.

156 Greif, *Herder's Aesthetics and Poetics*, p. 144.

157 Adler, *Herder's Style*, p. 339.

Glauben ans Wort der Väter«.”<sup>158</sup> We will return to Herder's concept of *Humanität* later for further examination, but for our present needs the following definition will suffice:

“Ich wünschte, daß ich in das Wort *Humanität* alles fassen können, was ich bisher über des Menschen edle Bildung zur Vernunft und Freiheit zu feinem Sinnen und Trieben, zur zartesten und stärksten Gesundheit, zur Erfüllung und Beherrschung der Erde gesagt habe: denn der Mensch hat kein edleres Wort für seine Bestimmung als Er selbst ist, in dem das Bild des Schöpfers unsrer Erde, wie es hier sichtbar werden konnte, abgedruckt lebet.”<sup>159</sup>

Within this definition we find something of a directionally free and open teleological framework which dictates the moral progress of man. This openness is examined by Vicki Spencer when she writes “Historical understanding is achieved by explaining the uniqueness of each *Volk* and not by either denouncing or venerating its cultural traditions and values on the basis of a linear conception of progress.”<sup>160</sup> Loosely understood this becomes G-d's task for humanity to become that which they are capable of becoming. *Humanität* is different for every person, in every culture, in every time. The perfect Egyptian pharaoh is not the perfect classical Greek athlete is not the perfect postmodern French artist. Herder raises contextual historical contingency as the deciding factor for the *initial* aim of moral human development. No value or norm is fixed, “for Herder, the change of time affects even reason, generally considered to be the timeless human faculty for truth.”<sup>161</sup> For now we will set this aside and examine what Herder's general goals for philosophy consist in.

#### **1.4. Herder's Goal for the Practice of Philosophy.**

Herder's goal for philosophy rests in a critical reform of (his) contemporary philosophical world and a return to a sensual philosophical good life. He aims to shatter the dominating Cartesian way of thinking which has been brought to its apex in the work of the German Idealist tradition (e.g. Kant). Heinz and Clairmont note Herder's displeasure in the approaches of his contemporaries in the following passage:

“[One must first destroy, then construct. One may destroy all systems through a negative science and then one may build up from the subjective principle which claims very little, which determines the degrees of knowledge in every statement: one may analyze the manner of demonstration and its possible and real diversity, investigate how

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158 Corkhill, *Herder and the Misuse of Language*, p. 86.

159 Herder, Johann Gottfried, “*Ideen zur Philosophie der Geschichte der Menschheit*”, FA 6:154.

160 Spencer, Vicki, *Beyond Either/Or The Pluralist Alternative in Herder's Thought*, in the International Herder Jahrbuch 1998, pp. 53-54.

161 Godel, *Herder's Concept of Truth*, p. 29.

sciences all differ according to their origins: the subjective nature of thinking, objective condition and method.]”<sup>162</sup>

He strove to cut against the status quo of philosophers in search of the one objective truth and set his sights on the wider historical advancement of concepts of truth and language. Through his theory of the stages of a language, he finds his German epoch to be one of “beautiful prose.”<sup>163</sup> In his life and writing he attempts to embody precisely this principle, “balanc[ing] the poetic expression of the youth of humankind against the rigorous conceptual correctness of humanity's old age, taking advantage of the poetic beauty of the former and of the perfection of language of the latter...to be a poetic philosopher.”<sup>164</sup> His occupation as an active pastor led him to extend his message to appeal to the lives of those living beyond the colleges and universities of the time, advocating for something of an artistic public enlightenment. His critical usage of metaphor is implemented to bring his reader along into the discussion at hand, and guide them away from the conclusions surrounding necessary moral and metaphysical generalizations. He feared these generalizations because “for the rationalist Enlightenment the individual had to vanish in order to make space for the general class, hence, the individual, the unique being came to be in a certain way an obstacle for the progress of philosophy.”<sup>165</sup>

Michael Forster notes two central aims of Herder's lifelong philosophical program, both of which set a strongly critical wrangling in of the philosophical field:

“The first involves a rejection of traditional metaphysics...Herder's case is roughly this: (1) Traditional metaphysics, by undertaking to transcend experience... succumbs to unresolvable contradictions between claims, and hence to the Pyrrhonian skeptical problem of an equal plausibility on both sides requiring a suspension of judgment. Moreover (Herder goes on to add in the *Fragments*), given the truth of a broadly empiricist theory of concepts, much of the terminology of traditional metaphysics turns out to lack the basis in experience that is required in order even to be meaningful, and hence is meaningless (the illusion of meaningfulness arising through the role of *language*, which spins on, creating illusions of meaning, even after the empirical conditions of meaning have been left behind). (2) Traditional metaphysics is not only, for these reasons, useless; it is also *harmful*, because it distracts its adherents from the matters which should be their focus: empirical nature and human society. (3) By contrast, empirical knowledge (or strictly speaking, and a bit more

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162 Heinz and Clairmont, *Herder's Epistemology*, p. 44.

163 Adler, *Herder's Style*, p. 342.

164 Ibid.

165 Ibid., p. 346. Adler discusses in a footnote how the Kantian 'Pure' Reason became nothing more than an 'Instrumental' Reason which mutated into a form of social oppression during the National Socialist period and remains within our state of late capitalism. More on this can be found in the writings of Max Horkheimer and Theodore Adorno.

broadly, “healthy understanding”) is free of these problems. Philosophy should therefore be based on and continuous with this.”<sup>166</sup>

This rejection of the enterprise of metaphysics is analogous to Rorty's own rejection of metaphysics as being nothing more than a misguided distraction from the pressing social needs of our time. The attention Forster draws in (1) to Herder's view of language creating the problems finds great sympathy in Rorty's analysis of philosophy's usage of the mirror metaphor within epistemology. Reliance on this single, restricted use of epistemic language keeps us trapped within the vicious circle of recurring skepticism. Herder's critique of language and its similarity to that of Richard Rorty's will find further discussion in §4, *Herder and Rortyan Ironism*.

The second goal which Forster draws to the forefront of Herder's philosophical project is a rejection of ethics consisting in a cognitive task:

“Herder's basic claims are these: (1) Morality is fundamentally more a matter of sentiments than of cognitions. (Herder's sentimentalism is not crude, however; in subsequent works such as the *Critical Forests* he emphasizes that cognition plays an important role in morality as well.) (2) Cognitivist theories of morality — of the sort espoused in this period by Rationalists such as Wolff, but also by many other philosophers before and since (e.g. Plato and the critical Kant) — are therefore based on a mistake, and so useless as means of moral enlightenment or improvement. (3) But (and here Herder's theory moves beyond Kant's), worse than that, they are actually *harmful* to morality, because they weaken the moral sentiments on which morality really rests...”<sup>167</sup>

These criticisms draw philosophy out of the clouds and push to ground it in the concrete lived experiences of the individual lay person. His general attitude of skepticism carries over from his distrust of metaphysics into his views on the practice of abstract, rationalist ethics. His emphasis on sentimentalism and, in particular, the contextual basis for ethical decision making sets him apart from his contemporaries. For Herder, a cold abstract ethics cannot touch the lives of the reader to the same degree as his own sensual concept of *Humanität*. This pursuit of empirically based sensual philosophy will be discussed in greater detail in the following section.

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166 Forster, "Johann Gottfried von Herder", §3.

167 Ibid.

## **2. Historical Contingency and Herder.**

### **2.1. Introduction.**

Before proceeding to an in-depth study of Herder's philosophical musings, it is worth re-stating the reason for Herder's inclusion in this work. The overarching goal of this dissertation is two-fold: the primary aim is to form a Rortyan philosophy of religion which is coined as 'Ironic Theology'; the secondary aim is to ground this theory as being a legitimate heir of German Enlightenment theology. This grounding is accomplished, hopefully, through the comparison of Rorty's work with a figurehead of early German theology, Johann Gottfried Herder.

The points of convergence will be argued to exist in their emphasis on contingency/historicity and solidarity/humanität. The following section will address the contingent and historical aspects of Herder's philosophy of language and theology, while simultaneously tying it to Rorty's own use of contingency. We will begin first by examining his account of language's historicity before proceeding to his account of religion, as the latter builds upon the former.

It should also be noted that, due to my own limitations, it is not feasible to try and account for the entirety of Herder's writings. To do so would either result in a broad oversimplification or a text which would rival the *Encyclopædia Britannica*. For this reason I am limiting my analysis, primarily, to his *Fragments on Recent German Literature*, *Treatise on the Origin of Language*, *This Too a Philosophy of History for the Formation of Humanity*, and the *Theologische Schriften: Von Religion, Lehrmeinungen, und Gebräuchen*.<sup>168</sup> These texts will also be addressed in their similarity to Rortyan philosophy and it must be admitted that this comparison impacts my own reading of Herder's original texts.

### **2.2. Philosophy of Language.**

Herder's philosophy of language was the spark which inspired many later German philosophers, and more recently English speaking theorists; despite this fact, his influence was overshadowed by the works of Kant and his followers. His thought shifts away from the notion that language was a G-d-given attribute of man, a position advocated by his contemporary Johann Peter Süßmilch, and argues that the actual origin point of language is from man himself. This position is presented in a famous contest essay, but, Forster argues, "Herder's *positive* argument for a human origin is perhaps made best, not in *On the Origin* itself (where it gets entangled with the polemics against Süßmilch), but in the *Fragments* (as excerpted here)."<sup>169</sup>

Forster argues that within Herder's positive philosophy of language there are three main assertions: (1) "Thought is essentially dependent on, and bounded in scope

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168 The English translations of the first three works are drawn from Michael Forster's *Herder: Philosophical Writings* unless otherwise indicated.

169 Forster, Michael, *Herder: Philosophical Writings*, p. xiv.

by, language...”; (2) “Meanings or concepts are to be equated – not with the sorts of items, in principle autonomous of language, with which much of the philosophical tradition has equated them... but instead, – with *usages of words*.”; (3) “Conceptualization is intimately bound up with (perceptual and affective) sensation.”<sup>170</sup>

These strongly empiricist principles are also found within the work of later analytic philosophy and are especially present in Richard Rorty’s own writings on language. Both theorists accept that we cannot move beyond language, and resist the urge to craft their own meta-language to categorize language. Both theorists also adopt something of a pragmatic form of meaning, although how this comes to fruition is not analogous between the two thinkers, and pragmatism plays a much greater role in Rorty’s philosophical progress. Godel notes that, for Herder, the “individual process of perception and comprehension is – as we know – bound to the change of time. An individual historical assumption is said to be true if it makes a contribution to current knowledge. We always depend on constructing *our* truth in correspondence with the changing historical circumstances.”<sup>171</sup> Both theorists also accept that the mental act of conceptualization cannot be achieved beyond the body. This is a point of greater interest to Herder than Rorty, but it remains a factor for both philosophers. These three assertions will act as guideposts of comparison between the two thinkers.

### **2.2.1. *Fragments on Recent German Literature.***

Following with our guideposts, as presented by Forster, we will begin by highlighting the *Fragments*’ expression of point (1), that thought is bounded within language, and also by comparing this to Rorty’s commitment to this position.

Herder, in comparing the biblical and classical era with his own, writes: “All ancient languages have, like the ancient nations and their works in general, more that is distinctive than what is newer. Hence our language can inevitably learn more from them than from those languages with which it is more closely related...”<sup>172</sup> Here we can see Herder subtly suggesting premise (1) as he claims that we can acquire new concepts from those of vastly different language than from those who share a language within our own language-family. The Germanic languages, for example, will find their concepts of justice to be somewhat akin to each other. The German adjective, *gerecht*, and the English adjectives, *fair/just*, can act as a case example of this. The two words are not 1:1 conceptual equals, but the words are easily interchangeable and the differences easily made clear. In such cases there is no radically new concept learned by the speakers. But what if we compare the English direct/indirect articles to Swahili noun classes, we run into a radically different exchange of concepts. In this situation when there is not a set and clear translation, the speakers of both languages stand to learn a great deal from each other. Through such interactions speakers find themselves exposed to wildly new concepts and manners of thought which were impossible to present through their mother language.

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170 Forster, "Johann Gottfried von Herder", §4.

171 Godel, *Herder's Concept of Truth*, p. 32.

172 Herder, J.G., trans. Forster, Michael, *Herder: Philosophical Writings*, p. 38.

The consequences of premise (1) extend beyond the realm of meager linguistic difference, but also into the social world. Societal movement and interchange creates situations where one can become a linguistic alien, overwhelmed by a culture shock of radical differences in speech, practice, and manners of thought.

Another consequence we find is in the seeming inability to craft a 1:1 translation between languages. Herder cites his contemporaries' translations of Homer:

“...I feel sorry for those who want to read Homer in a translation, even if it were as correct as possible. You are no longer reading Homer, but something which *approximately* repeats what *Homer* said inimitably in his poetic language.”<sup>173</sup>

Speakers cannot grasp the entirety of conveyed concepts in other languages through translations. This is one, of multiple, reasons why Herder's work emphatically supports the resistance towards the pursuit of a single global language. It is interesting to note that his skepticism of the possibility of communication between different language speakers even extends to those who can read texts penned in their original tongue. In this regard he writes:

“He is the greatest philologist of the Orient who understands the nature of the Eastern sciences, the character of the native language, like an Easterner. He is an original and national Greek whose sense and tongue have been, so to speak, formed under the Greek sky; whoever sees with foreign eyes and wants to talk about Greek holy places with a barbarian tongue, him Pallas does not regard, he is an unconsecrated person in the temple of Apollo.”<sup>174</sup>

Forster's assertions of (1) and (3) find fruition in the above passages. We have seen that what can be thought and conceptualized is limited by the language of the thinker. The ancient Athenian cannot think as an Enlightenment era German. Their languages, and therefore, conceptual frameworks themselves differ.

That these conceptual differences arise due to the senses finds expression in Herder's account of the philologist and the Greek. The senses receive varying inputs as they correspond to the surroundings of the one perceiving. On Herder's account, language emerges:

“...through short and powerful accents of shouting. Unarticulated noises will transform themselves into rough monosyllabic words... These languages, formed immediately according to living nature, and not like more modern languages according to arbitrary, dead ideas...”<sup>175</sup>

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173 Ibid., p. 41. The italics are present in Forster's text.

174 Ibid., p. 50.

175 Ibid., pp. 60-61.



If 'reflex' and 'startle' responses to nature are understood to be the origin of human language, each future language cannot help but be shaped by what it is a reaction towards. Man's response to the powerful crashing of waves against jagged cliffs will differ greatly from another's response to find themselves face to face with a hungry stalking tiger. Even the later vocabularies of later descendants of these ursprache cannot help, but offer contextual and contingent vocabularies. How could man possibly speak, and by extension think, about what they have not themselves experienced? He simply cannot do so!

The necessity of experience to shape the initial direction which a language develops must not be idly forgotten, or worse willfully ignored. As language ages and passes through its stages of life, its point of reflection and growth progresses also. "Hence each nation speaks in accordance with its thought and thinks in accordance with its speech. However different was the viewpoint from which the nation took cognizance of the matter, the nation named the matter."<sup>176</sup> We are the linguistic heirs of those who spoke about *things* in the world, but find our brittle and cold tongues only able to speak dryly about the names once screamed, hissed, or whispered by our ancestors. How we reached this age of hollow words is through what can be described by Herder's pragmatic theory of truth. In a vein similar to Rorty's later ironic pragmatism Herder maintains:

"...truths and errors were preserved and passed on, as advantageous or disadvantageous prejudices; side ideas attached themselves which often have a stronger effect than the main concept; advantageously or disadvantageously, contingent ideas were confused with essential ones... The three goddesses of human cognition – truth, beauty, and virtue – became as national as language was."<sup>177</sup>

It is at this point when we approach Forster's assertion (2), that meaning of a word is found in its use and not in its referent. As the wielders of a language which stands upon the ideas of those who came before us, our language cannot touch the world as it once did. This is not to say that our contemporary sensations do not impact our language and concepts, the industrial revolution and the rise of the computer age are evidence enough of how new sensations shape how we view the world, it only means that we cannot return to that primal age of intimate reactionary speech. And good for it! The primal languages were but languages of the fearful grunting savage.

In a manner similar to Rorty's approach to linguistic development in *Contingency, Irony, and Solidarity*, Herder turns to discuss the important role which is played by the literature of a given country. He writes:

"If then each original language which is the native growth of a country develops in accordance to its climate and region, if each national language

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176 Ibid., p. 50.

177 Ibid.

forms itself in accordance with the ethics and manner of thought of its people, then conversely, a country's literature which is original and national must form itself in accordance with such a nation's original native language in such a way that the two run together. The literature grew up in the language, and the language in the literature."<sup>178</sup>

We find that just as our literature embodies the values of our language, the topics and themes explored through literary production and play, in turn, mutate and refine our language. This development is not thoroughly a conscious move forward, but was something of a semi-conscious by-product of how and where we use words and concepts. Touching on this similar notion, Rorty writes:

“Europe did not *decide* to accept the idiom of Romantic poetry, or of socialist politics, or of Galilean mechanics. That sort of shift was no more an act of will than it was a result of argument. Rather, Europe gradually lost the habit of using certain words and gradually acquired the habit of using others.”<sup>179</sup>

We see this similar line of inherited concepts and vocabulary when Herder writes: “Man hat von einem kleinen Erdstriche, den wir erleuchtet nennen, *Proben, Muster, Meisterstücke, Regeln* des Geschmacks fast in allen Arten der Literatur, Dichtkunst und Menschenbildung erhalten, denen man *mit Ausschließung alles andern* folgt.”<sup>180</sup> A major difference between the analysis of Herder and that of Rorty rests in how we should move forward with this concept of values being inherited rather than discovered. Rorty advocates the active use of imaginative literary play in hopes of creating solidarity with our fellow man and achieving a utopian liberal democracy, while Herder's concept of *Humanität*, which will be explored deeper in the following chapter, seems less emphatic on the need to pull other languages (or nations) under the hood of liberal democracy. *Humanität* aims to promote the peaceful coexistence of an ever expanding plurality of languages and its position acts something like a ‘big tent’ of liberalism. As *Humanität* champions the development and fostering of national (linguistic) genius, Herder's own genius bears strong resemblance to Rorty's ironist:

“What Herder wishes from the natures of genius in his own time can be explained from a cosmopolitan perspective as the courage to convey knowledge as a demonstrative contingency and to make the central theme of every example of progress as an instance of long-term history.”<sup>181</sup>

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178 Ibid.

179 Rorty, *Contingency, Irony, and Solidarity*, p. 6.

180 Greif, *Herder's Aesthetics and Poetics*, p. 161.

181 Ibid., p. 156.

This vague overview can suffice for our current needs, as we will return to this discussion shortly.

It can be seen through this analysis of the *Fragments*, that Forster's three guide posts are in fact present. It has also been shown how these guideposts are also present in the later work of Richard Rorty. Both Herder and Rorty understand the power that language wields over our inner conceptual lives as well as the ethical and social consequences of these concepts. Language is contingent upon the context from which it timidly buds or feverishly bursts. Both theorists resist the urge to turn towards a metaphysical foundation to tether language and urge for a quietist approach to philosophical questions. Rorty attacks the concept of foundationalism through his analysis of the mirror metaphor in his *Philosophy and the Mirror of Nature* and Herder attacks the divine source theory, as promoted by Süßmilch, as being, not only misguided, but as insulting the beauty of linguistic variety. Both men are careful how far they pursue these ends, remaining critically aware of the danger of straying beyond the limits of their language. In pursuing an origin of language we risk over-extending our language towards pseudo-philosophical questions which cannot be understood. "Nothing is more prone to be quarreled about than what none of the parties understands, and unfortunately there is nothing that humanity is more inclined to than wanting to explain [to others] what it cannot explain to itself."

### **2.2.2. *Treatise on the Origin of Language.***

The second linguistic text of Herder may be of greater length, but is not necessarily richer in depth. The *Treatise* was submitted in a Berlin essay contest with the theme of addressing the origins of human language. Both positive and negative aspects can be found within the text. On the one hand it contains Herder's own account of the birth of language, while on the other it directs a vicious polemic against the work of Johann Peter Süßmilch. Before proceeding further in the award winning essay it may prove useful to briefly touch upon the target of his critical force.

Johann Peter Süßmilch was a pastor and contemporary of Lessing, Kant, and Herder. His work spanned the areas of theology, philosophy, statistics, and demographics, but his most famous individual text was his *Versuch eines Beweises, daß die erste Sprache ihren Ursprung nicht vom Menschen, sondern allein vom Schöpfer erhalten habe* (1756). The text, following its aptly given title, aims to address the question of language's origin contrary to the budding trends of secularism. Contrary to the work of thinkers, such as Rousseau, he argues that language cannot emerge from the world alone, but must be a G-d given asset of man. He overlooks the contextual aspects of linguistic emergence and focuses upon only the universal elements which stand at the core of all languages. This divine source theory, as it is commonly referred, elevates the status of man's abilities in relation to the rest of creation.

For an historical thinker like Herder such a removed source of language seems to overreach and willingly ignore the human aspects of a given language. He uses Süßmilch's divine source theory as his own rhetorical punching bag in order to present his own sensual theory of language. In doing so he sets himself apart from clerical

dogmatism, as well as the secular naturalists who reduce language to the point of an insignificant oral reflex. The accounts of Rousseau and Hobbes reduce the status of early man to that of the animal, which in turn raises the status of the animal to that of man. Herder's third way keeps the higher humanist stature of mankind while retaining a wholly sensual and empirically grounded account for the origin of language.

We now have enough basic information to proceed with our account of Herder's second linguistic text. The following section will continue by touching on the same three guideposts which were utilized in the previous sections. In addition to these guideposts I will draw comparisons and similarities between Herder and Rorty throughout the analysis of the *Treatise*.

#### 2.2.2.1. Part I.

By again following Forster's analysis of Herder we will begin by addressing premise (1) that thought is bound up in language. Throughout this text it is a bit more challenging to separate Herder's three premises, because in most cases we find a pair of premises being presented simultaneously. Early on we witness the strong linking of premises (1) and (3). Herder writes:

“Our artificial language may have displaced the language of nature, our civilized manner of life and our social polite behavior have dammed, dried out, and drained off the flood and sea of the passions, as much as one wants, but the most violent moment of sensation, wherever and however seldom it occurs, still reassumes its right, and immediately resounds in its mother tongue through emphases.”<sup>182</sup>

Herder follows this statement with the conclusion that thus:

“The Arab in the desert who has around him nothing living except his camel and perhaps the flight of wandering birds can more easily understand the camel's nature and think that he understands the birds' cries than we in our abodes. The son of the forest, the hunter, understands the voice of the stag, and the Laplander that of his reindeer... Actually, *this natural language is a language-of-a-people for each species among itself, and hence the human being has his as well.*”<sup>183</sup>

From these two passages Herder is bringing to light the relationship between sensations and language, and by extension that the original sensations and worldly experiences shape and bind the ways different regions (Herder often uses nations in this meaning) think. This link is commonsensical when we examine the earliest forms of language, but in our current quite removed linguistic generation this insight is not immediately evident.

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182 Herder, J.G., Forster, Michael (trans.), *Herder: Philosophical Writings*, pp. 66-67.

183 Ibid., p. 67.

This is one pitfall into which Süßmilch's divine source theory stumbles. Rather than addressing the stages and varieties of linguistic development he seems content to assume the heavenly descent of a fully grown 'metaphysical' language, despite the fact that we can only reach this status by standing upon the contingencies of the language(s) of our ancestors. In addition to this ahistorical mistake, Herder also notes that, "Not a single livingly resounding language can be completely captured in letters, and still less in twenty letters..."<sup>184</sup> Restating his commitment to (3), and by extension (1), Herder continues by presenting a thesis on the nature of written versus spoken language:

"And if language is more unarticulated the closer it is to its origin – then what follows but that it is surely not the case that language was invented by a higher being for the twenty-four letters and these letters were invented straightaway with language, that these letters were a much later and only imperfect attempt to set up for oneself a few markers for memory, and that language arose not from letters of God's grammar but from savage sounds belonging to free organs?"<sup>185</sup>

Thus we find ourselves the heirs to a contingently written language which is itself nothing but a flawed tool for the recollection of the sensual experiences of man's earliest beginning.

This account of (1) and (3) is also an undercurrent in the thinking of Richard Rorty. Rejecting the metaphor of our language accurately mirroring the world, he argues that the growth of language is not about finding our discovering the perfect 1:1 sign for external entities of the world, but is a creative enterprise centered around the usefulness of our terms. This sense of pragmatic meaning is found in premise (2) of Herder's philosophy of language, however these pragmatic undertones may not be immediately evident in the *Treatise*. (It is also within the pragmatic realm where Herder's philosophy of language finds a strong tie to his socio-ethical concept of *Humanität*.)

However, in reducing the origin of language to sensual experiences Herder does seek to maintain the linguistic differences between human and animal communication. Unlike Rousseau or Condillac<sup>186</sup>, who both seek a natural origin of human language, Herder draws a strong distinction between the bestial and abstract forms of language (and thus thought). While both animals and the man-in-nature may both cry out at the sting of a bee or the bleating "**BAH!**" of the sheep, animals lack the additional layer of 'understanding' their own utterances. By maintaining a quasi-Aristotelian tripartite anthropology, Herder aims to anchor abstract and self-aware use of language to the unique human command of speech. Following Aristotle's teleological concept of creatures developing according to what they are 'meant' to be, the quality or practice which makes humankind unique is the abstract use of our exclamations.

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184 Ibid., p. 69.

185 Ibid., p. 72.

186 Ibid., p. 76.

He cites the world (Sphäre) of animals in contrast to man beginning with the humble arachnid. He writes, “I have pursued this relationship and I find everywhere a marvelous, observed, ‘inverse proportion between the lesser extension of their movements, elements, nutrition, preservation, reproduction, upbringing, society and their drives and arts.’”<sup>187</sup> His further examples include the hive making of bees and the web weaving of the spider to make clear that the creature which excels in its singular nature, instinctive craft is also greatly limited in the range of its possible arts. The geometric beauty of the honeycomb is an architectural marvel, but the bee’s work ceases there. We do not find the hive progressing towards building new forms of comb and hive, they exist contented in their singular and perfect form. This too with the spider. Its web is a masterfully woven deathtrap, but it remains relatively unchanged in its perfection.

Man’s own Sphäre is much wider, thus necessitating a broader linguistic ability. “His senses and organization are not sharpened for a single thing; he has senses for everything and hence naturally for each particular thing weaker and duller senses.”<sup>188</sup> In this wider Sphäre of life we again see the pragmatic premise of Herder’s philosophy of language enter the stage. “For what, when we decline to play with words, is the *peculiar language of a creature* but the language which is appropriate for its sphere of needs and types of work...”<sup>189</sup> This pragmatic appropriateness of language is precise, direct, and limited within the animal kingdom, but this limitation is lost in the case of man. “What language... does the human being possess as instinctively as each animal species possesses its language in, and in accordance with its own sphere? The answer is short: none!”<sup>190</sup> The senses of man, in their weakness, “precisely because they are not for one point, they are more universal senses of the world.”<sup>191</sup> This freedom to expand or diminish their life world, language’s sensual bedrock will continually develop and progress. As sensations broaden and increase, following (1) and (3), language and thought increase in variety and plurality.

In this realm of free play we find language’s meaning becoming a matter of pragmatic usage and not accurate representation of a given referent. Language is a useful tool for the contingent lifestyle of man, not a foundational tether to the external world. Herder does not, in his philosophy of language, anguish over the relationship between world and word. They coexist and cannot be without the other. He adopts a somewhat naive presumption of the natural world of the senses. Language is a natural part of this world and is not, in any way, removed and requiring a philosophical link. His philosophical system is holistically sensual in its accounts of language, history, and religion. Unlike the Kantian elevation of transcendental reason, Herder pushes us to remain within our flesh tombs of sensual experiences. This is not only a beneficial rhetorical move, but it is by and large all that humans require in order to live out an ethical and meaningful life.

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187 Ibid., p. 78.

188 Ibid., p.79.

189 Ibid., p. 80.

190 Ibid.

191 Ibid., p.82.

This pragmatic account of language can also be found in Rorty's *Contingency, Irony, and Solidarity*. For Rorty the task of the ironic philosopher becomes that of the poet, to create new uses of language which may find purpose in our fluctuating historical contexts. The two theorists both maintain (2), that meaning consists in how words are wielded and not in an object to which they gesture. This concept of meaning as reference is itself a less-than-useful metaphor which has become a standard philosophical trope.

Herder continues with his teleological account of language by tying the human language solidly in the sensual experience of being human. "The invention of language is hence as natural for him as is his being a human being!"<sup>192</sup> Humans in their limited sensations cannot help but experience the world differently than other creatures. From this weakness Herder accounts for man's ability of self-reflection. This experience of reflection separates the lives of man from the lives of animals. It is here when Herder introduces his example of man's encounter with the bleating sheep:

"As soon as he develops a need to become acquainted with the sheep, no instinct disturbs him, no sense tears him too close to the sheep or away from it; it stands there exactly as it expresses itself to his senses. White, soft, woolly – his soul, operating with awareness, seeks a characteristic mark – *the sheep bleats!* - his soul has found a characteristic mark...

"The sheep comes again. White, soft, woolly – the soul sees, feels, takes awareness, seeks a characteristic mark – it bleats, and now the soul recognizes it again! 'Aha! You are the bleating one!' the soul feels inwardly. The soul has recognized it in a human way..."<sup>193</sup>

Herder uses this example to show how the human is what he is precisely because of language. Language is the means through which we exist in the world. "The sound of bleating, perceived by the human soul as the distinguishing sign of the sheep, became, thanks to this determination to which it was destined, the name of the sheep..."<sup>194</sup> The sound emitted by the sheep touches the soul of man. It is an intimate link between man and world, not a piece of reflection, but the touch of pure reason and raw sensuality. Both exist within the loud, chaotic, violent sensuality of the world.

After the famous account of the bleating quadruped, Herder compares his analysis, again, to the divine source theory of Süßmilch. His central criticism can be instilled in the following passage:

"If someone wants to assume such a supernatural facilitation for other reasons, then that is quite irrelevant to my purpose; only in that case God has not at all *invented* language for human beings, but these still had to *find* their language for themselves through the effect of their own forces, only under a higher management. In order to be able to receive the first word as

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192 Ibid., p. 87.

193 Ibid., p. 88.

194 Ibid., p. 89.

word, that is, as a characteristic sign of reason, even from God's mouth, reason was necessary; and the human being had to apply the same taking-awareness in order to understand this word as a word as if he had originally thought it up."<sup>195</sup>

For Herder it is untenable that, if reason and language are intertwined, that man could have pre-rationally received language. This would be similar to teaching grammar to an idiot, despite our actions and best efforts there must be some form of comprehension possible in order to allow for the slightest progress. This disconnect from the natural world is the strongest point of opposition which Herder thrusts back against Süßmilch.

Language is not 'found' in the traditional philosophical sense, rather it is adopted as a useful means of navigating through the world. The position is shared by both Herder and Rorty. We exist entirely bound up in language (1), beyond the original points of language acquisition linguistic development becomes a combination of sensual experiences and reflection upon our inherited vocabularies (3), and finally this progress is not due to our acquisition of terms which are better apt at representing what is *really* out there, but are simply more useful for our everyday lives.

The latter half of Herder's text consists of his own account of language's earliest moments of life and its relationship to the human senses. He details "the history of the sensuous human being, the obscure link, how nouns arise from verbs – and the easiest step to abstraction."<sup>196</sup> He links this analysis to the earlier example of the bleating sheep, claiming that the first word was not 'sheep' but "as a bleating creature."<sup>197</sup> Later on when it became useful the term 'sheep' was used upon sight of the woolly bleater. The abstract noun being born out of the participle is an example of the pragmatic development of what Rorty terms final vocabulary.

He details the situation of encountering and naming things which do not make sound which leads into a rather interesting ranking of the senses which runs contrary to the popular primary placement of sight. Herder ranks sight as "the coldest sense..."<sup>198</sup> as compared to hearing which can perceive distant objects while simultaneously feeling them. He argues that philosophy is mistaken having elevated sight as the central metaphor for knowledge, a metaphor which Rorty too criticizes as a key problem within metaphysics and epistemology. Sight creates distance of in and out, here and there; while a sound heard is both distant and intimate. I shiver at the howling of the distant wolves, its presence is both far off in the moonlit night and lurking in the nearby darkness.<sup>199</sup>

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195 Ibid., p. 92.

196 Ibid., p. 101.

197 Ibid., p. 102.

198 Ibid., p. 107.

199 There is a longer list of reasons for hearing's importance which range from pages 108-112 in Forster's *Herder: Philosophical Writings*, but for our purposes further examination is unnecessary.



#### 2.2.2.2. Part II.

We now find ourselves within the second part of Herder's essay. At this point he is responding to the academy's secondary question "And by what means will they [i.e. men abandoned to their natural faculties] arrive at this invention [i.e. the invention of language]?"<sup>200</sup> He proceeds with an account of the natural laws which are related to man's mastery of the world through language. While these laws are of historical interest to Herder scholarship, they are beyond the scope of this dissertation. Any comments which follow regarding these laws, will thus be cursory and brief.

Herder's second natural law reads "'The human being is in his destiny a creature of the herd, of society.'"<sup>201</sup> This law stands as a link between Herder and Rorty's account of contingent final vocabularies. Herder describes the education of a child as "the further formation of human instruction through the spirit of the family, through which spirit nature has united the whole species, becomes also the further formation of language."<sup>202</sup> Language, in its broadest sense, does not consist of a plurality of wholly private languages or games, rather we are raised into and by the contingent languages of our parents and the wider society. Again in a quasi-Aristotelian approach, Herder ties the linguistic, cognitive, and thus ethical development of the child, to the broader society. If the child's society has one thousand words for martial courage, but few for compassion, the cognitive temperament of the resulting adult will be greatly impacted.

This brings us to Herder's third natural law. "Just as the whole human species could not possibly remain a single herd, likewise it could not retain a single language either. So there arises a formation of different national languages."<sup>203</sup> This law celebrates, and does not condemn, the plurality of human languages or cognitive frameworks. The progression and development of these languages and ways of thinking are crucial aspects of Herder's ethical concept of *Humanität* which will be discussed in the next chapter. It is enough to note here that no language stands, for Herder and Rorty, as a singular primary language. Each language holds its strengths and weaknesses dependent upon its context of formation. The desert dwelling nomad has use for fifty words describing sand, while those who trek across frozen tundras have more need for icy vocabularies. Neither is more correct than the other, only more applicable in a given *Klimat*. Rorty's philosophy maintains this exact train of thought. Languages rise to fit the needs of a given place and time, the resulting final vocabulary serves the speaker best in its place of origin. This raises the question of linguistic migration and the exchange of concepts. How do we as philosophers and theologians account for the exchange of ethical, religious, and political ideas? The traditional responses fell somewhere between universal foundationalism (right or wrong) or relativism. Both Herder and Rorty opt for a pragmatic escape from this over trodden dichotomy.

For both thinkers Herder's fourth law comes to fruition: "...the human species [*Geschlecht*] constitutes a single progressive whole with a single origin in a single great household economy, likewise all languages too, and with them the whole chain of

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200 Ibid., p. 127. Footnote.

201 Ibid., p. 139.

202 Ibid., p. 141.

203 Ibid., p. 147.

civilization [Bildung].”<sup>204</sup> Despite the differences in language family or dialect, all speakers are members of the human species and are thus bound up together in striving for Humanität and solidarity. This final law is the definitive link between Herder's philosophy of language and his ethics, this leap is also analogous to the push made by Rorty from the contingency of human languages towards the shared goal of human solidarity.

We are now in a position to move away from Herder's linguistic writings and pursue his concept of Humanität. The following chapter will examine his *Auch eine Philosophie der Geschichte zur Bildung der Menschheit* with the goals of unpacking the meaning of Humanität, displaying its position as a spiritual precursor to Rorty's approach of solidarity. It will be shown that both thinkers are treading a nearly identical path in order to show that Rorty's thought, though presented only in a secular manner, is not inappropriately used as a platform for interreligious dialogue.

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204 Ibid., p. 154.

### **3. Herder and *Humanität*.**

#### **3.1. Introduction.**

It is within Herder's shift between language and ethics that we can show the positive similarities to Rorty's own work. Rorty understands solidarity as the:

“...ability to see more and more traditional differences as unimportant when compared with similarities with respect to pain and humiliation – the ability to think of people wildly different than ourselves as included in the range of us.”<sup>205</sup>

This inclusion among ourselves is an extension of Rorty's larger project of spreading political liberalism. He adopts Shklar's view that liberalism is not an expansive universal system of governance, but rather the commonsensical notion that “liberals are people who think cruelty is the worst thing we do.”<sup>206</sup> The definition of cruelty will, of course, evolve as our usage of the word progresses (or digresses). For Rorty the expansion of plurality within the scope of liberal solidarity nearly mirrors Herder's philosophical concept of *Humanität*. “Herder's pluralism...is not relativized to what a particular culture or persons hold to be of value... what is of value are those principles and activities which accord with his conception of *Humanität*.”<sup>207</sup> The following chapter will detail Herder's understanding of *Humanität*, its relationship to evolving language, and will conclude with a final comparison to Rorty's own ultimate political position.

#### **3.2. *Humanität*.**

The crown of Herder's philosophy, *Humanität*, can be surmised in a passage from his *Ideen zur Philosophie der Geschichte der Menschheit*:

“Ich wünschte, daß ich in das Wort *Humanität* alles fassen könnte, was ich bisher über des Menschen edle Bildung zur Vernunft und Freiheit, zu feinern Sinnen und Trieben, zur zartesten und stärksten Gesundheit, zur Erfüllung und Beherrschung der Erde gesagt habe...”<sup>208</sup>

*Humanität* is the all encompassing goal of human language, culture, physical and intellectual growth, and religion. It is this strong forward drive which should be adopted as the highest good of mankind. To embrace this goal is when we begin on the path towards becoming our most human selves.

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205 Rorty, *Contingency, Irony, and Solidarity*, p. 192.

206 Ibid., p. XV.

207 Spencer, *Beyond Either/Or*, p. 57.

208 Buntfuß, Markus, *Herder on Nature*, p. 5. An unpublished manuscript presented on Herder and Idealism.

This goal begins with the development of language, as it was previously shown to be the shaper of our thoughts and conceptual frameworks through which we gain and interpret sensory inputs. As this language grows in richness and depth, simple identification becomes abstracted and removed. Ethics and religion are born from our frightful, impassioned presence in a living world. The gods of wind and rain are transformed and come to be shaped by reason, by goodness, and by logic. Man binds the gods through his ever growing mastery of language. Upon the advent of written language we have returned the voice to the divine and carve it permanently into stone.

As our culture grows towards its adulthood, the once timeless truths of humanity become dusty trinkets placed upon our linguistic hearth and hold little meaning beyond a sentimental heirloom. The march of man through time sees the birth and death of cultural traditions, practices, sacred places, and the gods themselves. Such a process would seem to place man on an inevitable track towards secularism, but Herder does not believe this to be the case. Religious experience is precisely that, an experience, not an empty repetition of bad poetry. We will return to this topic in the next section in discussion of Herder's treatment of religion and dogma.

This cultural growth towards *Humanität* is not limited to the evolution of religion. Herder uses the example of Ancient Egypt and the birth of Greece: "Here again too, stupidity to tear a single Egyptian virtue out of the land, the time, and the boyhood of human spirit and to measure it with the criterion of another time."<sup>209</sup> The ethics and practices of other epochs "were for him advantages or necessary evils..."<sup>210</sup> The traditional approach to the history of ethics, religion, and science much answer the question "who can compare the different satisfaction of different senses in different worlds?"<sup>211</sup> For Herder it is not only foolish to try and evaluate our ancestors through our own value schema, but it is impossible to achieve this properly. Akin to the philosophical insights of Rorty, there is no single, privileged vantage point we can reach where we can ultimately turn around and judge our journey. *Humanität* has no final vantage point which we should pursue. This final goal of absolute spirit was not adopted within the German idealist tradition until the later writings of Hegel. Herder keeps within the empiricist spectrum by holding the future progress of *Humanität* open. We are tasked with striving to become the best we can within our own value schema, without projecting it upon others. "Herder, too, wanted a sense of whole, but resisted identifying the whole with the end or *telos*... Herder saw as the real project of a 'history of mankind' not to trace the trajectory of progress but to discriminate among the varieties of human excellence."<sup>212</sup>

The result from these points is a plurality of cultures which strive to actualize the best versions of themselves. "Prejudice is good in its time, for it renders happy. It forces people together into their center, makes them firmer on their tribal stem, more blooming in their kind, more passionate and hence also happier in their inclinations and

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209 Herder, Forster, *Herder: Philosophical Writings*, p. 282.

210 *Ibid.*, p. 283.

211 *Ibid.*, p. 296.

212 Zammito, John, *Herder and Historical Metanarrative*, p. 68.

purpose.”<sup>213</sup> This seemingly divisive statement has been termed as ‘nationalistic’ by some scholars, but it must not be lumped in with far-right political usage of this term. Herder's linguistic nationalism is in fact strongly committed to the tenets of political liberalism, the value of diversity, and the equal treatment of others. Trabant defends Herder from the reach of political nationalism writing:

“Herder was not a herald of (German) nationalism... Herder shows that *all* cultures, unique in time and space, contribute to the common advancement of mankind. Hence, respect for cultural differences within a belief of common progress – beyond relativism and nationalism – is the message of his alternative philosophy of history, *Auch eine Philosophie der Geschichte*.”<sup>214</sup>

This brings us to the next major point of Herder's philosophy of history.

In the second stage of his essay, Herder details his concept of societal stages and *Bildung*. He uses the examples of the West's progression of religious belief. Describing the position of Julian: “the two most famous religions, the oldest heathen religion and the newer Christian religion, struggled for nothing less than rule over the world.”<sup>215</sup> The stages of cultural development are a mixture of Providence and utility in the eyes of Herder. If the ‘right’ ideas bloom at the ‘right’ moment they find themselves becoming the new status quo. In the case of Christianity in Rome, “Greek mythology and Roman state ceremony – this was likewise clear to him! - was inadequate for the purposes of the century.”<sup>216</sup> Pragmatic value and luck, for lack of a better term, drive the development of culture towards an open ended future. “»Ever since the *Fragmente* Herder emphasized time and again that the human being, in learning the language passed on to him, also acquires a certain understanding [Deutung] of reality...«”<sup>217</sup> In this openness Herder diverges from the Greek teleological legacy of Aristotle. *Humanität* is not a predetermined end goal, but is a carrot dangling on a stick, always leading us beyond our present position and present values. “Contingency, or rather, primitively and freely operating force, exhausted itself in small forms of the great form such as a politician could hardly have thought out: chaos, in which all strove for a new, higher creation without knowing how and in what form.”<sup>218</sup>

The contingent ideas may be sown over the path, or be picked up by birds, or they may find themselves being sown on good soil. “The basis of every reformation was always just such a small seed, fell quietly into the earth, hardly worth talking about... but now inclinations, ethics, a world of habits are destined to be changed, created anew,

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213 Herder, Forster, *Herder: Philosophical Writings*, p. 297.

214 Trabant, *Herder and Language*, p. 122.

215 Herder, Forster, *Herder: Philosophical Writings*, p. 303.

216 *Ibid.*

217 Menze, Ernest, “Herder and prejudice”, p. 87. in the *International Herder Jahrbuch*, 2002.

218 Herder, Forster, *Herder: Philosophical Writings*, p. 311.

through it...”<sup>219</sup> The lucky, fateful formation of a new chestnut is the ground of societal progress; from its beginnings in language and upwards.

This same mentality is present in Rorty’s elevation of the status of authors and poets. The author, playwright, and screenwriter are the mechanism of contemporary cultural change. If a practice is normalized on screen there is a correlation to its acceptance in the wider society. But in the creative realm, as opposed to the concrete society, there is less consequence for mistaken poorly thought out views and concepts. They fall on deaf ears and are never taken up as prescriptive societal standards for ethics and behavior.

This brings us to the third and final segment of Herder's essay. In this series of ‘additions’ Herder comes nearest to advocating a position akin to Rorty’s assertion that there can be no privileged final vocabulary. “Do you in the whole universe, as it weaves its work dead and alive all at once, find yourself the exclusive central point towards which everything operates?”<sup>220</sup> We have not today, and cannot tomorrow, reach a point of perfect, all-encompassing language! Herder drives this point home when he twists theology. “The enlightened human being of later time – he wants to be not only a hearer of all but himself the final epitomizing note of all notes!, mirror of all the past and representative of the purpose of the composition in all its scenes!”<sup>221</sup> We will not be the final epistemic resonance. The song continues beyond our illusory fermata. Our period of thought, art, and religion is a drawn out note among many others, and to dwell on our own place as superiors is nothing more than petty cultural egoism.

Herder concludes these additions, and the larger essay, in his poetic reassertion of this sense of humility. He writes: “I am nothing but the whole is everything... But happy he who even then does not regret his fragment of life!”<sup>222</sup>

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219 Ibid., p. 314.

220 Ibid., p. 336.

221 Ibid.

222 Ibid., pp. 357-358.

## **4. Herder and Rortyan Ironism.**

The final section of Herder's work which will be discussed within this dissertation is that of his *Theologischen Schriften*. This book spans the gamut of his thoughts on church related matters, but the most important chapters which flow from our previous discussions of language and Humanität are his writings titled *Von Religion, Lehrmeinungen und Gebräuchen*. In these chapters, specifically I and II, the differences between religion and the dogmatic institutions which reigned during Herder's era are outlined. The primary goal of this chapter is to show the possible narrative links between a Rortyan philosophy of religion and Herder's own contributions to Protestant theology.

As with the previous chapters the following will proceed by showcasing Herder's antifoundationalist train of thought in combination with comparison to the antifoundationalist work of Richard Rorty. I hope to show that antifoundationalism was not a novel invention of the late 1900's, but that it holds both a rich secular and religious history. The presence of antifoundationalism throughout Christian thought should lessen the alarm which might arise from the proposed approach of theological ironism. Antifoundationalism is not radically new, not tantamount to atheism, but is a legitimate heir to German enlightenment theology.

The following chapter will proceed as follows: First, I will analyze Herder's concept of religion and its relation to language, experience, and belief; Second, I will examine Herder's views of Christianity and liberalism. In this second section we will examine his sharp criticism of dogmata which he believes is exemplified in the extravagance and practices of the Catholic Church.<sup>223</sup>

### **4.1. What is Religion?**

Herder's theological and religious writings stand as polemic counter-positions to the Catholic Church of his day. He takes particular offense to the rising work of theologians, both Protestant and Catholic, who seek to reach beyond “a consistent restriction to empirical observation.”<sup>224</sup> In speaking of theology as a discipline he describes it as “gewissermaassen die liberalste von allen [Wissenschaften]; eine freie Gottesgabe ans Menschengeschlecht, die diesem auch zu allem liberalem Guten der Vernunft, einer edeln Tugend und Aufklärung geholfen.”<sup>225</sup> What is important to draw from this snippet is that theology should aid in the further development of liberal enlightenment values. This practical and developmental point of Herder's definition is further evidenced by Herder's placing theology at the root of all thinking. He writes, “Jedwede Nation dachte sich also die Entstehung der Welt, und des Menschengeschlechts, und ihres Zustandes, und ihrer Völkerschaft in Begriffen der

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223 Kessler, Martin, “Herder's Theology”, in *A Companion to the Works of Johann Gottfried Herder*. p. 249.

224 Ibid., p. 249.

225 Ibid., p. 247. (SWS 10:277)

Religion! Alles bekam theologische Farbe.”<sup>226</sup> This should not lead to the shallow view that theology must envelop all forms of thought. Herder's point here is much more subtle. This response brings us back to Herder's earlier discussion of the origin of language. The ‘early’ or ‘original’ status of theology is due to the innocent naivete of our first linguistic utterances.

#### 4.1.1. Religion and Language.

Herder defines religion saying: “Religion ist [...] eine Sache des Gemüths, des innersten Bewußtseyns.”<sup>227</sup> As we have shown earlier within our discussion of Forster's three point analysis of Herder's linguistics if religion is an innermost consciousness, it is thus an immediate outgrowth of the empirically grown linguistic concepts inherited by the believer. Religion cannot escape the environmentally conditioned language of the believer. Spencer comments on Herder's attention to the importance of location in history, writing:

“He considers it the most ridiculous vanity for Europeans to think that all people must live like them to achieve happiness. It is also highly insensitive to the material conditions of obtaining in different eras...For Herder, just because belief systems and standards of values differ between *Völker*, there is no concrete basis to assume from the outset that such difference entails inferiority.”<sup>228</sup>

This root in language is an early glimpse of the openness towards the religious views of others found in Herder's concept of religion.

If theological thinking stems from the linguistic encounters with the world, it must necessarily conform to the three point thesis stated by Forster. The theological concepts are only understood through language and experience, and in addition to this its concepts should develop to fit the practical needs of the world. This ties in to Kessler's claim that “Within a progressing development toward the most human religion, Herder wanted theology, as the ‘Lehre von Gott und dem Menschen’ (Teachings of God and Man) to become a popular and complete philosophy of humankind.”<sup>229</sup> Religion is to progress with and for the society in which it finds itself, it should not become a rigid law bound hindrance upon the society.

He describes such dogmatic rules of religious thought as empty and mocking the valuable kernels of proper religious experiences.

“Er nahm die Wortformel ohne innere Überzeugung an und pflanzte sie als einen Wortschall weiter. »Neige deine Stirn, spricht er zum Andern, damit mein höhler Schädel stoße. Hörest du den Schall? Das ist ein Dogma, das eben so in mich überging, wie ich es dir gebe.«”<sup>230</sup>

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226 Ibid., p. 248. (FA 5:13/SWS 32:149)

227 Ibid., p. 249. (SWS 20:141-142)

228 Spencer, *Beyond Either/Or*, p. 59.

229 Kessler, “Herder's Theology”, p. 249

230 Herder, Johann Gottfried, “Von Religion, Lehrmeinungen und Gebräuchen”, in *Theologischen Schriften*. p. 736.



The dogmatizing of religious experience is analogous to the removal of language from its living reality. This inevitable removed position rests on words about words about words reacting to an innermost experience of our earliest ancestors.

Herder begs the question in the aphorism XXIV: "... sollte meine Religion, meine innerste Gewissenhaftigkeit, mein Glaube, meine sicherste Zuversicht hangen? Welch ein Elnder müßte meine Religion sein!"<sup>231</sup> If our religion, specifically Christianity (then and today), is nothing more than hollow outdated contingent language it is likely dangerous to society if retained. Religion, encountered in nature through the bodily senses, is one of the most intimate elements of being human, but this is nowhere to be found in the great dogmatic codices of Rome.

Herder remains optimistic that religion can be 'rehumanized' and this methodology can be most useful on the global stage. He traces the problem of dogmatizing back to Christianity's growth in the Greek world, a world of logic, order, and universality. Rather than allowing this single digested form of Christianity to be excreted worldwide we must allow for a plurality of Christian religions to develop. Christianity's promise is in its ability to be recreated in vastly different parts of the world. In this sense Herder concludes that Christianity should be understood as the most 'human' religion. Its contextuality rests on its message that belief and not ahistorical ritual are essential to living the best life. It is fitting now to address Herder's concept of belief and show its relation to language and dogmatic thought.

#### **4.1.2. Belief.**

The divine word contained in the infallible Latin Vulgate negates the possibility of personal religious experience in the manner which Herder understood it. Herder hoped that the rise of Protestantism and biblical translation into fallen tongues would bring about "das reine Christenthum, worüber ein jeder Mensch nur sich selbst symbolisches Buch seyn kann."<sup>232</sup> In this link between inherited revelatory text and the contingent final vocabularies of the speakers/readers the individual is granted the opportunity to form their own 'new' inner experiences. Because the individual's textual interpretation is private, the belief of person M and person N cannot be adjudicated through "rationalistic criticism of revelation..."<sup>233</sup> These revelatory experiences stand before reason and their empirical life experiences are the key shapers of future revelation. "As revelation, says Herder, scripture cannot be understood a priori because of God, but only a posteriori out of experience."<sup>234</sup> With these cursory points in mind we can now show the relationship between Forster's three premises of Herder's philosophy of language and his account of belief, highlighting the overarching holistic philosophy of life being presented by Herder.

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231 Ibid., p. 743.

232 Kessler, "Herder and Theology", p. 249.

233 Ibid., p. 250.

234 Ibid.

Forster's three premises, again, are: (1) Thought is bound to language; (2) Meaning is use and not reference; (3) Conceptualization ultimately comes from sensation. Beginning with (1) it is easy to see how belief is impacted. Any inner thoughts/reflections occur, for Herder, through language. Belief, as shown above, comes from a revelatory experience and can only be processed through language. Belief is an intimate though impure form of knowing, due to the subject matter of religious belief. Because thought and belief are bound by the language of the believer/thinker, it proceeds with "the progression of history [as] a gradual development of the ideas of God."<sup>235</sup> This coheres entirely with (3) and keeps with the empirical and naturalist approach to theology. As our sensations and world evolve with the course of history it is natural and necessary that the resulting beliefs change to fit the context and needs of the historical moment. G-d's action in the world is contained to natural 'forces' within the world which are readily accessible to human experience. In maintaining his overall monist naturalist worldview Herder writes: "Alle Kräfte der Natur wirken organisch. Jede Organisation ist nichts als ein System lebendiger Kräfte, die nach ewigen Regeln der Weisheit, Güte und Schönheit einer Hauptkraft dienen."<sup>236</sup> Herder resists the notion to adopt a divinely intervening relationship between the world and G-d and also resists the popular forms of philosophical deism in which G-d created the universe and then wandered off. His philosophy of nature, which is beyond the scope of this work, treads a thin line between sensual religious idealism (a term coined by Marion Heinz) and Spinozan pantheism.<sup>237</sup> This common interaction between man and nature is necessary for the revelatory sensations of mankind and that these revelatory experiences are not supernatural, but are the most human experiences possible. These encounters are only later achieved as belief after being filtered through the human senses of sight, hearing, touch, taste, and smell.

Forster's remaining point (2) is the most interesting in its relationship to religious belief. In (2) meaning is understood as stemming from use and not by the referent of the word. This is particularly useful in escaping the problem of religious language. Despite Herder's sensual religious convictions, he is not immune from the difficulty of finding a referent for religious language. By adopting this pragmatic approach Herder escapes the problem in the same path taken by Rorty. By promoting the translation of the biblical texts and the commitment to (2) Herder promotes a form of religion which manages to be 'universal' because of its holding with the goal of achieving Humanität.

This open form of context mindful religion exists to allow for peoples from every corner of the globe to pursue their own linguistically defined forms of perfection. There is no support for oppressive global missionary projects, but rather a spread of commitment to liberal religion which can promote the pursuit of cultural perfection.

The central usefulness varies from language to language, but the concept of Humanität can be assented to by all cultures because it does not condemn, but seeks to foster their own unique growth and development. We are now in a position to show the

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235 Ibid., p. 251.

236 Herder, Johann Gottfried, SWS 16:569.

237 For more on this topic see Markus Buntfuß "Herder on Nature".

links between Herder's theology and the position of philosophical irony maintained by Rorty. This will proceed in the same manner as the previous two sections by showing how through the emphasis upon linguistic contingency and liberalism, Herder's philosophy of religion will be seen as entirely coherent with Rortyan philosophy.

## **4.2. Herder, Rorty, and Liberal Religion.**

Rorty himself wrote relatively little with direct regards to religion, penning only one major work in tandem with Gianni Vattimo whose own work could be generously seen as unorthodox. Rorty, in this work often regards himself as “religiously unmusical” or “anti-clerical.”<sup>238</sup> He chooses these titles as opposed to labeling himself as an atheist. His reason for doing so is primarily due to his acknowledgment that religious language does not hold a place within his final vocabulary, this is a purely political label. It is important to note here, that we shouldn't draw the conclusion that his philosophical ideas necessitate atheism. His notes on the topic of religion are his own account of himself and his vocabulary, but if we take his position of ironism seriously Rorty's religious views are not singular or privileged. His ears simply do not hear the religious tones of the world's music, others may and does not dispute this except at the political level.

### **4.2.1. Christianity and Liberalism.**

This commitment to plurality of belief (vocabulary) as well as commitment to an open liberal political sphere, allow us to draw the parallels in thought between Rorty and Herder. Both theorists, though working in drastically different contexts, have formulated a philosophy which stands to promote a pragmatic open minded approach to handling matters of religious differences.

For Herder, a committed Protestant pastor, Christianity stood as an open, and ultimately human religion. Christianity, in his view, would allow for the contextual difference to impact the belief systems of the believers. Herder rejects the ultimate Christianity of Rome for a bottom-up, grass roots, nominalist religion of the people working in their best interests. Religion should promote the growth of the believing community's Humanität and not try to force every beautiful culture and worldview through the same dogmatic mold.<sup>239</sup>

Rorty's own work is also viciously anti-dogmatic. Drawing from the final chapters of *Philosophy and the Mirror of Nature* and the entirety of *Contingency, Irony, and Solidarity*, Rorty attacks any and all attempts to privilege a single strain of thought,

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238 Rorty, Vattimo, *The Future of Religion*, pp. 30-33.

239 Spencer reminds us that “It might appear like an outright contradiction for Herder to employ external criteria in his historical evaluations and believe in the possibility of attaining objective historical knowledge whilst emphasising the plurality of values amongst different *Völker*. Yet, this contradiction is largely mitigated once it is recognized that underlying his appreciation of human diversity is a conception of human nature which recognises the existence of certain common capacities and interests in all humans.” *Beyond Either/Or*, p. 65.

be it philosophical, religious, or political. Rorty's early work attempts to show the historical development of the dogmatic thought aimed at the production of institutional dogmatism by attacking the metaphor of language 'mirroring' nature. Herder, too, attacks the privileging of sight and mirror metaphors of knowledge. Zammito highlights Herder's commitment to the importance of historicity, writing:

“[The most necessary thing that one gleans from an author what belongs to his time or the time that preceded him and what he left for posterity. He bears the chains of his epoch, to which he presents his book as a gift: he stands in his own century like a tree in the earth in which he is rooted, out of which he draws sap, with which he dresses the limbs of his emergence...]”<sup>240</sup>

The process of history should lead to wider and more open ways of thinking, but to this point it has narrowed around these dogmatic metaphor driven epistemology. Both theorists only place the practical needs of a given society as 'privileged'. The goals of progress and equality are maintained as 'higher' ideals because they keep open the possibility of future linguistic, cultural, and political developments. If we strip the status of these goals, Humanität in the case of Herder and Rorty's liberal ironism, we will inevitably find ourselves retreating towards some form of dogmatism.

Pragmatic forms of thought, with regards of religion, can be found in the theologies and philosophies discussed in the next chapter. The Black theology movement, Dalit theology, Feminist theology, and Queer theology are all examples of a given group reinventing the ways we speak about G-d and the wider functions of religion. In each of these examples the concepts presented are only aimed at furthering the life status of the group in question. Insofar as these approaches attack the 'mainstream' dogmatic forms of theology, they do so not to replace it with their own new orthodoxy, but rather to widen the areas of possible discussion and dialogue. This short list can be viewed as examples of Humanität or liberal ironism for these reasons.

Rorty's own work can certainly be seen as no friend to the Kantian legacy of the Enlightenment, but this equating of the Kantian approach with the Enlightenment ignores the far too often ignored non-dichotomous responses to the philosophical questions of that period. In his history of the counter-dogmatizing legacy of the Enlightenment it is interesting, and tragic that Rorty ignores, willfully or otherwise, the philosophy of Herder.<sup>241</sup> His work does reference Gadamer frequently, specifically showing the differences between Gadamer's hermeneutics and Rorty's ironic neopragmatism, and Gadamer himself does recognize the useful contributions which Herder made to the history of philosophy. Despite this ignorance, the similarities of Herder and Rorty's respective works cannot be denied. The comparisons noted in this chapter aim to soften the application of Rortyan antifoundationalism to theology and the

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240 Zammito, *Herder and Historical Metanarrative*, p. 72.

241 This oversight is discussed to greater extent in Michael Morton's *The Critical Turn: Studies in Kant, Herder, Wittgenstein, and Contemporary Theory*.

philosophy of religion. My approach is not the first of its kind, however it is unique in its application of Rortyan philosophy for the creation of a theological platform. The strains of openness, plurality, and the necessity of continuing discussion can be found in contemporary post-analytic philosophy and the Enlightenment period of theological thought. This path of thought has been overgrown and hidden despite the fact that it, Herder's work, was greatly influential on the famous thinkers of that time.

Before concluding we should examine a possibly frightening conclusion which can follow from grounding religion in its contingent historical context, that is the death of a religion. Herder plays with this concept throughout his linguistic, historical, and religious writings, often tracing the growth of mankind's relationship to G-d through early animism, to the Greek and Roman pantheon, and finally coming to his beloved Christianity. He acknowledges that certain concepts eventually reach a point when they are so alien to a speaker that they fall away from their vocabularies. Rorty's own reputation is itself an example of how certain concepts may fall upon deaf ears. Just as we no longer offer sacrifices to Poseidon for safe voyages, theologians today must acknowledge the potential likely death of Christianity.<sup>242</sup> Thinkers must search for the relevant kernels of Christianity and avoid trying to halt historical social progress by privileging the status of their religious text. An easy example of how not to do this can be seen in the American religious right's resistance to climate change research. If theologians are honest and humble with the scope of their discipline they must not only remain open to secular progress, but they cannot cap 'theological progress' in the form of revelation. Earnest theists should not accept the premise that divine action is complete, but as Herder acknowledges can be witnessed in the natural world throughout history. This position, though unexamined by Rorty's religiously unmusical ear, nevertheless aligns with the central thesis of *Contingency, Irony, and Solidarity*.

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242 This is especially relevant in the rising secular climate of Europe and Western culture more broadly.

Chapter 3, Part I:  
An Ironic Theology

# **1. What does an Ironic Theology Look Like?**

## **1.1. Introduction.**

The purpose of the following final chapter is two-fold. First, in part I, the greatest attention and detail will be spent describing the criteria for an Ironic theology. The first chapter was spent describing and defending Rorty's approach to philosophy, as exemplified in his liberal ironist figure. Now I will attempt to apply the philosophical lessons we find in the liberal ironist to the discipline of systematic theology. It is my hope that this model will provide a strong answer to the longstanding problem of religious language which, by extension, can be utilized for the purpose of interreligious dialogue.

Second, in Part II, Ironic theology will be directly applied to the practice of interreligious dialogue through comparison to other historical models and approaches. The problem of religious language surfaces within nearly every major publication attempting to provide a complete and systematic approach to interreligious dialogue or the theology of religions and for this reason this topic is addressed in the early stages of this work. The relationship between these two areas initially sparked my interest in extending my own Rortyan response to the linguistic problems of religion to the contemporary world of interreligious dialogue. It is my hope that such a model calms the worries of traditional Christians and furthers the many growing discussions between the global living faiths. Before we begin it should be stressed that this text is not written in defense of a specific religious tradition and that the model provided here should be seen, at most, as a bare skeleton which can be built upon by any of the world's living faiths in order to fit the specific needs fitting their contexts.<sup>243</sup>

In the second chapter attention will be placed on formulating the criteria for an Ironic theology. The argument will begin with the discussion of philosophical nominalism and contingency, drawing out the conclusions that these areas have upon religious worldviews. When this is completed the next step will be to discuss the Ironic theologian's shift away from the search for foundations of religious belief to the quest for achieving better religious social practices. It is on this point which I diverge with Rorty's approach to religion, and follow the directly theological writings of Herder.

Rorty's own approach to the religion's role in society was one which, on my own reading, exaggerates the importance of the separation of church and state within America. Rorty argues in his essay collection, *Philosophy as Cultural Politics*, that we should not discuss the ontology surrounding G-d's existence, but rather the "cultural desirability of God-talk."<sup>244</sup> Rorty claims elsewhere that his own understanding and

243 One could raise the objection that ironic theology can only be understood from a postmodern Western Christian point of view. This is a valid point, however it is worth noting that I am not promoting Ironic theology as a universal band-aid for all problems facing interreligious dialogue. I am simply expressing a view which I believe could be useful in certain instances of discussion between world religions. If it is the case that Ironic theology can only be employed productively by those coming from a background similar to my own, even this slight amount of progress should be understood as a success.

244 Rorty, Richard, *Philosophy as Cultural Politics*, p. 24.

opposition to these questions is “a political one, not an epistemological or metaphysical one. It is the view that ecclesiastical institutions, despite all the good they do— despite the comfort they provide to those in need or in despair – are dangerous to the health of democratic societies.”<sup>245</sup> To hold religious commitments, on his understanding, is to be in possession of some untouchable kernel of truth or knowledge which places the believer in a position of privilege. The creation of this unfounded superiority is inherently opposed to the commitments required to liberal democracy. My own approach agrees with Rorty until he declares that religious belief is inherently dangerous to democracy.<sup>246</sup>

If applied to traditional, foundationalist religious beliefs this critique holds a great deal of weight, however if one could conceive of a radically anti-foundationalist theology there is no contradiction between our dearly held commitment to liberal democracy and our religious beliefs.<sup>247</sup> It is my hope that the following depiction of Ironic theology can offer such an approach to religious belief. This reconstructs Rortyan philosophy of religion in response to the work of theorists such as Jürgen Habermas or Charles Taylor who raise the point that religious sentiments can inspire and sustain hope which may be otherwise difficult to maintain in our increasingly secular society.<sup>248</sup> This hope rests in my own commitment to Rorty's pragmatism. Unlike Rorty, I am skeptical of the future absence of religion and the ability to separate between one's religious commitments and politics. Instead of bracketing religious belief, I am more inclined to try and find a path around the private/public distinction which results in a humble religious position which fits comfortably within a democratic society. More on these differences will be discussed throughout the following sections, for now it is sufficient to note that Ironic theology stands somewhere between active secularism and religious inclusivism, finding itself within a socially oriented form of religious pluralism.

Once the details of an Ironic theology have been formulated, the task of discussing the new goals and problems of theology will be discussed. In section three readers will find the strongest re-orientation of traditional problems facing theology and a glance of what kinds of work would be conducted by ironic theologians. The task of systematic theology and dogmatics will be recast in light of pluralism and pragmatism and I will attempt to answer the dubious question of ‘what comes next?’ for theology. A great deal of attention will be paid to the relationship between doctrinal religious thought and the consequences of cruelty which often follow. This relationship leads to

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245 Rorty, Richard, Gianni Vattimo, *The Future of Religion*, p. 33.

246 Rorty's major reason for this fear is that “a lot of Christians have been bigoted fanatics.” Derek Nelson notes in a footnote of his *Inquiry, Conversation and Theistic Belief* that “It is not his *only* objection – that modifier is characteristic Rortian hyperbole.” p. 507.

247 Such a commitment is easily found in the works of liberal Jewish writers accounts of the transition from expecting a ‘Messiah’ versus awaiting a “Messianic Age’ of democracy. Eugene Borowitz writes in his book *Liberal Judaism*: “... the liberals felt they had a much more realistic theory of messianism: democracy. Here they followed their principle that traditional Judaism had given too great emphasis to God's acts and that modern religiosity ought to focus on humanity's powers. Instead of God sending an ideal king, they foresaw all humankind working together and by social reconstruction producing a perfected world.” p. 82.

248 See Smith, *Rorty on Religion and Hope*, p. 77.



the rejection of universalizing religious belief systems to the status which they enjoy today, it will be argued that belief should remain at the level of the individual.

Section four will discuss the plausibility of a future non-universalist understanding of faith and religion. The questions surrounding a universal free Christian identity will be discussed. This discussion will culminate in the final, and controversial claim that religions can, and as some currently exist will, die out. This evolutionary approach to the development of religious beliefs draws religion much closer to the society in which it is situated, which stands counter to Rorty's own distinction between public and private belief. Here it will be argued that certain archaic forms of religious beliefs die off, as social values progress. This is not to claim that religion(s) should be eliminated, but rather that they are not immune from the passage of time and social development. Additionally, it will be argued that the larger institutionalizing of individual faith should be avoided as it creates boundaries which impede dialogue with those who hold beliefs which are contrary to or different than our own.

Section five will conclude by showing where an Ironic theology fits within the famous historical approaches to a religiously plural world. Ironic theology will be shown to be a novel form of religious pluralism that takes a much stronger stance against exclusivism and inclusivism. It will also show its uniqueness in its resistance to the metaphysical baggage which tends to burden other forms of pluralism. It is my hope that an ironic approach to theology can be a useful form of pluralism that can be utilized by those who are disenchanted with the historical dogmatic and highly metaphysical approaches to religious pluralism. Ironic theology remains committed to social praxis over the needs for a metaphysical foundation. Ironic theologians are content to take a pre-existing religious belief system and examine how one can employ it for tending to the needs of social development and justice, they are not concerned with showing how their belief system somehow speaks best to some absolute and untouchable Being beyond comprehension. Following the lead of Rorty's call for a re-directing of the philosophical enterprise, it is my belief that theology will benefit from a drastic alteration of its areas of inquiry.<sup>249</sup>

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249 This shift is already occurring within certain sub-disciplines of theology. Those working within Liberation theology, Feminist theology, and Queer theology (to name a few) are all areas which have taken up this edifying task. Their approaches to theology will find greater attention in the final section of this chapter.

## **2. Developing an Operational Structure of Ironic Theology.**

### **2.1. Contingent Theology and Humility.**

Within the development of the Christian 'theology of religions' movement there has emerged a three-fold 'standard' model: exclusivism, inclusivism, and pluralism.<sup>250</sup> The model describes the three most common ways of understanding the relationship between Christianity and the other living faiths. The first, exclusivism, claims that Christianity holds a position of superiority over all other faiths and belief systems. It maintains that Christianity is the only or most complete truth and only way to salvation. This response to our religiously plural world is held by many American evangelicals and other religious fundamentalists.

Inclusivism claims that, while Christianity holds the *most* truth of the world religions, believers of other faiths can find their own salvation through Christianity regardless of their own ideological commitments. Christian salvation can be extended to Muslims and Hindus through the Christ's death and resurrection. This position has been adopted by neo-orthodox theologians who attempt to avoid the exclusivist response, but remain afraid of potentially trivializing the Christ event.

The final position, pluralism, claims that all of the world religions hold equal claims to truth. There has been a general acknowledgment of our limited ability to speak of the divine, and many pluralist theologians claim that we can understand each religious tradition as different ways of approaching and describing the same transcendent, wholly other, divine Being. Pluralism has found its strongest proponents in the work of scholars such as Paul Knitter and John Hick, whose work will provide pivotal insights for the development of an Ironic theology.

These distinctions, while initially helpful, all find themselves centered around a longstanding debate; the debate between realism and anti-realism. Our discussion in this chapter will center around this debate by showcasing the parallels between theological realism and philosophical realism. The problem of religious language, the central problem addressed in this work, only comes about if we approach theological language from the realist tradition. Just as Richard Rorty cleaned the skeletons from the closets of philosophers, it is my intention to apply this spring cleaning to the discipline of systematic theology.

The aforementioned positions towards world religions find themselves staking out different claims as to the universality and particularity of their inherent truth-statements. There seems to remain the strongest underlying commitment to some universal truth or value in the cases of exclusivism and inclusivism. In both cases proponents of these positions hold that the language which we use articulate a truth which reaches beyond its localized linguistic communities. The words of G-d, as found in the Tanakh, Bible, or Quran, would be understood by the exclusivist and inclusivist as expounding a truth which is applicable to all people, not just those within a given

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<sup>250</sup> This model was first introduced by Alan Race in *Christians and Religious Pluralism: Patterns in the Christian Theology of Religions*.

community's vocabulary. The difference between these positions is a matter of how this truth is applied.

The pluralist response, typically, comes in one of two popular varieties: all religions are relative; or all religions are essentially the same.<sup>251</sup> For our purposes here only a brief overview of these positions will be necessary, as we will examine them in greater detail at the end of this section. The first position, relativity, holds that each religion speaks its truth best to certain individuals, while another religion may better fit others. Person 'A' may feel best persuaded by religion 'X', while person 'B' may follow religion 'Y'. 'A' finds no power or truth in the religion of person 'B', but nevertheless cannot provide an adequate refutation of 'B's belief system. This position offers no real method of choosing<sup>252</sup> between two different religions, it offers the historically problematic conclusion of 'to each, his own.' We find ourselves with no tools for dealing with the problem of religious language here and are forced to look elsewhere for answers.

The second, pluralist response doesn't fit our needs any better than the previous position of relativism. The position of *all are essentially the same* is presented in Knitter's reading of Arnold Toynbee. Knitter notes that Toynbee, and those who follow a similar line of argument, call not only for the epistemic allowance of other religious traditions, but hold that "if we can look beyond the non-essentials of each religion, we will find that the inner core, the essential experience and insight of all of them, is essentially the same."<sup>253</sup> This approach argues that each religious tradition, at its core, holds a truth which is found at the core of every other world religion or that each religion is a different path which leads to the same destination, metaphysical or otherwise. These theories seem reasonable, but ultimately avoid answering the problem of religious language, which remains a plausible question within their theological systems.

These three models all depend on some form of realism, akin to that of the philosophical realists. They all postulate that there is some form of divine truth *out there* and that our religious traditions, practices, and language must make contact with this divinity. This contact may be literal mirroring descriptions or a symbolic relationship. This dualist approach in theology runs into the exact problems which face metaphysicians and epistemologists. They find themselves tasked with finding a way to ground all knowledge, or, in the case of theologians, religious language. Rorty argues that the perceived necessity of grounding our knowledge "is the fruit of the Greek (and specifically Platonic) analogy between perceiving and knowing."<sup>254</sup> He maintains that the historical argument is nothing more than the continued attempt to explain an ancient metaphor.

There are two possible ways to respond to this metaphor. One way is to "think of knowledge as a relation to propositions, and thus of justification as a relation between

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251 These two varieties were described by Paul Knitter in his famous work, *No Other Name?*

252 Whether or not this is necessary, or *ethical*, is a valid concern, but addressing this question is beyond the scope of this work.

253 Knitter, *No Other Name?*, p. 38.

254 Rorty, *Philosophy and the Mirror of Nature*, p. 157.

the propositions in question...”<sup>255</sup> The second is to “think of both knowledge and justification as privileged relations to the objects those propositions are about.”<sup>256</sup> The second way was taken up by the vast majority of philosophers, and arguably also by exclusivist and inclusivist theologians. Scholars within these two camps are emphatic that their religious tradition(s) stand as the relational point between ourselves and some reality (immanent/transcendent/or otherwise) which is beyond ourselves. In these cases the religious tradition acts as Rorty's philosophical mirror. It mediates between ourselves and something other. The exclusivists and inclusivists believe that their ‘mirror’ is, unquestionably, the privileged vocabulary over all alternatives. As shown in the above discussion of Rorty's response to privileged and final vocabularies, this view cannot be the case. By once again applying Rorty's critique of philosophy to theology, we find that “we understand knowledge when we understand the social justification of belief, and thus have no need to view it as accuracy of representation.”<sup>257</sup>

This holistic approach to knowledge, of both philosophy and religion, abandons the notion that we can find knowledge through pure reason (or pure revelation). We have inherited our religious tradition(s) and they are saturated with historical contingencies. To assume that at some point in the past or future we had/will possess perfect revelation, is just as misguided as assuming we had/will have a perfect final vocabulary. This is a small hope, nothing more. To live within a religious faith is to live with such a hope, but we often get carried away and extend this hope into the practice of religious metaphysics and epistemology. When we do this we are being led by our intellectual pride rather than linguistic humility. Ironic theology is nothing more than a call to humble our understanding of religious claims to knowledge. Religious claims to knowledge are not only overextended by the more conservative minded believers, but also those who declare themselves to be liberal or postmodern believers who have been greatly impacted by the presence of the other world religions. Pluralism, in its current forms, falls into the same pitfalls which plague exclusivism and inclusivism. These doctrines, despite appearing to have moved beyond, remain trapped within the language of mirrors and representations.

So, how does the work of pluralist theologians continue this representational account of truth? Each of the previously mentioned popular views of pluralism, relativism and same-ness, are both wholly dependent upon a representational model of truth. Relativism, as explicitly discussed by Rorty, only exists as a problem (or in this case solution) if we accept the traditional approach to truth-claims. Rather than understanding it as a valid concern, it is described better as the *philosophical urge*. This urge is defined as “the urge to say that assertions and actions must not only cohere with other assertions and actions but 'correspond' to something apart from what people are saying and doing...”<sup>258</sup> The threat of relativism exists as an empty threat which legitimizes the concerns of confused academic philosophers. When we look at relativism in its application to religious pluralism we find it serving a similar function.

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255 Ibid., p. 159.

256 Ibid.

257 Rorty, *Philosophy and the Mirror of Nature*, p. 170.

258 Rorty, *Philosophy and the Mirror of Nature*, p. 179.

Faced with the problem of religious language, theologians who claim that all are relative simply try to throw the problem away, but what they are really doing is insuring that it can never be properly set aside. If all religious claims are relative, every situation in which contradictory claims are uttered, conversation partners hold a convenient 'pass' option. They are allowed to avoid answering these questions because there is no answer, but the problem we face is the demand for such an answer. By looking to other approaches to truth-claims, which were discussed above, we can avoid asking these unanswerable questions in the first place and put our mental energy to a more productive task.

The second popular form of pluralism stumbles into the pitfall of representationalism to a greater extent than strong relativism. In claiming that each of these different religions are same, proponents of this view are making a strong positive metaphysical claim. These theologians and philosophers of religion often appeal to the metaphor of a group of blind men each grasping a different part of a single elephant and declaring the elephant to be like 'Z'. The problem with applying this metaphor to the varied religious claims of truth is that in claiming that each claim is a different way of describing 'Z', they are proposing an unverifiable metaphysical truth. This method of doing theology is similar to method taken by the ironist, but the ironist will not make the final leap and claim to have reached (a) truth. The pluralist who promotes same-ness holds that their final vocabulary, all religions point to the same final point, best corresponds to how the world is, despite there being no way to justify such a claim. If they formed this model and offered it as a useful conversational starting point, there is no folly, but in staking out a claim to truth which proposes a theory which best matches the world, these pluralists find themselves clinging fast to another form of dogmatic representationalism.

Before we finish our discussion of pluralism there is one famous example worth noting. The theocentric approach which has been proposed by John Hick. Hick's model is a strong iteration of the same-ness response to pluralism. He describes his Copernican revolution in theology as:

“...a paradigm shift from a Christianity-centered or Jesus-centered to a God-centered model of the universe of faiths. One then sees the great world religions as different human responses to the one divine Reality, embodying different perceptions which have been formed in different historical and cultural circumstances.”<sup>259</sup>

We find that throughout his work Hick makes continual reference to, what Paul Knitter calls, “the one Spirit, the one Divine Reality or Absolute, the one Logos behind all the religions.”<sup>260</sup> This example breathes the same air of correspondence which has kept alive the problem of religious language. Hick writes that his theocentric approach maintains “not every religious expression is therefore true, but that every religious expression is

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259 Hick, John, *God and the Universe of Faiths*, p. 131.

260 Knitter, *No Other Name?*, p. 147-148.

therefore relative.”<sup>261</sup> This model draws heavily upon the traditional religious dualism of immanent and transcendent. In trying to avoid the problems which faced the other forms of relativism, Hick claims that all religions are not to be viewed as equal. The important question to ask is “how to judge whether a particular religion actually does mediate the ultimate reality or whether one religion does the job better than another.”<sup>262</sup> This task of mediation remains dependent upon the correspondence theory of truth which was shown in chapter one to be composed of unjustifiable metaphysical assumptions.

Religion under this model acts only as a linguistic and behavioral mirror between us and some singular Spirit, Divine Reality, Absolute, or Logos which remains entirely beyond our sight. As said earlier, there is no way to determine whether or not a religion can do this, what we can determine is the internal coherence of a tradition and how the tradition functions within our social structures. Hick agrees that we can only measure a religion's ability to turn people's attention away from themselves and towards “Reality-centeredness.” This ultimate ethical and eschatological nature of religion can only be known according to Hick at “the end of history as we know it.”<sup>263</sup> Ironic theology functions in a similar manner in that it claims one can compare the validity of religious traditions through appeal to their social function, however we ironists refuse to ascribe any truth value to strong metaphysical claims as made by theologians, pluralist or otherwise. These appeals to societal function are nothing more than saying something like ‘religion *W* can more readily be interpreted as supporting practice *N*.’ These judgments can then be used as stepping stones for further interpretation and open the door for continued conversation. This continued conversation is all that we can honestly request from discussions between the great world religions.

Pluralist theologians continue postulating unverifiable metaphysics or value claims by clinging to the same foundational dreams which were held (and continue to be held) in the history of philosophy. If we drop this as a viable theological model, as Rorty did in philosophy, then we find ourselves with no problem of metaphysical religious language at all, only questions of practicality. To show this I will extend the characteristics of Rorty's liberal ironist to the discipline of theology in hopes of offering an operational structure for Ironic theology.

As discussed in the previous section<sup>264</sup>, Rorty defines an ironist as the following conditions:

“(1) She has radical and continuing doubts about the final vocabulary she currently uses, because she has been impressed by other vocabularies, vocabularies taken as final by people or books she has encountered; (2) she realized that argument phrased in her present vocabulary can neither underwrite nor dissolve these doubts; (3) insofar as she philosophizes about her situation, she does not think that her

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261 Ibid., p. 148.

262 Ibid.

263 Hick, John, *On Grading Religions*. *Religious Studies* 17 (1981), pp. 462, 465-467.

264 See Ch. 1 §3.3, *The Ironist: Accepting Contingency and the Search for Solidarity*.

vocabulary is closer to reality than others, that is in touch with a power not herself.”<sup>265</sup>

These conditions can easily be applied to the task of the theologian by simply substituting faith language into the above definition. The Ironic theologian doubts her own religious tradition because she is impressed by the traditions of others, she recognizes that no argument from her own vocabulary (faith or otherwise) can place her tradition in a position of superiority, and if she does engage in the task of theology she recognizes that her contribution to the discussion does not come closer to a final truth than the contributions of others. The Ironic theologian creates edifying models, which amount to the formations of new and useful ways of speaking about G-d and religion, which may or may not be adopted by the wider society.

This form of theology does not exist to search for a truth, but should rather be understood as a medication for a sickness. “Irony is, if not intrinsically resentful, at least reactive. Ironists have to have something to have doubts about, something from which to be alienated.”<sup>266</sup> This remains the case for the ironic theologian. Ironic theology is primarily a reaction against the history of theology, insofar as it parallels the realism/anti-realism debate. Ironic theologians are those who find no sense in questions such as the problem of religious language. For the ironist, this is no question at all! Such questions assume that we possess the linguistic capability to understand when and how our language latches onto, not only the world, but also the divine. Such a proposition is nothing more than a pipe dream.

This resentful nature of Ironic theology abandons the search for truth, religious or otherwise, and transitions from discussing the problem of religious language to discussing potential methods of interreligious dialogue. This transition is somewhat described in Rorty's analysis of theologian's resistance to the importance of cultural politics. He writes, “Granted that the existence of God or of an immortal soul is controversial, that controversy should be explicitly about what exists, not about whether religious belief conduces human happiness. First things first, ontology precedes cultural politics.”<sup>267</sup> The problem with this mentality is that these 'ontological' debates are idle armchair discussions, until we can explicitly tie them to the social world in a useful manner. To search for the true nature of Christ, as it is found in the *most* correct translations of the Bible has little to no impact on the lives of everyday believers. What does land in the laps of congregation members are new models and ways of thinking about G-d's work in the world. These models do not need a final, foundational position, which is sought by the onto-theologian. The work of the Ironic theologian, anti-foundational model building for the sake of social progress, is more than enough. Smith elaborates further on Rorty's own commitment to this point: “Religious language is to be judged not by its ability to designate possibly existing things, but by its ‘cultural desirability’... Something is culturally desirable if it conduces to human happiness.”<sup>268</sup>

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265 Rorty, *Contingency, Irony, and Solidarity*, p. 73.

266 *Ibid.*, p. 88.

267 Rorty, *Philosophy as Cultural Politics: Philosophical Papers Vol. IV*, p. 4.

268 Smith, *Rorty on Religion and Hope*, p. 80.

This form of theology places Rorty's cultural politics at the head of the wagon, and leaves ontology as a secondary means which might be useful in accomplishing a social end. Theologian David Tracy called for “relative adequacy” in our discussion of the Christ event, but it might be *better* if we were to demand something like relative functionality.<sup>269</sup>

The developmental process of becoming an Ironic theologian is thus two-fold: first one must come to accept contingency, and second work to create models with relative functionality. Accepting contingency is simply extending Rorty's declaration of the contingency of philosophical language to that of theology. It would first appear that declaring religious language contingent would be to undermine the very function of religious language. However, if we embrace the virtue of humility we should find ourselves espousing theological claims closer to the Socratic dictum rather than the historically strong dogmatic claims made by the great ecumenical councils. If we attempt to form socially functional religious models, as opposed to describing or categorizing supposed ahistorical doctrine theology can avoid the problem of religious language. When we accept that our understanding of religious doctrines, texts, and experiences come to us through historical conditions and not from a direct line to the heavens, the task of doing theology takes on a new direction. We will find ourselves placing much less attention on searching for a more accurate Christology or a more expansive anthropology, but for new ways in which we can weaponize the Gospels towards achieving social progress.

Ironic theologians cater their inquiries towards the contingent questions facing our respective contexts, questions which are worth offering humble, historically situated answers. Rather than following the standards set by theologians, such as Barth or Pannenberg, Ironic theology find its best contemporary manifestations in the work of Liberation, Feminist, Queer, and Environmental theologians.<sup>270</sup> These theologians take up the task of forming models which speak to certain problems, and only these problems. Theological models become tools in our social conversations with others. Each tool has its finite window of usefulness, which may or may not have larger applicability than other theological tools. This does not discredit the value of these other tools, but simply notes that they are used in relatively specific circumstances. Lukewarm American Protestantism can be applied to a wider range of situations than a radical lesbian liberation theology, but this in no way means that it is more correct.

This form of theology is not so novel or controversial. In fact, pre-Ironic, pastoral theology was nearly identical. We see this in the way pastors changed their vocabularies when speaking to different members of their congregation. Of course a theological discussion with a teenager will look different than one with an Alzheimer's patient. The difference between pre-Ironic theology and Ironic theology, is that the ironist abandons the necessity of making these two discussions cohere entirely. The

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269 Tracy, David, *The Analogical Imagination: Christian Theology and the Culture of Pluralism*, p. 407.

270 This small list of X-theologians is by no means complete. This list will continue to wax and wane as our contingent, historical conditions change. For example, perhaps one day we live in a society free of oppression. In such a society we would no longer have the need for liberation theology. This will be further discussed in Part II.



traditional theologian takes a larger abstract system and attempts to force it to fit the needs of different contexts. The ironist simply attempts to speak to each context in the best way possible. They do not fear the face of Biblical contradiction, but apply scripture insofar as it is useful to addressing social needs.

Ironism is a humble approach to practicing theology. It is one which carefully works to address the contingent needs of believers and non-believers where they are found. Social practice finds its importance placed before orthodoxy, and we begin looking towards religion's functional role in society rather than trying to place it as a foundation of being or knowledge. Religion exists within a society and to understand it as standing before or as a grounds for society is mistaken.

Ironic theology calls us to cater towards contextually specific problems, and cater our larger theological formulations to these particular instances. This distinction runs parallel to the metaphysical debate surrounding universals and particulars. The ironist does not see a universal Christendom which manifests throughout the globe, but rather a series of particular traditions whose differences should not be downplayed. This nominalist approach to religion, Christian or otherwise, begins in the acceptance of linguistic limitations and remains because of its immense practical usage.

This brings us to our next section, *Relative Functionality Over Foundational Dogmatics*. Here we will examine the need for traditional, foundational theology. I will again parallel Rorty's examination of metaphysics and epistemology's preferential treatment within philosophy, in hopes of showing how theology has too often fallen into the same error. This section will show that theology requires no foundation in order to speak to the needs of different societies and contexts. An untethered, Ironic theology is better suited to addressing our postmodern, religiously plural, and increasingly secularized world.

## **2.2. Relative Functionality over Foundational Dogmatics.**

The second aspect of an Ironic theology, beyond the acceptance of contingency, is prioritizing function over foundation, effect over epistemology.<sup>271</sup> Accepting the contingency of our theological vocabularies pushes us towards abandoning the task of searching for theological foundations for our social judgments. Theology, at least in its ironic form, does not seek to discuss the dual nature of Christ, but rather how this doctrine impacts the lives of those who adhere to it. We should understand that within the enterprise of theology “a belief can still regulate action, can still be thought worth dying for, among people who are quite aware that this belief is caused by nothing deeper than contingent historical circumstance.”<sup>272</sup> If this position is shown to be plausible, theology would seem to be freed from the need to provide strong, dogmatic systems which are to be held as norms for orthodox Christianity. We are left with a

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271 For more on this transition see V.A. Lektorskii's *Realism, Antirealism, Constructivism, and Constructive Realism in Contemporary Epistemology and Science*. *Journal of Russian and East European Psychology*: vol. 48, no. 6. pp. 5-44.

272 Rorty, *Contingency, Irony, and Solidarity*, p. 189.

Christianity which looks outward in hopes of helping those in need, without the problematic preoccupation with the religious affiliation of the other.

Rorty writes:

“The view I am offering says that there is such a thing as moral progress, and that this progress is indeed in the direction of greater human solidarity. But that solidarity is not thought of as a recognition of a core self, the human essence, in all beings. Rather, it is thought of as the ability to see more and more traditional differences (of tribe, religion, race, customs, and the like) as unimportant when compared with similarities with respect to pain and humiliation – the ability to think of people wildly different from ourselves as included in the range of ‘us.’”<sup>273</sup>

In this chapter I hope to unpack this statement and show that is also easily applied to theological progress. We should come to understand theological progress not as the perfection of doctrine, but as expanding our religion's capability to lessen the amount of pain and humiliation in the world. The following chapter will address the central question: Does religion need metaphysics?

### **2.2.1. Does religion need metaphysics?**

The necessity of the shift from foundation to function can be seen when we apply our understanding of contingent language and final vocabulary to the problem of religious language. The historical discussion, as evaluated in chapters two and three, has shown that each new attempt at solving this problem has done nothing more than kick the theological can down the road. Ironic theology, however, simply throws away the can. “For us ironists, nothing can serve as a criticism of a final vocabulary save another such vocabulary; there is no answer to a redescription save a re-re-redescription.”<sup>274</sup> We can stop searching for an answer to this question upon the realization that it is an empty discussion prompt.

A function focused theology, which is not tethered to a strong foundation is likely to receive criticism similar to the points raised against Rorty's call for a foundationless democracy. The problem raised would appear to be something like *what does a dogma free Christianity look like?*<sup>275</sup> If our belief doesn't stand on a foundation it would appear to become something radically *other* than our traditional view of religion. Can we continue calling our belief system ‘Christian’ if there are no hard criteria which must be met in order for a belief system to be determined orthodox? Upon further introspection it is more of a humble acceptance of the absence of something we never possessed to begin with: certainty.

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273 Ibid., p. 192.

274 Ibid. p. 80.

275 A dogma-free Christian theology would seem to be an iteration of Gianni Vattimo's concept of weak thought. For further detail of his position please see his 2012 work, *Weak Thought*.

If we place function at the forefront of our discipline we do not discard the metaphysical development of Christian thought. The Trinitarian roots are not tossed aside due to error. These doctrines remain ingrained within our belief systems. After all, Christians were raised to believe in the trinity. None of us have been raised as firm believers in Ironism. We retain our metaphysical religious commitments in the form of our final vocabulary, but acknowledge that this vocabulary is free floating. This both maintains and limits strong metaphysical inquiries by theologians. The Ironic theologian engages in dogmatics in order to challenge the standard models of belief in areas which are deemed to require improvement.

Social functionality of religion comes to the front of our attention because it is the only way we see our religion impact the world. Christology and eschatology are areas of theology which are centered around unverifiable truth-claims, but the impact that these areas have upon the lives of believers and those in contact with believers is tangible. The development of dogmatics has always centered around changing social needs, and this center is enough. Christianity has changed its 'policies' regarding divorce, homosexuality, witchcraft, and the priesthood, not because of new revelations and unearthed texts, but because of a disconnect between the world we live in and the historical worldview of a religion.

If we cling to the foundational understanding of theological progress, these steps forwards will continue to be met by resistance from those who think the alteration in doctrine is a step away from truth, away from the Absolute. However if the purpose of doctrine is to provide one of multiple views upon social development and progress, these changes are not reality shattering. Metaphysics is not necessary to our lives as believers, however it is inevitable that we have inherited some metaphysical baggage as part of our education into a religious language. To examine how this might look, I will look at the example of how baptism is understood metaphysically and socially.<sup>276</sup>

To the question of 'what is Baptism?' the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America (ELCA) gives the following response:

“In Holy Baptism the Triune God delivers us from the forces of evil, puts our sinful self to death, gives us new birth, adopts us as children, and makes us members of the body of Christ, the Church. Holy Baptism is received by faith alone.”<sup>277</sup>

This response is a strong metaphysical understanding of the sacrament of Holy Baptism. Here we understand baptism to mark an ontological change in the life of the Christian. “Baptism inaugurates a life of discipleship in the death and resurrection of Christ. Baptism conforms us to the death and resurrection of Christ precisely so that we repent

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276 This discussion of Baptism is an analysis of the theological position held by the ELCA. The position discussed is not a universal declaration of the meaning and purpose of baptism. This is also not a complete and expansive discussion of the sacrament of Baptism, it is only an example of how a religious practice looks with and without metaphysical baggage.

277 Brugh, Lorraine S. and Lathrop, Gordon W., *The Sunday Assembly: Using Evangelical Lutheran Worship Vol. I*, p. 291.

and receive forgiveness, love our neighbors, suffer for the sake of the Gospel, and witness to Christ.”<sup>278</sup> The question stands: how does baptism look if we bracket the metaphysical language? What happens here? The new Christian is understood, socially, to have been welcomed into a group of like minded believers and has been tasked with self-reflection and a commitment to loving their neighbor. The central thrust of baptism remains even if we accept that the strong metaphysical doctrine surrounding the practice is humbug. I do not wish to diminish the value that the metaphysical understanding of baptism has for believers, rather I want to drive home the point that the central tangible function remains intact even if we bracket the strong religious sentiments tied to the sacrament of Holy Baptism. The metaphysical understanding is embedded in the final vocabulary of the believing Christian, and we cannot ascribe any truth value to the practice, at least in any traditional sense. However, when we look at the pragmatic function of baptism there is no reason to retain or reject the metaphysical aspects of baptism. The Christian practice of baptism serves the social function of calling people into an ethically reflective life and pending future social change this practice is harmless.

This discussion of baptism, however brief it may be, stands to show that religious institutions can function with or without the metaphysical claims. Baptism is a socially useful institution regardless of its strong doctrinal implications for human ontology. We need to remember that the metaphysical dogmatic parts of Christianity (and other religions) are continually changed to better meet societal needs.

### **2.3. Why Ironic Theology Works.**

To close this chapter I will briefly state why Ironic theology should supersede the traditional practice of theology. The three central reasons are: Ironic theology best responds to the problem of religious language; Ironic theology puts its effort towards accomplishing pragmatic doctrinal change; Ironic theology is better suited than Exclusivism, Inclusivism, or Pluralism for the practice of interreligious dialogue.

#### **2.3.1. Ironic Theology and the Problem of Religious Language.**

The problem of religious language can be briefly stated as whether or not our language is capable of discussing the nature of G-d, or gods, in any meaningful or true way. Each of the three attempts found within the standard Exclusivism-Inclusivism-Pluralism model attempt to answer the problem with the affirmative. Each variation from the standard model claims that religious claims are meaningful or true due to their presupposition of theological (and philosophical) realism. A presupposition which, at its historically strongest point, was a “mingled pure theory of meaning with impure epistemological considerations – those which led them, at various times and in various ways, to various forms of operationalism, verificationism, behaviorism,

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<sup>278</sup> Ibid.

conventionalism, and reductionism.”<sup>279</sup> As shown above, the presupposition of realism is unfounded, problematic, and without this presupposition the problem of religious language would (likely) not have risen in the first place.

If we abandon the position of theological realism, accepting that it is a remnant of a troublesome ancient Greek metaphor, we can begin looking at other models of truth and meaning. These new models will not bring with them linguistic problems such as the problem of religious language. Ironic theology is one model which avoids the problem of religious language entirely, as it is both anti-foundationalist and anti-representationalist.

Ironic theology does not demand that the truth value of a statement depends on the statements ability to internally (linguistically) mirror an external realm which exists beyond ourselves. Rather, ironists don't take the skeptic's argument that seriously, “they need not invoke verificationist arguments; they need simply ask why they should worry about the skeptical alternative until they are given some concrete ground of doubt.”<sup>280</sup> By adopting a pragmatic approach to truth, one which sees truth claims as being dependent upon coherence within a given language and the societal usage of a vocabulary. We need not worry about the demands of theological realism unless we are faced with a strong alternative or reason for adopting it.

### **2.3.2. Ironic Theology and Pragmatism.**

It is now necessary to further unpack what the ironist's pragmatic approach to truth consists in. Rorty writes:

“Great systematic philosophers are constructive and offer arguments. Great edifying philosophers are reactive and offer satires, parodies, aphorisms... Great systematic philosophers, like great scientists, build for eternity. Great edifying philosophers destroy for the sake of their own generation.”<sup>281</sup>

This dualism can be extended to include those who work within the discipline of systematic theology. The great thinkers thought themselves to be bettering and refining dogma, the edifying, pragmatic, and ironic theologians doubt this enterprise and do nothing more than attempt to create useful ways of talking about G-d.

Rorty often compares the philosophers insistence upon some form of realism as a parallel to the theists insistence on the need for G-d. This sort of realist talk, in both philosophy and theology, has become problematic precisely because scholars believe themselves to provide strong true answers to the question of how things really are. Philosophers claim to be able to describe how things in the world are by appealing to ever changing epistemological methodologies, theologians have followed this same

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279 Rorty, *Philosophy and the Mirror of Nature*, p. 259.

280 Ibid., p. 311.

281 Ibid., p. 369.

dogmatic path in forming certain church doctrines which are understood to be orthodox, and alternative proposals are condemned as heretical. The church claims to hold a privileged position in regards to the true models of how humanity stands in relation to the divine.

The point here is that when scholars or larger doctrinal institutions claim to have the vocabulary which best represents how the world and the divine really are, they are relying on an outdated belief that “there is an intrinsic nature of non-human reality that humans have a duty to grasp...”<sup>282</sup> Theologians need to come to terms with the fact that religion is inescapably human. Scripture does not come from on high, but revelation is found in, with, and under the embodied history of humanity. Pragmatism, theological or otherwise, maintains that if “human beings have responsibilities only to one another entails giving up representationalism and realism.”<sup>283</sup> Ironic theology adopts this suggestion of pragmatism by abandoning the notion that the only progress we achieve in forming and adopting new models is “a matter of finding ever more effective ways of enriching human life.”<sup>284</sup>

For the Ironic theologian their pragmatism makes questions of christology, eschatology, and soteriology (to name a few theological sub-disciplines) matters of bettering the lives of Christians and non-Christians, not reaching a more profound closeness to the relationship of the divine to humanity. Ironic theologians focus upon how humanity's religious inheritance can fit the needs of the contemporary world.

Ironic theology places greater emphasis on the pragmatic value of their models due to the limited progress which can be achieved by coherence alone. The plethora of world religions each hold a relatively self-coherent theological vocabulary. Differences of vocabulary led to the formation of different denominations within the Christian church. Catholicism and Protestantism (in its many forms) are both coherent systems formed by appealing to particular portions of the Biblical texts. One denomination is no more accurate than any other denomination. No group holds a more privileged epistemic position than any other. Rather, they each form a different narrative model of living for their adherents. These models of living are understood by the Ironic theologian as wholly pragmatic extensions of religious belief. Differences in eucharistic theology are important to the ironist insofar as they influence our duties towards the larger human population. “Insofar as religion has been dying out among the intellectuals in recent centuries, it is because of the attractions of a humanist culture, not because of flaws internal to the discourse of theists.”<sup>285</sup> Theology, in the hands of the ironist becomes more of a theo-praxis. This emphasis on praxis over theory leads the ironist away from working towards new dogmatic theories with the religiously similar and pushes them to engage the religious other in socially progressive interreligious dialogue.

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282 Rorty, *Philosophy as Cultural Politics: Philosophical Papers Vol. IV*, p. 134.

283 Ibid.

284 Ibid.

285 Rorty, *Philosophy as Cultural Politics: Philosophical Papers Vol. IV*, p. 136.

### 2.3.3. Ironic Theology and Interreligious Dialogue.

The Ironic theologian is pushed towards interreligious dialogue for two reasons: doubt of their own vocabulary; and their interest in theo-praxis. The first reason stems from the ironist's recognition that their own inherited (or adopted) religious vocabulary is wholly contingent. Ironists realize that their own religion holds no special epistemic position above the other living faiths. Christianity, Judaism, Hinduism, Islam, and Buddhism each find an equal lack of truth-value regarding their dogmatic claims. Ironists are compelled to learn from their religious neighbors in hopes of understanding their respective final vocabularies and also to see the societal and ethical consequences of these vocabularies. Ironic interreligious dialogue seeks to find the most useful aspects of the vocabularies used by the world religions in hopes of bettering their own vocabulary. As history passes certain ways of speaking and understanding the world cease to be “a live, momentous, and forced option.”<sup>286</sup> When pieces of language seem to become deflated or hollow, residents of a language cannot help but look around for other options. This examining the lay of the religiously linguistic land can be best accomplished by personal interaction with the religious other. Interreligious dialogue provides a healthy controlled space to accomplish this, among its many other social functions.

The second reason for Ironic theologians flow into interreligious dialogue stems from the ironist's attention on the practical aspects of theories and new vocabularies. Rorty's analysis of philosophical progress can be projected upon theology as well:

“Thesis Sixteen: Waiting for a guru is a perfectly respectable thing for us philosophers to do. It is waiting for the human imagination to flare up once again, waiting for it to suggest a way of speaking that we had not thought of before...They do not need the sort of guru who explains that his or her authority comes from a special relation to something non-human, a relation gained by having found the correct track across an abyss.”<sup>287</sup>

The point of this claim is that far too often philosophers, in Rorty's understanding of the discipline's history, get caught up focusing too deeply on an area of inquiry long after it has passed its period of impact. For Rorty, the linguistic turn, and its failure, buried the long standing realist, representationalist model of truth.<sup>288</sup> Once this was accomplished there was little left for the discipline to achieve, but the scholars who dedicated themselves to solving these new problems of language dogmatized their work as taking precedent above other forms or areas of inquiry. Theologians must resist the urge to do the same. Rather than lofty academic inquiry, directly practical work becomes the focal goal for ironic theologians.

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286 James, William, *The Will to Believe*, §1.

287 Rorty, *Philosophy as Cultural Politics: Philosophical Papers Vol. IV*, p. 146.

288 Rorty's own reflections upon the legacy of the linguistic turn can be found in his retrospective essays written ten and twenty-five years after the initial publication of his *The Linguistic Turn*.

The search for new, innovative ways of speaking about G-d, G-d's relation to creation, and our liturgical practices is the task of the Ironic theologian. Ironist's "principle concern must be the extent to which the actions of religious believers frustrate the needs of other human beings, rather than the extent to which religion gets something right."<sup>289</sup> This shift from evaluating religious language as truth-centered to being practice-centered grows directly from James' notion that what is right becomes "what would be better for us to believe."<sup>290</sup> The way in which the pragmatic theologians can find a response to James' call is through the learning process which takes place in interreligious dialogues. The social and political practicality of religious sentiments and practices are evaluated by the many world religions against the backdrop of our inherited religious and political values. Ironic theologians find themselves moving from the lessons learned from the linguistic turn and placing their hopes of finding new vocabularies and ways of thinking in what Marianne Moyaert calls the "dialogical turn."<sup>291</sup>

Ironic theology is an attempt at providing a dogma free approach to the discipline of theology. It combines the lesson of contingency which we have learned from the history of analytic and post-analytic philosophy and the linguistic turn with the earlier American pragmatist focus on the social element of knowledge and values. Ironic theologians are committed pluralists who reject John Hick's "claiming that realism [as opposed to anti-realism] is a *proper* religious outlook."<sup>292</sup> Ironists approach theology by joyfully accepting that there is no *proper* religious outlook, we are one phase of a vast continuing tradition. Our task is to move our tradition forward in the most pragmatic and ethical way possible.

The next chapter will look to the future of systematic theology in light of the arguments raised by the Ironic theologian. Historical theological problems and debates will be recast in a pragmatist direction. Dogmatics and practical theology will be contrasted and their respective goals will be analyzed through the lens of Ironic theology. It will conclude by evaluating the roles of academic theologians and practical theologians (pastors/missionaries/educators).

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289 Rorty, Richard, *Philosophy and Social Hope*, p. 148

290 James, William, Castell, Alburey, "What Pragmatism Means," in *Essays in Pragmatism*. p. 156.

291 Moyaert, Marianne, "Interreligious Dialogue", in *Understanding Interreligious Relations*, ed. David Cheetham, Douglas Pratt, and David Thomas (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013), p. 193.

292 Cheetham, *Understanding Interreligious Relations*, p. 21.



### **3. Meta-Theology vs. Systematic Theology.**

#### **3.1. Introduction.**

Our understanding of systematic theology, as a discipline, is changing. We no longer have theologians locking themselves away in stone towers (although those of the Ivory variety remain) dictating the truths of G-d to the peasants below. Today, the discipline is composed of scholars who come from all walks of life and all corners of the globe. With this diverse new group of thinkers, new questions have been raised regarding the enterprise of theology itself. What goal should the theologian work towards and how can they accomplish it?

Recent work by Gordon Kaufman and Sallie McFague understand that the task of the theologian is to form a coherent doctrine for believers. Theologians look to their sacred texts and traditions and form vocabularies which are internally coherent. This meta-theological shift has been termed by some as “Constructive Theology.”<sup>293</sup> The new form of theology that was formulated in the last chapter, Ironic theology, stands upon the shoulders of this new constructivist movement.

Constructive theology, as an approach to writing about theology, which attempts to address “those primary themes that have emerged, again and again over the centuries...”<sup>294</sup> While at the same time “being both Christianity's wise conservators and its harsh critics – all the while trying to construct bold visions of hope and justice for a world in desperate need of them.”<sup>295</sup> These scholars do what theologians should be doing, drawing upon the grand history of Christian tradition and reinterpreting it in a manner which can be applied best within our contemporary society. Constructive theologians attempt to straddle the preservation of tradition with pragmatic social advancement.

Constructive theology recognizes and tries to make the best of an epistemically bad situation. Ironic theology acknowledges that the best religious doctrine can only hope for internal, self-coherence (on this point being in sync with the tradition), but emphasizes the validity of a theology through the social practicality of the new language/belief/model. This stronger emphasis of pragmatism gives the ironist a distinct advantage when she is faced with the task of choosing between two equally coherent constructive theologies. The ironist sees two seemingly opposed religious doctrines, for example Calvinist or Lutheran accounts of predestination, and revels in the ability to take two doctrines and apply them in circumstances in which they are best suited. Their respective coherence is evidenced by their continued historical presence within the theological sphere, but when faced with that troublesome problem of relativism “there is no big secret which the ironist hopes to discover, and which he might die or decay before discovering. There are only little mortal things to be rearranged by being

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293 See Serene Jones and Paul Lakeland, *Constructive Theology: A Contemporary Approach to Classical Themes*.

294 Ibid., p. 7.

295 Ibid., p. 4.

redescribed.”<sup>296</sup> The Ironic theologian playfully rearranges the doctrines of their own (and others) religion with the hope of forming something usefully novel. Not only does the ironist mix and match aspects of tradition, but they are also keenly aware that parts of the tradition may fall away or be removed at any time. The constructivist, while agreeing with pragmatic reinvention, is more hesitant to simply drop religious vocabulary.

The following chapter will further unpack what it means for the ironist to do theology in a way that continues to redescribe doctrine with the hopes of finding a “better description” despite the fact that “he has no criterion for the application of this term and so cannot use the notion of ‘the right description.’”<sup>297</sup> Next, the relationship between doctrinal theological questions and cruelty will be examined. The chapter will conclude with the meta-theological acknowledgment that the pragmatically inclined ironic methodology is better suited for contemporary interreligious dialogue than past and present alternatives.

### **3.2. The Absence and Surplus of Truth Value.**

The introduction ended on the question of how it would look if we could determine the best of two value claims without appealing to “what George Pitcher has called the ‘Platonic Principle...’”<sup>298</sup> Tersely stated, “Our certainty will be a matter of conversation between persons, rather than a matter of interaction with non-human reality... At most, we shall see differences in the degree of ease in objecting to our beliefs.”<sup>299</sup> By dropping the mirroring understanding of language we turn our understanding of virtuous behavior away from behavior matching a divine command, Golden Rule, or Supreme Principle of Practical Reason.

This radically historical approach accepts that morality is always changing in scope and direction. As we move and live within this ever-changing inherited system of beliefs, opinions, and what has been dubbed knowledge, we ground *our* view through an ironic ethnocentrism. This consists in the believing, opinionated, knower taking up their contextually inherited values (earlier dubbed a final vocabulary) as the norm through which other values are evaluated. This is not as much as foundation as it is a starting point of conversation. What is important to see here is that where the dogmatically minded theologian begins by taking their religion as truth and others as doubtful, the Ironic theologian begins by doubting their own religious claims because they see potential in the views of others. It needs to be emphasized that only potential is seen by the ironist. Potential, for their purposes, is more than enough.

We count ourselves blessed with a starting point which further directs and points us towards areas of inquiry. This status as existing within a foundationless web of beliefs is adequate for pragmatic societal functioning. Societal norms have value in that they possess the ability to dictate actions. Some of these norms can be argued for more

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296 Rorty, *Contingency, Irony, and Solidarity*, p. 99.

297 Ibid.

298 Rorty, *Philosophy and the Mirror of Nature*, p. 156.

299 Ibid., p. 157

substantively than others. Neither norm stands upon a solid foundation, rather, only a more persuasive argument. The evolution of societal values is mirrored in the evolution of church doctrine and social positions. For example, as LGBT rights gained greater acceptance in the broader society, the church followed suit and altered its official stance. Some Christian groups embraced the fluidity of their social positions by enacting institutional changes, others embraced the older societal norms and shifted towards reinforcing strong doctrinal impasses.

The assertion that doctrine cannot change is to understand religious language as “tablets of stone, written with the finger of God.”<sup>300</sup> Dogmatic theologians, conservative or otherwise find themselves often building doctrinal structures with this mentality. So long as realism and representation remain common presuppositions held by theologians social progress will be delayed. These commitments result in the ever present skeptical counter-arguments to the doctrines promoted by the dogmatist. In response to such arguments the dogmatists attempt to strengthen their case, make their arguments less touchable by the corruptive force of religious skepticism. This retreat, however, is not without consequence. In strengthening their defenses against the skeptic, the dogmatist creates doctrinal systems of belief which lend themselves to institutional cruelty.

### **3.3. Dogmatics and Cruelty.**

The previous section ended with the claim that doctrinal thinking impedes social progress and is often employed to keep dogmas, laws, and ordinances in place which are understood to cause harm to a given group. Rorty, describes his own response to this cruelty as anti-clerical writing:

“...religious professionals who devote themselves not to pastoral care but to promulgating orthodoxy and acquiring economic and political clout. We think that it is mostly religion above the parish level that does the damage. For ecclesiastical organizations typically maintain their existence by deliberately creating ill-will toward people who belong to other such institutions... They thereby create unnecessary human misery.”<sup>301</sup>

This section will further expand on this notion and elaborate on how traditional dogmatics, as found in systematic theology, lend themselves (intentionally or otherwise) to consequences which impose harm or suffering. It should be noted that in instances of dogmatic theology the author in question will understand themselves to be a committed theological realist. Theological realism being the ascent towards making claims which reach beyond our language towards the world and the divine. Realism is the implicit assumption that our language, religious or otherwise, finds its grounding *out there in the*

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300 Exodus 31:18 (NRSV)

301 Rorty, Richard, *Religion in the Public Square: A Reconsideration*, in “Journal of Religious Ethics”, pp. 141-142.

*world*. Trabant contrasts the tendency towards violence implicit within the traditional approach to epistemology to Herder's alternatives, writing:

“...this acroamatic epistemology was in no way able to replace the traditional Western conception of cognition as seeing and grasping... The eye that gazes forward and the hand with its firm grip on things constitute the bodily foundation of our aggressive attitude toward the world. Herder's softer acroamatic epistemology is an appeal to let the world breathe and resound, and to dialogue with it.”<sup>302</sup>

Such commitments are exceedingly difficult to reconcile with the world of religious pluralism, despite many attempts to do so.<sup>303</sup> To show exactly how dogmatics lends itself to cruelty, we must first examine what the task of dogmatic theology is.

Dogma, which is an area of study within the field of dogmatics, has been defined as “a belief held unquestioningly and with undefended certainty. In the Christian Church, a belief communicated by divine revelation...”<sup>304</sup> As shown above, such unquestioning commitment fails to recognize the contingency of one's own final vocabulary. This failure leads to a sense of epistemic pride. *We* are the holders of truth, and *they* are blundering about with false idols. This may inspire a sense of isolationism; these are *our* truths and we will keep them among ourselves. It may also inspire strong proselytary tendencies which do violence to the beliefs held by those of other faiths.

Both of these can be understood as forms of cruelty, or at least not aiding to its elimination. The isolationist pulls back from the world, content among themselves. In doing so they, at worst, fail to assist in limiting the acts of cruelty in the world. They may abstain from the public sphere. The missionary can find themselves in positions of active cruelty. They invade a new land, and strip bare that which was once held sacred, substituting it with the one true faith. We have seen this soul saving mentality leading to the infliction of great pain timeless times throughout history, a recent example of such cruelty is the institutional form of gay conversion therapy. Such applications of religious faith is the despicably tragic logical consequence of dogmatic thinking.

### **3.4. Ironic Pragmatism and Interreligious Peace.**

The addition of ironism, as it was initially presented by Richard Rorty and now reinterpreted to accommodate religious belief, turns the view of theology away from the heavenly bodies and towards the suffering of others. The epistemic commitments, if one can even call them such, push the ironist towards those who were traditionally understood as *they*, *religious others*, or, *those people*. The self-doubt propels the ironist

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302 Trabant, *Herder and Language*, p. 130.

303 Such attempts can be found in the work of John Hick, Paul Knitter, and especially Peter Byrne.

Byrne's *Prolegomena to Religious Pluralism* can be taken as a beautiful, insightful example of the concerns for grounding theology upon realism.

304 Blackburn, Simon, “Dogma.” *The Oxford Dictionary of Philosophy*.

into dialogue with others, such dialogue is intended not to convert, but to educate and promote peaceful relations between the world religions.

Ironism's lack of strong commitment to the correctness and falsity of religious claims prevents them from imposing a doctrine upon the religious other which causes harm. It is precisely this point which separates the ironist from the dogmatist. The dogmatist is aiming to set norms and systems of belief for the believer, the ironist simply acknowledges them as they stand. There is no judgment of their truth, only of their usefulness.

Ironism looks outwards in order to widen the circle of solidarity among religious neighbors, all the while using situations of dialogue in order to determine if their own final vocabulary passes the cruelty litmus test. Rorty cites the usage of literature to widen our perspective of our own cruelty: "books help us see how social practices which we have taken for granted have made us cruel."<sup>305</sup> I believe that this can be extended into the realm of interreligious dialogue. Through such dialogue we are presented with a narrative entirely *other* than our own, and through this narrative we come to see our own views recast in ways previously unseen. This emphasis on new narratives is central to Rorty's argument of the important role literature plays in shaping the ethical values of a given society. Dialogue does not bring us closer to creating a bridge between religious language and an external transcendent truth, but it does give us the opportunity to shape our behavior in a helpful manner.

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305 Rorty, *Contingency, Irony, and Solidarity*, p. 141.

## **4. The Life of (a) Faith.**

### **4.1. Introduction.**

The following section takes up a somewhat different topic than the rest of this chapter. Turning attention away from the primarily theoretical discussion of the approaches to language which undergird religious discussion, this section will focus upon questions of religious identity. The purpose is to show that the search for foundational religious language inevitably leads to an in-out political dichotomy which will create impassable boundaries for those pursuing interreligious dialogue. By attempting to show that a nominalist religious identity better facilitates interreligious dialogue, it is my hope to avoid the negative social consequences of a group identity.

For the sake of my own ease, and the attempt to avoid presenting a misguided depiction of any world religion, Christianity will act as the primary religion of discussion as it is the religion with which I am most familiar. By the end of section four, it will have been demonstrated that our usage of 'religion' should cease to be used as an overarching term which lumps groups of believers together. Dropping this term is for reasons both theoretical and pragmatic. Theoretically, it will be shown that the attempt to find some unifying characteristic of a group of faiths is extremely difficult, if not impossible. Pragmatically, rather than lumping believers together into what become doctrinal and value imposing institutions, receiving believers as just that, individual holders (and most importantly interpreters) of beliefs, is a mentality which is fruitful for approaching others in what has unfortunately been termed interreligious dialogue.

This discussion, again, heavily imports topics from within the philosophical arena, namely the historical debates surrounding universalism and nominalism. While those discussions were primarily centered around ontology, the alternative application of these arguments towards ideological religious structures is recognized by the author.

Before we proceed further, it would be fruitful to explain the historical positions and describe my own application of terms towards institutional religion and groups of faithful believers. By faithful or believer, I am specifically referring to a single individual who holds (and interprets) a religious claim or belief within their final vocabulary. The members of a Methodist congregation are each single instances of believers. The larger group, viewed as a single entity is a contingency of language, but holds no uniform standard over the individuals other than that they are in general proximity of one another. These large groups of believers are just that, groups of particular people holding (and interpreting) a set of beliefs. 'Religion' is used to describe the attempt at universalizing of a set of beliefs over a wide range of believers.<sup>306</sup> It will be shown that this universalizing is far more difficult than had it may first appear. This difficulty leads to the pragmatic shift of dropping its usage from the vocabulary of the Ironic theologian.

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<sup>306</sup> This use of religion is particular to the approach taken by those who compose systematic theologies in a dogmatic fashion. A fashion which will be shown to cause more harm than good. When this word appears capitalized it should be taken in this pejorative sense.

## **4.2. Nominalist Faith vs. Doctrinal Religion.**

Before proceeding to discuss the relationship between religious belief and the individual, there are a few terms which must be defined. The first of these being nominalism. According to the Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy, “the mere rejection of properties, numbers, possible worlds, propositions, etc., does not make one a nominalist – to be a nominalist one needs to reject them because they are supposed to be universals or abstract objects.”<sup>307</sup> This definition is directed towards the discussion of metaphysical entities such as number and color, but it can be extended to groups of believers and Religion due to each holding a parallel structure. One instance of white is to whiteness, as a Christian is to the Christian Church. It is this relationship which will be critiqued in the following section. It is my hope to show that for the purpose of interreligious dialogue, it is better if we act as particular believers, rather than as an iteration of the universal church.

### **4.2.1. Christian Identity without the Universal Church.**

On Sunday mornings throughout the world, Christians recite the Apostle's creed. This creed has been a standard set-piece of the Christian liturgy. Voices cry out from around the globe, “I believe in the Holy Spirit, the holy catholic and apostolic Church...”<sup>308</sup> For the purposes of ecumenical discourse, a call to unity, to the one catholic church, is an extremely beneficial linguistic structure. However, when we begin discourse with those who are not Christian, this can form problematic power relationships. One example of this can be seen in the 1893 *World's Parliament of Religions*. Intended as an open and equal dialogue between the world's religions:

“One could argue that this first World's Parliament of Religions was more of a Christian forum to which non-Christians were also invited than a true interreligious assembly. That this criticism is not unfounded is obvious if we look at the members of the organizing committee, which consisted of fourteen of Chicago's well-known Protestant Christian leaders, one Jewish rabbi, and a Roman Catholic Bishop.”<sup>309</sup>

While this example took place over one hundred years ago, and the form of contemporary dialogue has changed drastically, the point is well illustrated. “The belief in the necessity of interreligious dialogue is at least partly inspired by the desire to put the earlier dominant and privileged position of Western Christianity to rights.”<sup>310</sup> A

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307 Rodriguez-Pereyra, Gonzalo, “Nominalism in Metaphysics”, *The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy*. Summer 2015. §1.

308 This version of the Apostle's Creed comes from the 1988 ELLC liturgical collection, *Praying Together*.

309 Moyaert, Marianne, “Interreligious Dialogue”, in *Understanding Interreligious Relations*. ed. David Cheetham, Douglas Pratt, and David Thomas (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013) p. 195.

310 *Ibid.*, p. 197.

nominalist response to the existence of the universal church, is a single linguistic attempt to attack this position of privilege. This attack upon institutional forms of religion is not directed only at the Christians who wish to join into discussion, rather it is extended to all of those who seek a seat at the discussion table. By approaching discourse as a group of humans, each with varying beliefs, rather than as Christians, Buddhists, Muslims, and Jains, there is an immediately stronger sense of solidarity among those in discourse. The attention is not placed upon differences, but rather on the commonalities we hold and how we can better the lives of humanity.<sup>311</sup>

What does it mean to be a Christian without the catholic Church? A Christian sans Christianity? How do we understand what it means to be a Christian? Is there a single universal point which brings believers together into one body? One might better phrase this question as, *should* there be such a universal point?

#### 4.2.1.1. *What makes a Christian?*

Rather than appeal to the works of the great theologians of history, let us first consult a dictionary. Within ordinary English parlance, the noun 'Christian' is defined in simple (a) and full (b) forms:

- (a) a person who believes in the teachings of Jesus Christ.
- (b) one who professes belief in the teachings of Jesus Christ.<sup>312</sup>

Nowhere in this definition does one find mention of the Church or any larger ecumenical body. All we are presented with in these forms is that a person is understood being a Christian if they believe in the teachings of Christ. This may at first appear to be a completely vague and largely useless definition, but this assumption is extremely misleading. We find that this definition requires further explanation: what is meant by belief?; which teachings?; which Jesus Christ? All of these questions are dissected in greater detail and found in theological definitions. This process has not reached completion and the question still remains; what makes a Christian?

If a Christian is understood to be someone who believes in the teachings of Jesus Christ, we are no closer to locking down a single point of unity among believers. At most we might be able to claim that all those who claim the title of Christians would apply the above definitions to themselves. This definition cannot help but frustrate the dogmatic theologian who seeks to create a beautifully simple cage of rules which imprison the belief of the Christian into a unified institutional box. This prison of belief is known by most as the Church.

The relationship between the Christian and the religion of Christianity is not of bi-directional necessity, rather the religion is wholly dependent upon the believers. However, one must ask if believers truly require Christianity, as an institution, in order to call themselves Christians? It is not difficult to extend Foucault's understanding of the

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311 It should be noted here that there are many different aims and goals of interreligious dialogue. The form discussed here is one whose focus is socially and politically motivated.

312 See "Christian." *Merriam-Webster.com*. Merriam-Webster, n.d. Web. 4 May 2016.



prison to the contemporary institutionalized church. Foucault describes seven maxims which determine the pedigree and efficiency of a penal system. For the sake of time these can be reduced to the following:

“1. Penal Detention must have as its essential function the transformation of the individual's behavior... 2. Convicts must be isolated... 3. It must be possible to alter the penalties according to the individuality of the convicts... 4. Work must be one of the essential elements in the transformation... 5. The education of the prisoner is... in the interests of society and an obligation to the prisoner... 6. The prison régime must...be supervised and administered by a specialized staff possessing the moral qualities and technical abilities required of educators... 7...Not only must he be placed under surveillance on leaving prison, 'but he must be given help and support.’”<sup>313</sup>

To what extent are these criteria achieved by the Religious corrective facility? We will begin with James' definition of religion as “the feelings, acts, and experiences of individual men in their solitude, so far as they apprehend themselves to stand in relation to whatever they may consider divine.”<sup>314</sup> In response to Foucault's first point, Religion in its dogmatic form is explicitly norm and value setting in relation to the above definition of religion. It directs how believers are supposed to believe, this cookie-cutter approach to theology later dictates and shapes the behavior of the believer. Point two is the most difficult to relate to dogmatics, but the relationship can be found in the internal digestion of dogmatic teaching. When one ingests a dogmatic text the comparison of one's personal beliefs are held in isolation against the beliefs and standards set forth by the dogmatist. Point three can be related to the personal relationship between one's self and their own sin. This relationship is the intimate intermingling of identity with shame. Point four is self explanatory, the life of faith is a life of transformation.<sup>315</sup> Point five is most important for our own project. According to our analogy the religious upbringing one receives is formed in the interests of the religion itself. This is often called indoctrination. Point six extends to the position of pastors, deacons, bishops, and academic theologians. Point seven is the most difficult to draw into our analogy. We can make this leap by extending religious supervision out into the world beyond the central practice of worship. Just as the rules and regulations follow us out into the world; so does the guilt which accompanies sinful behavior.

By viewing the manner in which we determine who fits into the category of “Christian” as following the parallel structure of the Western prison complex, we should find ourselves questioning our theological fluidity within traditional religious institutions. The conclusion is commonsensical: dogmatic religious institutions stifle the development and growth of theological ideas and, as such, we would be better off

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313 Foucault, Michel, *Discipline and Punish*, pp. 269-270.

314 James, William, *The Varieties of Religious Experience*, p. 37.

315 This transformative nature of religious growth is present regardless of the value placed upon good works within a given theological system.

without them. Religion should not be the attempt to “utter the unutterable...a hopeless attempt to satisfy man's eternal metaphysical urge.”<sup>316</sup> Rather, we should learn from Wittgenstein's conclusion that “the bridge is finally demolished.”<sup>317</sup>

#### 4.2.1.2. *Why the question, 'What makes a Christian?', doesn't make sense.*

Section 4.2.1.1. took up the task of answering the question “what makes a Christian?” This task of course leads to extremely unsatisfying results for the systematic theologian who intends on presenting us with a new explanation of our Religion. It will now be shown precisely why this question is so problematic.

Before we even approach the intricate doctrinal definitions of a Christian, just uttering the question creates a division between those who will be included in the definition and those who are not. Answering this question will (almost) always lead to such a dichotomy. Theologians have attempted to circumvent this problem with the invention of ideas such as Karl Rahner's “anonymous Christian” doctrine.<sup>318</sup> This approach fails to treat the world religions with integrity as it subordinates them to the universal status of Christianity.<sup>319</sup> In cases of interreligious dialogue where the social takes precedence to the theological search for truth, the question of identity cannot serve any purpose other than the formation of borders. This reason alone, is enough to regard the question as senseless for practical purposes. However, due to the nature of this work, we cannot reject the question on pragmatic grounds alone and a theoretical rebuttal is necessary before proceeding further.

The question 'what makes a Christian?' is, for the dogmatist, uttered through the use of religious language. We should understand that the central problem of religious language boils down to a problem reference.<sup>320</sup> How can we begin to proscribe cognitive meaning to this question as long as religious language demands a referent? What shall we point to? What should our language mirror?

If we take our earlier definitions from 4.2.1.1. we are making a reference, of some kind, towards Jesus Christ. We cannot ascribe more detail than this. Do Christians refer to Christ as a character in the same way that J.R.R. Tolkien readers refer to Frodo Baggins? Likely not, or at least dogmatists would scoff at their Religion being compared to a fantasy novel. It may prove useful to assume that there may be varying degrees of attempted reference to Christ. Some believers may take him as nothing more than a fictional character from whom we can learn moral lessons, while most others are committed to a type of Christian realism.<sup>321</sup> It is this commitment to a form of religious realism that leads to the above question nonsensical. As Smith succinctly puts it,

316 Engelmann, Paul, “A Memoir”, in *Portraits of Wittgenstein Volume I*. F.A. Flowers III and Ian Ground eds. p. 333.

317 Ibid., p. 341.

318 Knitter, *No Other Name?*, p. 128.

319 Further counter arguments to Rahner's inclusivism can be found in the works of Paul Knitter.

320 This question is, but one iteration of the larger problem of religious language which has been discussed in detail earlier in Chapter 1. One philosopher of religion who champions the importance of realism and representation within religious language is Peter Byrne.

321 Exemplars of the view that Christ is a fictional character or mythical figure can be found within the Jesus Seminar and the Jesus Project. They set aside the mythical qualia of Christ in favor of the historical Jesus.

“redemption rather arises from being able to imagine oneself as enlarged, or made better, or perhaps transfigured and made complete, through the mediation of the lives of other people, including the fictional lives of people found in literature, the arts, and other cultural artefacts.”<sup>322</sup>

### **4.3. Letting Religion Die.**

In his, *Contingency, Irony, and Solidarity*, Richard Rorty maintains that religious belief is incompatible with liberal democratic values. After section 4.2 we can conclude that he is both correct and false. Religion, insofar as it stands above the believer as a final unquestionable vocabulary, is incompatible with both democracy as well as Ironic theology. Thus Rorty's liberal ironist and my own Ironic theologian are opposed to the strong dogmatic structures which maintain a strong degree of foundationalism. These are rejected in favor of a grass-roots, bottom up replacement of the traditional epistemic task. The ironic believer through doubt of their own inherited vocabulary will eagerly look to others in order to draw upon beneficial beliefs and spiritual practices. With this approach to faith and belief, we must acknowledge and allow for the death of Religion.

The ironist's response which arises from the above distinction between believer and religion, is depicted well in Nietzsche's *Beyond Good and Evil*:

“The philosopher as we understand him, we free spirits – as the man of the most comprehensive responsibility who has the conscience for the over-all development of man – this philosopher will make use of religions for his project of cultivation and education, just as he will make use of whatever political and economic states are at hand.”<sup>323</sup>

Nietzsche's words, if we can glance over the polemical intentions with which he was writing, accurately depicts the ironist's interest in the pragmatic usage of systematic theology. Insofar as the ironist forms any systematic approach to a theological topic, it is done so out of possible social potential and not discovery of true doctrine.

If we allow for a Religion to die, believers lose nothing other than a vertical hierarchy which imposes doctrine. Without this overarching structure believers can come together in heterarchy<sup>324</sup> to discuss and exchange their beliefs freely with others, without the possibility of being punished wandering too far astray. This is not a recent mindset, but has been with us since the Enlightenment! “While pursuing truth, history unfolds as a continuous process (cf. Adler 1990, 171). A process that urges us, according to Herder, to abandon the idea of an absolute truth in favor of the processes of imagining individual, historical, poetic, and even religious truth.”<sup>325</sup> Religious inquirers should be able to go delve into the rabbit hole as deeply as they please, without coming

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322 Smith, *Rorty on Religion and Hope*, pp. 83-84.

323 Nietzsche, Friedrich, Kaufmann, Walter (trans.), *Beyond Good and Evil*, p. 72 §61.

324 See David C. Clark and his work on heterarchy and other alternatives to hierarchical power structures.

325 Godel, *Herder's Concept of Truth*, p. 37.

to face some artificial bedrock. Placing emphasis upon the personal vocabulary held by the individual rather on a larger socially imposed vocabulary is so that other citizens, believers, and theorists will have eventually further “extended the bounds of possibility.”<sup>326</sup> In Rorty's view such expansion is the best that philosophers can hope to achieve, finding a foundation is impossible, but formulating new ways of speaking which can lessen suffering is possible and is maintained as the goal of the ironist, both philosophically and theologically. This task was championed in the discussions of theologically liberal Judaism, Borowitz gestures in this direction when he claims:

“Many of the old terms, for all their diminished vitality, are better than any modern words we have. We shall just have to wait and see which symbols will die out and which will retain or even gain power. One of the great, imaginative religious tasks of our time is to create new, rich, living symbols for our God.”<sup>327</sup>

We will conclude this chapter by re-stating that the death of Religion does not mean the death of faith. This death is nothing more than a structural dismantling of an institution which may be causing social harm.<sup>328</sup> If the ‘-isms’ of Christianity were to vanish this should mean nothing to the faithful believer.<sup>329</sup> Belief is not predicated upon the existence of a strong institutional church structure, Christianity's existence in places of mission work can be taken as evidence of this. Asking questions like “what makes a Christian?” or “who is a Christian?” are socially problematic. This type of identity question seeks to draw boundaries between those who are *in* and those who are *out*. Such a boundary is fundamentally opposed to the progressive nature of interreligious dialogue which we cannot forget is the driving goal behind *this* form of Ironic theology.

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326 Rorty, *Contingency, Irony, and Solidarity*, p. 137.

327 Borowitz, *Liberal Judaism*, p. 150.

328 See Rorty, *Religion in the Public Square: A Reconsideration*, p. 145.

329 See Borowitz pp. 48-49, “Applied to a religion, the suffix “ism” emphasizes its intellectual content... This usage was particularly congenial to Protestant groups who emphasized the doctrines necessary for a faith that truly saved one.” Understood with this addition, the doctrinal -ism structure is little more than an illusory criteria for religious validity.

## **5. Situating Ironic Theology Among Neighboring Approaches.**

### **5.1. Introduction.**

This chapter will conclude part one of chapter three by restating the historical approaches to the problem of multiple world religions. It will examine in greater detail the positions of Alan Race and Gavin D'Costa, exclusivism-inclusivism-pluralism. In addition to this historical discussion, this chapter will also show where ironic theology finds its place among these three alternatives. It will be shown that Ironic theology is not just another manifestation of lazy pluralism, but one which stands out for its absence of metaphysics and prioritizing of social and political progress as a central hermeneutic tool.

Before proceeding further it should be acknowledged that despite the Trinitarian approach to religious pluralism there are a great deal of alternative methods which have been and continue to be employed.<sup>330</sup> Owen C. Thomas throughout this writings presented us with ten alternative positions which are described as: “Rationalism, romanticism, relativism, exclusivism, dialectic, reconception, tolerance, dialogue, catholicism, and presence.”<sup>331</sup> Donald K. Swearer categorizes the approaches based upon the intended outcomes of interaction with the religious other. These are determined to be: “discontinuity (Hendrik Kraemer); fulfillment (R.C. Zaehner); cooperation (W. Ernest Hocking); and dialogue (Samartha, Klaus Klostermaier, Wilfred Cantwell Smith).”<sup>332</sup> These are just the divisions and categories presented by two theologians, there are many others with equally nuanced systems. The work of Thomas and Swearer was showcased in order to display that there are a variety of alternatives to the “lighter” three-fold model of responses.

### **5.2. Historical Approaches to a Religiously Plural World.**

#### **5.2.1. Exclusivism.**

The first of the three historical positions described by Race and D'Costa is religious exclusivism. “The starting point in the exclusivist approach is the unique and decisive revelation of God in Jesus Christ, His only begotten Son. He is the sole criterion of all religions and ideologies.”<sup>333</sup> This definition can easily be altered for use by other world religions. This way of thinking about the differences of religious traditions is exemplified in the work of Karl Barth. In Barth's dialectical theology he repeatedly points towards “God's unique revelation in Christ. It is in Christ that God

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330 Eeuwout Klootwijk in his doctoral dissertation, *Commitment and Openness*, provides an excellent account of the history of these categories. The following descriptions were drawn from Klootwijk's historical discussion in the introductory pages 3-5.

331 Klootwijk, *Commitment and Openness*, p. 3.

332 Ibid.

333 Klootwijk, *Commitment and Openness*, p. 6.

says at the same time 'yes' and 'no' to the world of religions.”<sup>334</sup> By placing Christ as the center determining factor of truth and meaning, Barth is adhering to a form of correspondence theological realism which cannot hold water. Exclusivism has maintained its status within the three-fold model because it offers believers an extreme sense of comfort. Pannikar writes, “You consecrate your life and dedicate your entire existence to something which is really worthy of being called a human cause, to something that claims to be not just a partial and imperfect truth, but a universal and even absolute truth.”<sup>335</sup>

Achieving a metaphysical and epistemic foundation, as it is offered in exclusivist Christianity, perfectly reaches the goals held by the foundationalists and realists. If the urge to realism is firmly rejected and we adopt a form of theological anti-realism, there is no benefit from remaining within the exclusivist camp. Ironism, in the form presented above is one such anti-realist and antifoundationalist approach to theology. By shifting our theological goals and aspirations we find that exclusivism is incompatible with all three basic premises of ironism. They find no reason to doubt their own inherited or found vocabulary of belief. They expect to find foundational true answers to their theological inquiries, due to their starting with an unshakable bedrock of truth. “The Evangelical and Pietistic positions often adopt a much more uncompromising attitude towards other religions: the relation between Christianity and other religions is often seen as truth and error, light and darkness.”<sup>336</sup> Finally, they will fail to learn from the experiences and faiths of those who believe differently from them. Dialogue cannot be a learning experience, but will likely become either an act of attempted conversion or debasing the values of the other.

Exclusivism, in each of its many manifestations, is wholly incompatible with the position of theological ironism. While Christianity in America is in decline, with a loss of 7.8% of believers between 2007 and 2014, we see an increased diversity among those who identify as evangelicals.<sup>337</sup> This change is crucial for the hopeful decline of exclusivism. Exclusivism finds itself commonly maintained by “contemporary Pietistic and Evangelical movements.”<sup>338</sup> As diverse backgrounds and vocabularies begin to intermingle among the exclusivist believers, we can be hopeful that such diversity erodes problematic skepticism of the cultural and religious other.

Exclusivism stands as an impediment to attempted interreligious dialogue, save possibly in the case of “interreligious prayer meetings...[which] share experiences and insights on meditation practices.”<sup>339</sup> In this situations they are displaying their belief or practice for the other. Exclusivism is a useful doctrine only in this usage, anything beyond setting an example contradicts the tenets of an Ironic theology. From this analysis we should move to drop the exclusivist position from the ranks of pragmatic

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334 Ibid., p. 7

335 Pannikar, Raimundo, *The Intrareligious Dialogue*, p. XV.

336 Klootwijk, *Commitment and Openness*, p. 7.

337 Cooperman, Alan, Gregory Smith, Katherine Ritchey, *America's Changing Religious Landscape*, Pew Research Center. May 12, 2015.

338 Klootwijk, *Commitment and Openness*, p. 5.

339 Moyaert, “Interreligious Dialogue”, in *Understanding Interreligious Dialogue*, p. 202.

models of religious pluralism, looking elsewhere for a model which moves beyond unequal dualisms.

### 5.2.2. Inclusivism.

Inclusivism, while maintaining a more liberal and open face towards other living faiths, casts an illusion that is more accepting than it truly is. Inclusivist theologians find themselves in a balancing act between acknowledging the limits of their own claims and falling into the ever present terror of relativism. “Inclusivists try to hold together two convictions; first, the universal salvific will of God; and, second, the centrality of the Christ-event.”<sup>340</sup> Theologians within this camp continue to find themselves haunted by the specter of relativism and fear the loss of their religious identity. Drawing upon the earlier conclusions about religious affiliation and identity it may suggested that these fears would vanish if the hope of a collective universal religion were dropped.

The inclusivist differs from the exclusivist insofar as they adhere to the claim “revelation and salvation can be found outside the boundaries of Christianity. Still, Christ cannot be avoided.”<sup>341</sup> Under this response to the world religions scholars are careful to recognize the contingency of their own religious vocabularies, but they fail to progress to the stage of healthy doubt which should follow.

Inclusivists enact a violence towards the religious other in a way that the exclusivists do not. Where the exclusivist's black and white mentality leads to an obvious immediate rejection of other world religions, the inclusivist mutates the faith of those who believe differently. They have not come to realize that their faith is only validated through the belief of the inclusivist. Pannikar puts this best “[inclusivism] also presents the danger of hybris, since it is only you who have the privilege of an all-embracing vision and tolerant attitude, you who allot to others the place they must take in the universe. You are tolerant in your own eyes, but not in the eyes of those who challenge your right to be on top.”<sup>342</sup>

The hope of achieving tolerance and acceptance of the religious other has shamefully collapsed into one hand reaching out in peaceful gesture, while the other clutches a dagger. Those who adhere to this school of thought fail to pass any of the three central criterion of an ironic theologian. They stand directly opposed to Rorty's third condition of ironism. Inclusivists maintain that their faith does, as a matter of fact, hold a valid privileged position of religious truth. Their possession of such capital places them in above their religious neighbors, further strengthening hierarchical structures which impede healthy dialogue, breeding distrust and antipathy towards those who wield such privilege. This relationship holds a great deal in common with the old

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340 Klotowijk, *Commitment and Openness*, p. 8.

341 Ibid.

342 Pannikar, *The Intrareligious Dialogue*, p. XVII.

colonialist mindset, and may it be treated as such. We cannot hope to pull someone from the cliff up onto the summit when we ourselves are only standing on thin air.

### 5.2.3. Pluralism.

If Ironic theology cannot be placed within exclusivism or inclusivism, it must somehow find its niche among the schools of pluralism. Pluralism itself is a truly fascinating creature. It consists in a great deal of varieties, each with their own presuppositions and goals. What is most admirable about pluralist thinkers is that they have much less fear of darkness and confusion of relativism. This is not to say that pluralist thinkers have all abandoned realism and the baggage which comes with it; quite the contrary. There is an equally strong tendency to lean towards theological realism as there is to embrace theological anti-realism. This final section will explore the plurality of pluralism in both its realist and anti-realist variants.<sup>343</sup>

#### 5.2.3.1. *The Plurality of Pluralism.*

Within the budding approach of pluralism there are two key scholars who are considered godfathers of the movement: John Hick and Paul Knitter (realism) and Gordon Kaufman (anti-realism).

Hick describes the turn to pluralism as when “one then sees the great world religions as different human responses to the one divine Reality, embodying different perceptions which have been formed in different historical and cultural circumstances.”<sup>344</sup> Hick, at first reading, seems to fulfill Rorty's three criterion of ironism. He directly satisfies the third, and most important criteria, in a collection published with Knitter, “the move from Christian inclusivism to pluralism, although in one way seemingly so nature and inevitable, sets Christianity in a new and to some an alarming light in which there can no longer be any a priori assumption of overall superiority.”<sup>345</sup> Hick is correct that there can be no way of verifying one's own religious vocabulary over that of another, however he does assume some form of metaphysical “Reality-centeredness.”<sup>346</sup> This step, while providing an accommodating arena of discourse, rekindles the problem of religion in a new form. We find ourselves forced back against the old problem of realism, correspondence, and skepticism.

Knitter's own analysis of Hick points out the problematic conclusions which are made in trying to make his “Copernican revolution in theology.”<sup>347</sup> The most poignant indication of realism can be found in Hick's insistence “in affirming the one 'ultimate reality' behind all religions, he concludes not that every religious expression is therefore

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343 The examples used do not represent every pluralist theologian. They are simply two of the most well known representatives of the position.

344 Hick, John, *God has Many Names*, p. 6.

345 Hick, John, “The Non-Absoluteness of Christianity”, in *The Myth of Christian Uniqueness: Toward a Pluralistic Theology of Religions*, eds. John Hick and Paul F. Knitter. Maryknoll: Orbis Books, 1987. p. 23.

346 *Ibid.*, p. 23.

347 Knitter, Paul, *No Other Name?*, p. 147.



true, but that every religious expression is therefore relative.”<sup>348</sup> Hick leaves us stranded between personal religious experience and some unknowable transcendent Reality. We find ourselves left with a postmodern version of Platonism, but no way of reaching the Forms.

It is at this point where Ironic theology dodges this recurring bullet. Agreeing with the work of Hick and Knitter, insofar as they include no metaphysical leaps, ironism calls interlocutors to the discussion table out of doubting one's own religious language. For the ironist, like other pluralists, there is no G-d's eye view achievable within language, the ironist only keeps her eye on the social, pragmatic outcomes of the usage of religious languages.

Gordon Kaufman's work in theology presents an anti-realist account of Christianity and theology in a manner which is quite similar to that of ironic theology. He calls out to his fellow Christians stating, in much the same way ironists do: “we must think of ourselves as historical beings like everyone else, and we will see the traditions of value, meaning, and truth by which we are living and which orient our lives as themselves historical in character – that is, as creations of the human imagination in and through history.”<sup>349</sup> This approach fulfills the criterion of Rorty's philosophical ironism through recognition of the limits of one's own final vocabulary, Kaufman follows the logical consequences of this system by agreeing “it must certainly be granted that the sense of the *absoluteness* of our religious convictions will be weakened.”<sup>350</sup>

Ironism proceeds hand in hand with Kaufman's proposed self-reflective approach towards the practice of theology until the discussion of the future of theology arises. Kaufman understands the new task of Christian theologians is “to penetrate through the multiplicity of Christian institutions, practices, and liturgies, of Christian philosophies, theologies, and myths, to the basic categorical pattern that informs them.”<sup>351</sup> Here the ironist turns her back on Kaufman. This internal turn for basic categories is a continuation of the overly optimistic search for some universal foundation of Christian theology. Ironist's reject this notion as misguided, due its seeming contradiction to Kaufman's own emphasis on historical self-reflection and also because the value of such inquiry is questionable. We do not need to examine “fundamental categorical structures – so that we will be able to compare them with each other directly, evaluating the strong points and the weak points of each as frames of orientation for life today.”<sup>352</sup> We need to look outward to how the principles are lived out, or ignored, in the social realm. On my reading, it seems that Kaufman is overly optimistic in how believers adhere to the doctrines of their given faiths. There is no universal doctrine which we can point towards in order to predict social behavior.

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348 Ibid., p. 148.

349 Kaufman, Gordon, “Religious Diversity, Historical Consciousness, and Christian Theology”, in *The Myth of Christian Uniqueness: Toward a Pluralistic Theology of Religions*, eds. John Hick and Paul F. Knitter. Maryknoll: Orbis Books, 1987. p. 8.

350 Ibid., p. 8.

351 Ibid., p. 10.

352 Ibid., p. 13.

In an earlier chapter, I elaborated upon the ironist's insistence on a radically nominalist and contextual understanding of religious belief. Attempts to find basic categorical beliefs stands contrary to this work. The ironist feels no allegiance to Religion, but finds the utmost value in the personal faith of the believer. Consequently, when Kaufman attempts to keep alive the dream of a free floating Christian theology, the ironist recognizes that this cannot be. We are capable of a free floating approach to theological questions, but it cannot be Christian. Those who hold beliefs lumped into the larger category of Christianity are welcomed to the table of discourse, but as individual believers, not as Christians.

There are only small, extremely subtle differences between Kaufman's redirection of Christian theology, and the ironic meta-theological approach presented here. Despite our alternative paths, what is most important to note is that we land on the same final conclusion that the ultimate concern is not the weaving of a religiously linguistic basket itself, but what kind of social outcomes can be packed within it.

### 5.2.3.2. *Ironic Theology as a Metaphysic-Free Pluralism.*

In his article, *How to be an Anti-Realist*, Alvin Plantinga claims “creative theological anti-realism seems at best a piece of laughable bravado.”<sup>353</sup> This statement is entirely correct, however, Ironic theology as it has been presented in this volume should be understood, not as a creative theological system, but rather an edifying and humbling approach to the theological discipline. Perhaps Ironic *meta*-theology is a more apt description of my intention. Ironic theology applies its irony towards theology in much the same manner as Socrates directed his irony towards the Athenians, with “infinite absolute negativity...it was not actuality in general that he negated; it was the given actuality at a particular time...”<sup>354</sup>

Ironic theology fits within the varied pluralist responses to a theology of world religions. Its uniqueness lies in its refusal to instate doctrinal metaphysical claims, be they ontological or social in nature. The ironist practices theology through creative and playful model making. These models, however intricate, are akin to the sand mandalas carefully crafted by monastics. Formed with painful attention to details, all the while with full awareness that they will inevitably be swept aside. Their value stems not from coherence, correspondence, or even beauty, but practical social function. In this way they are both free floating, easily changed to fit the needs of a given context, but also able to prescribe normative values when the need arises.

The above described form of theological ironism differs from the liberal ironism which Rorty outlines in his *The Future of Religion*. He writes:

“contemporary secularists like myself are content to say that it [religion] is politically dangerous. On our view, religion is unobjectionable as long

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353 Plantinga, Alvin, “How to be an Anti-Realist” (Presidential Address), *Proceedings of the American Philosophical Association* 80 (1983), p. 54.

354 Kierkegaard, Søren, Hong, H.V. (trans.), Hong, E.H. (trans.), *The Concept of Irony, With Continual Reference to Socrates*, p. 271.

as it is privatized – as long as ecclesiastical institutions do not attempt to rally the faithful behind political proposals...”<sup>355</sup>

I am skeptical of the probability that religious belief does not find its way into the public sphere. Ironic theology, and an ironic account of religious belief and behavior is not a threat to democracy, only yet another voice in the global democratic community we are working to create. This is because the approach of the ironist supports the belief of the individual, and finds institutional religiosity repulsive and problematic. Ironic theology, with its central drive towards learning from the religious other can be safely utilized within interreligious dialogue without fear of imposing belief and structure upon those who speak a different religious language. Ironists do not believe, think, or live in black and white, as do the exclusivists. They do not look down upon the religious other by slyly subsuming minority traditions into their own as the inclusivist theologians. Ironists, while committed to pluralism and its ideals, maintain their epistemic humility in a way that other pluralist thinkers do not. Their emphasis lies upon social practice and not abstract system building alone. The ironist realizes that the relationship between belief and practice is bi-directional. Just as belief may dictate that behavior of the faithful, the behavior in turn may reshape the belief. This graceful humility provides a novel and unique way of believing. One which is always changing, always open, and always striving to better the world in which it finds itself.

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355 Rorty, *The Future of Religion*, p. 33.

Chapter 3, Part II:  
Applying Ironic Theology

# **1. Applying Ironism and Optimistic Religious Pluralism.**

## **1.1. Introduction.**

The following chapter will bring to a close the two goals of this dissertation. It will conclude by showing that the ironism, implicit in both romantic and pragmatist philosophy, reshapes philosophy and theology and pushes theologians into the pursuit of interreligious dialogue for non-violent reasons. In this final chapter the different forms of interreligious dialogue will be explored and their relationship to ironism will be explained.

The chapter will proceed in three main sections. The first will examine what an ironic interreligious dialogue looks like. The criterion for successful dialogue will be presented in their traditional forms and in the ironic format. The goals and outcomes of dialogue will also be presented and here irony will fully manifest as a complimentary form of dialogue.

The second section will occupy itself with resolving a problem that arose from the discussion found in I.4.2. Here the problem of Christian identity and its relationship to dialogue will be examined. It is crucial that we delve into the relationship between Religion-free Christianity and how these believers can approach dialogue with the religious other. This is crucial because when one enters dialogue with the religious other, it has traditionally been taken for granted that each interlocutor stands as a representative for their respective faith. If there is no universal body being represented, as maintained by the ironist, the question of what they bring to the discussion table becomes rather interesting.

Personal identity will also be examined as the ironic believer will find themselves in a precarious position in which they might both identify (albeit briefly) as a Christian while simultaneously refusing to ascend to a universal position. This seemingly contradictory position of the doubtful religiously believer will be shown to not be a contradictory position, but a necessary one. It will be shown that faith should be understood as maintaining this ironic distance. As soon as concrete claims begin and doubt fades, I will argue that faith ends.

The third and final section will showcase the work of multiple authors who can be seen as exemplary Ironic theologians. My goal in doing this is to show that the methodology of ironism is not wholly out of the question. The central thinkers discussed will be Sallie McFague and scholars from the Liberation theological movements. McFague will be showcased as an example of a theologian who recognizes the extreme contingency of their own language and projects. The Liberation theologians are discussed in order to show how the redescription of traditional Christian language finds its usefulness in the social realm through the expansion of solidarity. The Liberation theologians delve into the contingency of their language to recast it with the sole aim of social justice.

It is my hope to show that the future of theology should proceed in this direction and that we should fight the urge to fall back into the search for metaphysical

underpinnings for our religious utterances. Our playful dancing on the surface of religious language is not only enough for our purposes in this life, but it is also the humble recognition of our inability to speak of the divine.

## **2. Ironic Theology and Interreligious Dialogue.**

### **2.1. Introduction.**

Christianity has, from its point(s) of origin, been tasked with coming to understand its relationship with its religious neighbors. “The Christian Church first gained self-consciousness in reflection on the pressing issue of its relation to Judaism. And it was soon faced with the problem of its relation to the philosophical and mystery of religions of the Hellenistic world.”<sup>356</sup> Despite the ever-present religious other, the practice of formal and organized interreligious dialogue is a relatively modern phenomena. The encounter between religious others has transformed from accidental to intentional, and in recent times we “have witnessed the emergence of numerous organizations dedicated to the promotion of dialogue, from international movements to local ones, and from interfaith organizations to confessional ones.”<sup>357</sup> The widely acknowledged first event which took steps towards our contemporary approach was the 1893 Parliament of World Religions in Chicago. This event represents in a way that Christians not only interacted with other world religions, but also began re-examining their theological commitments and views regarding the value of these other faiths. Cheetham, Pratt, and Thomas describe the parliament as a “shift within Christianity – which was then the world's predominant missionary religion... to a radical rethink of that religion's stance towards the religious other.”<sup>358</sup>

Today we find ourselves in an increasingly globalized society and as such, “the religious other is no longer an *abstract figure* but is seen in all her *concreteness* as neighbour, colleague, friend, spouse, etc.”<sup>359</sup> To adhere to any religion, Christian or otherwise, places one in a relationship with others which demands a special form of dialogue. The following pages will examine the natures of the varied types of dialogue, its goals and intentions, and the criterion which make it a possibility. It will then be shown that theological ironism lends itself greatly to this enterprise. “Stanley Samartha, considered interreligious dialogue to be a meeting of commitments...a full and loyal commitment to one's own faith did not stand in the way of dialogue.”<sup>360</sup> It is my intent to show that the ironic theologian finds themselves committed towards non-violent dialogue in a way in which traditional theologians struggle and may fall short.<sup>361</sup> It will be shown that ironism embodies this collision of commitments to the greatest degree, while providing an answer to how one can be both open and committed, simultaneously.

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356 Thomas, Owen C., “Introduction,” in *Attitudes Toward Other Religions*. p. 9

357 Cornille, Catherine, *The im-Possibility of Interreligious Dialogue*, p. 1.

358 Cheetham, David, Douglas Pratt, and David Thomas, “Introduction”, in *Understanding Interreligious Relations*. p. 3.

359 Moyaert, “Interreligious Dialogue”, p. 198.

360 Ibid., p. 201.

361 This usage of violence language gestures back towards the analysis of dogmatics and cruelty found in Ch. 3, I, 3.3.

## 2.2. Types of Dialogue.

Dialogue exists between the grand array of world religions and among individual religions themselves. Each type of dialogue seems to embody a different aim, but in every case it consists of “the tension between identity and otherness. The main question is still that of how one can find a balance between one's own faith commitment and openness to the otherness of the other.”<sup>362</sup> With this explanation in mind we can begin to examine some of the more precise cases and forms of dialogue.

Marianne Moyaert discusses five types of interreligious dialogue, which will be further discussed in relation to theological ironism. These types of dialogue are: “(1) the dialogue of life, (2) the practical dialogue of action, (3) theological dialogue, (4) spiritual dialogue, and (5) diplomatic dialogue.”<sup>363</sup> Of course, this is not a conclusive list of all types of interreligious dialogue, a great deal has been written by a vast array of authors each with their own new/different typological approaches.<sup>364</sup>

Form (1) the dialogue of life is defined as “inter[action] with one another in the context of their daily life.”<sup>365</sup> This form of dialogue is entirely unintentional, believers and non-believers find one another in every day places, such as the grocery store or on the bus. There is no explicit exchange of theological discourse, all that is displayed is the manner in which they live out their faith.

Form (2) occurs when the “different religions... collaborate with others in development, emancipation, and liberation of all humankind. This practical *dialogue of action* takes shape in the context of collaboration in humanitarian, social, economic, or political fields.”<sup>366</sup> This field most immediately relates to the enterprise of Ironic theology and its pursuit of reducing cruelty and harm. The result of this form of discourse spills directly into the pragmatic and tangible realm, a consequence that the ironist will endorse much more freely than some of the later forms of dialogue. This form however leaps into the socio-political realm without strong appeal towards theological grounds of agreement. Rather, it “nourishes an interreligious solidarity in the awareness of shared responsibility: where people suffer, injustice happens, or nature is harmed, religions must take actions.”<sup>367</sup> Dialogue of action is intimately related to (1) in that it springs forth from shared experiences without an otherworldly metaphysical appeal. Religions, as understood in (2) are nothing more than political groups coexisting within the same system, each respective group face the same socio-political threats.

Form (3) is the first of Moyaert's categories which begins to include explicit expression of one's contingent religious final vocabulary. She describes it as a dialogue in which “emphasis is on the formulation of *what* is believed and on doctrinal issues.

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362 Moyaert, “Interreligious Dialogue.”, p. 194.

363 Ibid., p. 202.

364 Moyaert mentions a few such cases in a footnote on the previously footnoted page 202: D.L. Eck, 'What do we Mean by “Dialogue”?'; A. Sharma, 'The Meaning and Goals of Interreligious Dialogue'; E. Sharpe, 'The Goals of Interreligious Dialogue'; and L. Swindler, *After the Absolute: The Dialogical Future of Religious Reflection*.

365 Ibid.

366 Ibid.

367 Ibid., p. 203.



The primary purpose is to come to a reciprocal understanding...”<sup>368</sup> This form of dialogue could also be taken further and become a discourse regarding the truth value of the theologies in discussion. At which point, issues of conflict and power structures begin to form if one's goal is to show the superiority of their own beliefs. The Ironic theologian, however, enters (3) with only the weaker goal, that of understanding. The ironist seeks to learn from the theological experiences and beliefs held by the religious other. The information gained is then employed by the ironist in a return to form (2). New forms of theological understanding find their usefulness and truth, not only in their logical coherence, but in their ability to decrease societal cruelty. To approach dialogue form (3) there stands the necessity that interlocutors be “...willing to seek the truth wherever it may be found, whether inside or outside of the tradition with which he or she identifies.”<sup>369</sup> This approach completely envelops the conceptual life of the Ironic theologian. The ironist's recognition of the contingency of their own final vocabulary. The ironist does not, however, expect to find truth in any traditional sense of the word. Rather, they expect to find new solutions and ways of approaching the concrete problems that face our societies. They maintain the pragmatist stance of truth as usefulness, which has been passed down from the first generation of American pragmatists through the hands of the neo-pragmatists.

Form (4), spiritual dialogue, is an entirely different beast than the previous forms of interreligious dialogue. Like form (1) this type of dialogue is an attempt at sharing experiences with the religious other, in this case the experiences of prayer, meditation, and spiritual practice. There is no urge to compel the religious other to accept our positions and practices, while discrediting their own. “It is a matter not so much of insight and understanding on the discursive level as one of contemplation that occurs within the framework of an existential quest for truth.”<sup>370</sup> The focus here is upon a common and shared searching, and not on what may or may not have been found by the seeker. This form finds itself fitting neatly within the methodology of the ironist as they actively wish to learn from the experiences of the other. Spiritual dialogue is driven by humility in one's own experiences and the desire to hear from others about their equally valid experiences.

The final form of dialogue (5), diplomatic theology, is cast in a somewhat skeptical manner by Moyaert. She writes “It is true that major doctrinal changes should not be expected from this type of interreligious dialogue. These encounters are too formal in nature for that... diplomatic dialogue implies the willingness of religious leaders and their institutions to leave centuries-old hostility behind them.”<sup>371</sup> This form of dialogue can be viewed primarily as a rigid political display of mutual respect between faiths. Diplomatic dialogue would seem to be the most difficult form of dialogue to relate to the position of theological ironism. This difficulty arises from the importance placed upon the larger religious institution rather than the believers and

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368 Ibid.

369 Gillis, Chester, *Pluralism: A New Paradigm for Theology*, p. 43. Cited in Moyaert, “Interreligious Dialogue.”, p. 203.

370 Moyaert, “Interreligious Dialogue”, p. 203.

371 Moyaert, “Interreligious Dialogue”, p. 204.

what they believe. Despite this drawback, this form of dialogue can be understood as a pragmatic necessity which pours out from the previous forms of interreligious dialogue. It is necessary because we inhabit a world in which religion finds itself largely dominated by religio-political institutions. If we wish to achieve social progress the weight of such institutions cannot be ignored, regardless of the ironist's skepticism towards the validity of such structures.

### **2.3. Desired Outcomes of Dialogue.**

With so many forms and types of dialogue, it begs the question if there is a single goal behind these varied approaches to dialogue or does each form aim at a different outcome. From the aforementioned forms of dialogue it would appear that there are a few options for such goals: truth seeking, mutual understanding, and peaceful coexistence with ethical outreach.

Moyaert cites Catherine Cornille's view that "Dialogue without concern with the question of truth seems barren, if not inauthentic. It is precisely the thirst for truth which represents the motivation for dialogue, and which distinguishes dialogue from a mere exchange of informative about one's respective traditions."<sup>372</sup> We can see in forms (3) and (4) questions of truth. In form (3) however, the goal is not so much establishing the validity of one's religious beliefs, but the disclosure of those belief to the religious other. This distinction would seem to make the goal of form (3) not so much truth-seeking, but to establish a relationship of understanding between religious groups.

What about form (4)? We read in Moyaert's definition of spiritual dialogue that there is a shared journey or desire to find truth in the spiritual practices undertaken by adherents to different faiths. One might inquire as to whether this truth-seeking mentality extends into the dialogue itself or remains confined to the spiritual practice. If it extends into dialogue, we have one instance from our five forms which actively searches for truth. More likely, this truth-seeking behavior is a shared goal which is harnessed in spiritual dialogue to place emphasis upon similarity between the humans who adhere to different faiths. On this point, Cornille's assertion that dialogue without truth is barren is an extremely narrow look at what can be accomplished through interreligious dialogue, namely ethical outreach and peaceful coexistence.

Ethical outreach and peaceful coexistence cannot be separated as goals for interreligious dialogue. One cannot occur without the other. The above forms of dialogue can all be seen as promoting these goals: (1), (2), (5) by definition; (3) and (4) through internal examination. These two goals are the secondary aim of an Ironic theology. Driven to learn from the religious other, the ironist draws an ever widening circle of solidarity among its religious neighbors. This solidarity then manifests through social outreach, which in turn further widens our circle of solidarity. Solidarity exists as the combining of mutual understanding with a desire to exist together beyond mere tolerance.

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<sup>372</sup> Cornille, Catherine, "Meaning and Truth in Dialogue", in *The Question of Theological Truth: Philosophical and Interreligious Perspectives*. pp. 237-255.

#### **2.4. Theological Irony and the Commitment to Dialogue.**

As it has been suggested in previous chapters, it will now be shown that an ironic approach to theology faces lesser burdens in accomplishing these goals of interreligious dialogue. Achieving greater solidarity is the ultimate goal of Ironic theology. Through the intimate disclosure of religious commitments through interreligious dialogue the ironist hopes to establish “the ability to see more and more traditional differences... as unimportant when compared with similarities with respect to pain and humiliation... to think of people wildly different from ourselves as included in the range of 'us.’”<sup>373</sup>

Ironic theologians, with this goal in mind, must continually place themselves into cases of interreligious dialogue, this coming into contact with the religious other, in any of the five ways mentioned above, is the only way of expanding solidarity among those who practice different faiths. Ironism's emphasis upon contingency makes this coming together violence-free as there is no drive to impose a single doctrine as true or more accurate. The strongest claim made by the Ironic theologian is that certain sets of belief can better facilitate the expansion of solidarity among humanity.

Traditional and doctrinal approaches to theology, especially those who adhere to exclusivism or inclusivism, cannot engage the religious other without doing violence to them. Douglas John Hall writes that “A religious community that believes itself to be in possession of 'The Truth' is a community equipped with the most lethal weapon of warfare: the sense of its own superiority and mandate to mastery.”<sup>374</sup>

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373 Rorty, *Contingency, Irony, and Solidarity*, p. 192.

374 Hall, Douglas J., *Imaging God: Dominion as Stewardship*, p. 5

### **3. Maintaining Christian Identity in Dialogue.**

#### **3.1. Introduction.**

As stated above, we are faced with an important question surrounding our identity as doubting believers. Can we understand ourselves to be faithful Christians while maintaining that things could be otherwise? The following chapter will argue that this is not only possible, but follows from the nature of belief. We will showcase the not-so-radical differences between an ironic understanding of religious faith and that held within the Christian theological mainstream by comparing the ironic position to that of Thomas Aquinas. Aquinas stands as the exemplary figure of the traditional Christian stance that the truth of religious faith and language resides in its coming from divine revelation. The ironist maintains its truth resides in its usefulness in the here and now.

#### **3.2. Faith and Doubting One's Own System of Belief.**

When looking for an exemplary figure of the theological mainstream, we cannot find one better than Thomas Aquinas. His writings set forth a standard which continues to shape contemporary discourse within philosophy and theology. For this reason we will introduce his understanding of faith and its relationship to doubt, in order to show that the ironic position, being promoted here, is not a misguided tangent, but a reasonable consequence of historical theological thought.

Aquinas understands an individual's acceptance of divine purposes “not because they are provable by reason, but on the grounds that they have been revealed by God. And this is the assent of 'faith'... the assent to faith is both 'cognitive' (insofar as it involves beliefs) and action-orienting...”<sup>375</sup> This understanding of the assent to faith can be related to the position of ironism as follows:

- (1): Acceptance of final/basic/divine purposes are inherited without reason, there is a strong element of contingency here.
- (2): A belief is both a mental, world orienting value and, as such, shapes behavior in the world.

The theological principles which are maintained by believers “a Christian accepts the first principles of theology on 'faith', insofar as they are foundational for her reasoning, rather than being the product of ratiocination.”<sup>376</sup> Both the traditional and ironist theologians maintain this position [stated in (1)]. The ironist respects that they have simply inherited their final vocabulary, the traditional theologian accepts that it has been inherited from G-d. The difference here rests in whether the traditional Christian would

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<sup>375</sup> Wynn, Mark, “Religious Faith”, in *The Routledge Handbook of Contemporary Philosophy of Religion*. p. 168.

<sup>376</sup> Wynn, “Religious Faith,” p. 168.

assent to there being an alternative to their own inherited revelation. Such a position is not out of the question and can be seen in the writings on pluralism undertaken by both Catholic and Protestant thinkers. The important point is that our inherited final vocabulary or faith is simply accepted, there is no reason why we should accept this position over others, we just do.

Position (2) is also maintained both by the ironist and the traditional theologian. The ironist evaluates the plurality of final vocabularies on precisely how they manifest themselves in the world of action. The traditional theologian notes that action should follow from the complete acceptance of the principles of faith. The question of difference here lies in where the criteria of evaluating behavior rest. The ironist judges the initial principles through their later manifestation in the world, while the traditionalist would seem to judge the worldly action through its consistency with the revealed principles of faith. If we accept that divine revelation or final vocabulary is contingent (1), we will also assent to (3): that (2) can only be judged in light of worldly, pragmatic usage.

If we do not make this leap there is no progress to be made in the discourse between religious beyond: ‘you believe *P* and I believe *Q*.’ Such discourse is not useful beyond learning the beliefs of the religious other. If we want to approach the task of interreligious dialogue in hopes of achieving social progress, we must accept the above premises and allow for doubting our own commitments. This openness to doubt is consistent with the traditionally held view that we do not make a rational assent to faith, but simply accept it. This openness should be viewed as a shared point between ironism and traditional theology.

### **3.3. Faithfully Representing Belief Through Doubt.**

As members of a faith community seeking to enter dialogue with the religious other we bring our own commitments to any discussion. In order to maintain dialogue, and not only listen, we have the responsibility to represent our religious final vocabulary. We also have the responsibility to remain open to the beliefs and values of the religious other. These two points would at first appear to contradict each other. How can we be called to faithfully represent our own beliefs, while allowing enough room for doubt as to honor the position of the religious other. If we are not open to the views which may be contrary to our own, any form of metaphysical discourse is illusory at best. If, however, we allow for doubt of our own religious vocabulary, we can pursue the many forms of dialogue which were previously discussed.

It will now be shown that the primary difference between Aquinas' concept of faith and that of the ironist theologian consists in faith's relation to truth. Truth for the ironist, as has been shown, consists in the coherence and pragmatic value of the belief or language. However, this is not the case for Aquinas. “By contrast, the discourse of the theologian is ultimately driven back to starting points or principles that are held to be true on the basis of faith, that is, the truths that are authoritatively conveyed by

Revelation as revealed by God.”<sup>377</sup> This understanding presents truth as something which found or discovered *out there*, and not as something which is made by a community in their respective contexts.

Understandably, the traditional view cannot accommodate for adherence to a divinely received truth and doubts of the inherited belief. Ironism, however, does not only accommodate this possibility, but is built upon it. The contingency of one's final vocabulary, political leanings, or religious faith is internalized and it is accepted. We may never achieve, what Putnam terms, the devilishly tempting “God's-eye view of things...”<sup>378</sup> Instead of taking truth as an archaeological accomplishment it is “simply a compliment paid to the beliefs which we think so well justified, that for the moment, further justification is not needed.”<sup>379</sup> Rorty's pragmatist concept of truth perfectly displays how it is possible for one to identify with and live out their faith, while maintaining that certain unknown events in the future may force us to re-investigate our beliefs.

In order to display this faithful openness<sup>380</sup> we can form a thought experiment about the future of Christianity. There is, at present, no formal theological or religious stances addressing the existence of extraterrestrial beings or the status of artificially intelligent beings. Let's imagine that after colonizing another planet we encounter a new intelligent species. This will obviously demand a re-examination of many tenets of Christianity. Our views towards creation, revelation and scripture, and eschatology will be in great need of revisions. There is no present need to make such reforms. They are after all contingent upon the discovery of such creatures. Faithful openness and recognition that such changes are a possibility, however unlikely these events may be, is a perfect example of how one can maintain their religious identity whilst simultaneously keeping alive the possibility of doubt. For an Ironic theologian adopting this cognitive stance is no difficulty at all. Making such concessions is, however, a greater difficulty for the traditional theologian who takes faithful truths as divine revelation.

The pragmatic value of an Ironic theology far outweighs the unverifiable truth-as-representation/revelation model that has been previously adopted. Religious believers are pressed with social problems that deserve immediate responses. The ability to address these needs should supersede forming doctrines of the unknowable. The truth-value of such doctrines only rests in their ability to spur actions which benefit the present and keep alive the freedom of epistemic creativity for future generations.

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377 McInerny, Ralph and John O'Callaghan, “Saint Thomas Aquinas”, *The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy*. §2.

378 Putnam, Hilary, *Reason, Truth, and History*, pp. 49-50.

379 Rorty, *Objectivity, Relativism, and Truth: Philosophical Papers Volume I*, p. 24.

380 I use 'openness' here because it seems to better avoid the negative connotations associated with 'doubt', while preserving my intention.

## **4. Examples of Potential Ironic Theology.**

### **4.1. Introduction.**

Before we conclude this work, it seems appropriate to highlight some of the contemporary work that closely embodies the approach of the Ironic theologian. These are theologians who pay explicit mind to the contingent nature of our religious beliefs and language and utilize this in a creative manner which comes closest to the meta-theological approach taken by the Ironic theologian. This final chapter will survey the contemporary theological landscape in hopes of shining the spotlight on theologians working in an ironic manner.

### **4.2. Sallie McFague.**

In the year 1987, Sallie McFague published her work *Models of God: Theology for an Ecological and Nuclear Age*. This work best displays the acknowledgment of our contingent religious language. In the work, McFague playfully bounces between metaphorical manners of speaking about the nature of G-d. Her point in doing this is not to try and pin down a doctrinal position, but rather to show how different ways of speaking about G-d lead to wildly novel ways of understanding the divine-human relationship. She begins the work by noting that “we have assumed in our experiments with models of God that important personal relationships are prime candidates for expressing the gospel of Christianity as an inclusive, nonhierarchical vision of fulfillment.”<sup>381</sup> Her usage of new experimental ways of speaking are playful non-foundational means of extending the circle of human solidarity and decreasing cruelty.

In *Models of God* she explores a great manner of metaphorical understandings of G-d, such as: mother or lover, each of these lending themselves to a panentheist metaphysical position. This leap initially raises the ironist's red flag, but in recent literature it must be seen that “many panentheists find that metaphors provide the most adequate way to understand God's relation to the world. McFague agrees that any attempt to do theology requires the use of metaphor.”<sup>382</sup> The metaphorical way of speaking fits within an ironic approach to theology depending on what Culp means with an adequate understanding of G-d. If adequacy resides in being a more accurate representation, appealing to a correspondence theory of truth, then this method cannot be considered an Ironic theology. However, if the adequate understanding is built in order to affect the lives of believers, it does not contradict the tenants of an Ironic theology. We have seen that placing the value of metaphors in their functional adequacy is the method in which the ironic theologian evaluates competing religious truth claims.<sup>383</sup>

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381 McFague, Sallie, *Models of God: Theology for an Ecological and Nuclear Age*, p. 126.

382 Culp, John, “Panentheism”, *The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy* (Summer 2015 Edition), §3.

383 This was discussed above in Ch. 3, I, 2.2.

Through her frolicsome usage of metaphor and her adherence to the notion that speaking through an ever changing vocabulary is the most theologians can accomplish in regards to speaking of G-d, McFague practices a form of theology which can be taken as one example of Ironic theology. Her work exemplifies the ironist's understanding of contingent religious final vocabularies. In the next section this will be made explicit.

#### **4.2.1. Emphasis on the Contingency of Religious Language.**

As has been repeatedly stated, an individual's final vocabulary is historically contingent. This contingency is the starting point of any ironic theology. One must first embrace the historical fluidity of one's deepest held commitments and beliefs. McFague's work is being discussed here because of the sharp break she makes from traditional dogmatic theology, in humbly coming to terms with the contingency of language. In *Models of God*, she introduces a twist on the banal, empty statement that G-d is love. Instead, McFague introduces the metaphor of G-d as lover.<sup>384</sup> Her reason for making such an avant-garde leap beyond conventions is, "quite simply because it is so central to human life."<sup>385</sup> Her approach to theology is not one which seeks a golden path to truth, but rather one which accepts that such a theological El Dorado doesn't exist. The best we can do as theologians is to speak to our own historically contingent status. McFague flies her ironic colors when she writes:

"We are not making pronouncements but experimenting, not dealing with all possible models but one one, not suggesting our model comprises a complete doctrine of God but only certain aspects, not claiming the model is for all time but only for our time...imaginative boldness is not the same as dogmatic pronouncement... If we can make a case for our model, it will at best be plausible, illuminating, and timely; it will not be the one and only truth."<sup>386</sup>

Despite her nearing the border to ironism, McFague still maintains a stance of Christian realism. The models which we use are used to postulate new ways of describing G-d; not the ironic postulation on new ways to pragmatically employ religious language. McFague is still committed to a metaphysical noumena about which we cannot speak. The ironist acknowledges that such a noumena can only be spoken of meaningfully if it inspires practical action in the world. McFague does, however, assert that the model of G-d as lover should be accepted due to its practical usage to our contemporary period. Her interpretation of salvation presents us with a pragmatic approach rather than a transcendent promise of future gratification. She writes:

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384 McFague, *Models of God: Theology for an Ecological and Nuclear Age*, Ch. 5.

385 Ibid., p. 127.

386 Ibid., pp. 132-133.



“In our model of God as lover, salvation is not something received so much as it is something performed: it is not something that happens to us so much as something we participate in... it is not sufficient to be loved; it is necessary also to love. This implies a very close relationship between soteriology and ethics: that we are made whole only as we participate in the process of making whole. We participate, then, in our own salvation.”<sup>387</sup>

McFague stands on the cusp of traditional Christian realism and ironic, anti-realist theology. Her work is a strong example of the importance of creative experimentation in light of our inherited religious vocabularies. One cannot take their religious final vocabulary as an ultimate vocabulary. Religious language, and religion itself, are both evolving throughout the course of history. The ways in which we choose to speak about historical religious concepts shapes the future of our religion. This is not some grand, new revelation, but common sense. McFague's understanding of this contingent future of religion leads to her experimental approach to contingent model building within theology.

### **4.3. Liberation Theologians.**

Liberation theology cannot be designated to any single orthodox institution. After all such an institution would contradict the very tenets of a socially liberating theology. Despite their many differences and nuances, liberation theologians busy themselves forming interpretative systems of scripture and tradition, in such a way, as to lead to the social emancipation of an oppressed people. They write against the historically critical positions taken by figures such as Ludwig Feuerbach and Karl Marx. For the liberation theologian, religion is a crucial tool of combating oppression, and not the “sigh of the oppressed creature...”<sup>388</sup> Rather, religion under the interpretation of the liberation theologian becomes a concrete and actualized form of protest against the conditions of oppression.

This form of theology is being discussed in its relation to ironic forms of theology because of the emphasis placed upon the social ramifications of new ways of approaching the theological enterprise. Liberation theologians are the embodiment of the second tenet of an Ironic theology: the drive towards reducing cruelty and harm.

#### **4.3.1. Contingency as Means of Social Progress.**

James Cone, one of the more linguistically flavorful of scholars writing within the area of liberation theology, writes, “Theology by contrast [to philosophy of religion] cannot be separated from the community it represents. It assumes that *truth* has been

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387 Ibid., p. 145.

388 Marx, Karl, Joseph, O'Malley, “Critique of Hegel’s Philosophy of Right”, in *Marx: Early Political Writings*, p. 131.

given in the moment of the community's birth. Its task is to analyze the implications of that truth..."<sup>389</sup> For both Cone and the ironist theologian, every community is faced with a different set of socio-political problems which can only be faced by re-interpreting the traditions and standards of their respective society, language, and religion. Cone, in *A Black Theology of Liberation*, is writing to keep alive a revolutionary essence of Christianity in radical support of the civil rights movement. Cone argues that if "we speak of God as he is related to man in the black-white struggle, Christian theology can only mean Black Theology..."<sup>390</sup> This is a radical turn in the goals and vocabulary of theology, "this means that Black Theology refuses to be guided by ideas and concepts alien to black people."<sup>391</sup> He even acknowledges that this type of approach to theology cannot be understood completely, if at all, by white people because they come from an entirely other and equally contingent context. Cone embraces contingency in a way which aims to serve the needs of his audience, which are the expansion of equality and civil rights. His method has been called into question by critics for its fiery rhetoric and possible advocating of violence, however this critiques are missing the underlying point of what Cone is trying to accomplish. He is speaking to a community in its own contingent language, in its own final vocabulary. Viewing such language from the outside is startling and at certain points comical, but his writing is not intended to be a universal standard of behavior, but as a localized pragmatic starting point. It is precisely this localized point of entry which takes the community's final vocabulary as the standard of measurement.

While Cone does make some strong aims about what theology cannot be, his work fits with the three criteria of ironism and Ironic theology. The emphasis upon contextual and useful truth coheres with the contingent nature of one's own final vocabulary and is then extended forcefully in the direction of social activism. Theology does not exist to placate people during a time before paradise, but rather pushes them to make the best possible society in the here and now. Cone's claim that the white oppressor cannot comprehend a Black Theology and there is no use in trying to explain it using the language of oppression, Rorty maintains that "arguments – logical arguments – are all very well in their way, and useful as expository devices, but in the end not much more than ways of getting people to change their practices without admitting they have done so."<sup>392</sup> Argument is nothing more than inciting change, a good argument does nothing more. Argumentation, and for our purposes interpretation, does not discover something new that was previously hidden. Ironic theology is nothing but a burst of creativity which holds the hope that "by the time she has finished using old words in new senses, not to mention introducing brand-new words, people will no longer ask questions phrased in old words."<sup>393</sup>

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389 Cone, James, *A Black Theology of Liberation*, p. 30.

390 Ibid., p. 32.

391 Ibid., p. 33.

392 Rorty, *Contingency, Irony, and Solidarity*, p. 78.

393 Ibid.

#### **4.4. Some Concluding Notes.**

We have seen two examples of theological systems which are approaching the point of ironism. This task was undertaken in order to show that Ironic theology is not an absurd or impossible goal, but is a positive step forward in the aftermath of postmodernism. McFague's work draws attention to the contingency of one's inherited final vocabulary, nearly exploding with new ways of using religious and everyday language. Cone begins with this same acknowledgment of contingency and final vocabulary, then drives forward towards political and social application. The whole point of re-creating how we use religious language and the religious lexicon itself is entirely political. These two thinkers embody the two-fold enterprise of an ironic approach to theology.

At this point it will have been shown that traditional forms of theology are riddled with the remnants of metaphysical realism. As such they continually invite the argument of skepticism which has, and will continue to burden the usage of religious language. In place of this I have shown that adopting Richard Rorty's position of ironism presents a skepticism free means of using religious language. Such language is playful, poetic, and wholly intimate in a way that traditional realism can never be. In keeping our realist commitments we greatly limit ourselves by postulating a belief about which we cannot speak in any meaningful way. By casting aside these realist chains we can speak freely, only wary of the pragmatic consequence of our means of speech.

## **Conclusion.**

Let us take a moment, before closing, to look back at the goals of this dissertation and their completion. The general thesis consists in two parts, one historical and one formative.

The historical thesis is found in analysis of Richard Rorty's philosophical system and how it relates (or can relate) to the problem of religious language and interreligious dialogue. In addition to this primary analysis, Rorty's work is complimented by an examination of Johann Gottfried Herder's holistic philosophy of religion/language/history. This secondary account is intended to showcase the historical presence of anti-foundationalist philosophy within the Protestant theological scene. This outreach from Rorty to Herder is intended to grant a larger historical context to what can be potentially viewed as a radical turn away from the orthodox positions of the Church and the Protestant theological traditions.

The formative constructive thesis aims to construct an 'epistemic' position which can act as a platform for progressive interreligious dialogue. This platform grows from Rorty's philosophical proposal of liberal ironism and what it means with regards to questions of religious language. The result is a new approach to the history of interreligious dialogue by viewing it through an anti-foundationalist lens. This approach, which I have titled 'Ironic Theology', is also placed in its context among the other positions of interreligious dialogue as advocated by proponents of exclusive-inclusive-plural theologies of religion. This concludes with a few examples of what may be interpreted as potential ironic theologies. These theological texts either exemplify the importance of contingency among the status of a given position (philosophical or theological) or the pursuit of liberalism based upon a pragmatic free-floating 'foundation'.

The following concluding notes will briefly restate the quintessential details of each of the three preceding dissertation chapters.

## **1. Richard Rorty.**

The primary theorist whose work is built upon in this dissertation is Richard Rorty. Rorty's philosophical life spanned nearly five decades (1960's-2007) and began by continuing the powerhouse that was analytic philosophy (he even changed his research focus to acclimate to the new philosophical climate). His earliest writings contributed towards many of the on-going discussions in the philosophy of language and philosophy of mind. He gained his notoriety after the publication of his *The Linguistic Turn* which included an introduction strongly critical of many pursuits within the school of analytic philosophy. This introduction was complimented by his magnum opus *Philosophy and the Mirror of Nature* which aimed to trace the lineage of philosophical problems back to the Platonic mirror metaphor of knowledge. Once firmly positioned against the mainstream aspirations of philosophers, he returned to his roots in American pragmatism with a novel combination with Continental literary theory. *Contingency, Irony, and Solidarity* presented an experimental utopian approach to political and social philosophy. Rorty rejects the traditional foundationalist narrative in favor of an anti-foundationalist promotion of creative literary play as a means of achieving societal progress through changes in social vocabulary. After this controversial work Rorty spent a great deal of time composing articles relating Continental thinkers and Anglophone theorists. He also turned strongly towards the socio-political realm penning, by and large, more praxis oriented works. This combination of critical and socially constructive philosophy makes Rorty an interesting figure to draw upon in the crafting of a both critical and humbly constructive theology which fits the needs of our 21<sup>st</sup> century problems.

Following Rorty's critical to constructive turn the Rorty centered chapter of this dissertation begins through critical examination of the theological enterprise and its possible progress in light of the problem of religious language. This problem raises questions as to, whether or not, we can speak about G-d or religious matters in a meaningful way. Under the traditional universalist vs. relativist approaches to linguistic meaning, this question has fermented without any strong clear answers in either direction. By taking up a Rortyan approach these polar positions are set aside in favor of a pragmatic theory of meaning. This shift moves beyond correspondence, coherence, or hermeneutic concepts of truth and meaning and avoids the temptation to tie meaning to a referent or social consensus. Meaning finds its place in how the words are used and for what aims they are directed. Epistemic questions become secondary to questions of social progress and the preservation of liberal ideals. This transition is applied to the theological realm, questions about the nature of the divine are dismissed as pseudo-problems and focus is placed on how these themes impact the lives of believers and those who are engaged with them. The theologian takes up the quietist banner and humbly positions themselves to address the needs of their historical context. With this context driven academic theological writing as a new norm, it becomes necessary that theologians in our age be encouraged to pursue questions related to interreligious dialogue. Drawing upon Rorty's work in *Contingency, Irony, and Solidarity*, I have

attempted to create a loose theological framework for the pursuit of interreligious dialogue which is termed 'Ironic theology'.

This critically restrained construction of a potential approach to interreligious dialogue is set in context through relating it to the work of other writers in this area and also tethering the position of Ironic Theology to the tradition of Protestant theology as found in the influential, though underrated, works of 19<sup>th</sup> Century philosopher and theologian Johann Gottfried Herder.

## **2. Johann Gottfried Herder.**

Herder's inclusion in this dissertation may strike some as odd or out of place. After all, Rorty's relationship to Herder's texts is unknown at best, having never directly cited him or his works in the historical analysis of the mirror metaphor in *Philosophy and the Mirror of Nature*. This seeming ignorance of Herder's work by Rorty, and the majority of philosophers, is mourned in Michael Morton's *The Critical Turn: Studies in Kant, Herder, Wittgenstein, and Contemporary Theory*. Regardless of the nature of his ignorance, Rorty and Herder share a great deal in common with regards to their respective philosophies of language, history, and even their highly stylized forms of writing. These men were exemplary avant-garde in their methods of composition which makes the reading experience far less tedious than the subject matter might initially suggest. Herder's work was included in this text because of his place in the history of German theology and philosophy. While never holding the spotlight he cast his shadow over the rising stars of the next generation of German thought. Schleiermacher, Humboldt, and even Nietzsche were greatly influenced by Herder's offering of a non-absolutist, historically and empirically grounded philosophical option which stood in contrast to the Kantian leviathan of that age. Although he is something of a B-figure in philosophical history his ideas were groundbreaking for his day and are finding a welcome resurgence in contemporary scholarship both historical and constructive. The few of many subjects touched upon in this work do not in any way encompass the entirety of the broad scope of Herder's writings. For the purposes here only texts specifically related to the areas of language, Humanität, and theology have been presented.

### **2.1. Herder and Language.**

Herder's philosophy of language is centered in two key texts: the first is his *Fragments on Recent German Literature* and the second is his *Treatise on the Origin of Language*. Each text, though addressing different audiences, treats the questions surrounding the origin of human language(s). His audiences had already been exposed to the naturalist theories of Hobbes and Rousseau which hold that man and beast acquire language in the same manner, although towards far different extents. In radical opposition to this theory is Süßmilch's divine source theory of language which asserts that man was gifted language, fully developed, from their creator. Herder positions himself firmly between these two theories maintaining an empirically fixated linguistic evolution which is particular to the human being. Man and beast are not equated, but each given their own respective domain and teleological place within the world. The beasts of the world communicate to fit their perfected domains of action whereas man is unique to his primal weaknesses. It is because of these weaknesses and open ways of living that man necessarily wields language in congruence with this plethora of life styles.

Herder, a committed member of the clergy, while promoting a very sensual worldly origin of language sees no contradiction between this naturalism and Christianity. He maintains that only the slow grinding growth of language gives more than lip service to G-d's perfection. If language descended to us from on high complete in grammar, cadence, and vocabulary then it is an insult to G-d's creative imagination as well as the unique cultures which have grown up around the world. His elegant balancing maneuver keeps alive both his religious temperament and his deep commitment to an open and liberal form of humanism.

This balancing act can be taken to be a real-life example of Rorty's liberal ironist figure. Herder is presenting a complete, holistic system of thought while keeping fully aware of the small historical moment which his philosophy can (and does) hold. He traces both the rise and fall of a series of civilizations who, at their peak, saw themselves as the highest paradigm of life, all the while highlighting their mistakes and ultimate downfall. Instead of assuming his position as the capstone of the historical pyramid he accepts the fact that his successors will surpass him. In this humble historicist fact Herder introduces his social philosophy of *Humanität* as a new goal of philosophy in place of the universal foundationalism which had been growing in popularity.

## **2.2. Herder and Humanität.**

*Humanität* is Herder's socio-ethical philosophy of life. Following with an Aristotelian inspired teleology, he contextualizes the goals of human 'Bildung' to each contingent personal context. This egalitarian sense of 'goodness' is unique to each individual and the larger society in which they live. With these goals resisting the leap towards transcendence, they also change throughout time with the continuing goal of maintaining the future generation's potential to pursue *Humanität*. Rather than set a standard, de facto life aim (eudaimonia, duty, utility, etc.) Herder allows for the organic development of new ways of speaking, thinking, and acting. This concept is not particularly mind-blowing for readers today, but our contemporary largely open-minded social consciousness remains somewhat closed with regards to matters of religion. For the believer religion, scripture, and revelation are not as fluid as other worldly matters. Fortunately, Herder anticipates the impending religious objection and pens a response aimed at slowly disposing of dogmatic religious truths.

## **2.3. Herder and Theology.**

In Herder's *Lehrmeinungen* he lashes out against the institutionalized religious sentiments of the Catholic Church. He traces the early legitimate religious sensual experiences of man which are taken hostage, abstracted, and universalized by the Church. Once these sentiments are made to fit the broader population they lose their legitimacy and become hollow words mindlessly repeated ad nauseum. True religious feeling for Herder is individual and intimate. Each person is capable of having personal



experiences in a variety of historically contingent forms. Religious experience is lived through one's language and exists in the world in a parallel plurality. As an extension of Humanität religion must be maintained with a sense of openness to the legitimate pursuits of the religious other. The traditional absolutist approach to religious belief is the antithesis to Herder's liberal and historically minded theology.

Herder redevelops what he believes Christianity could be. His Protestant heart emphasized the importance of personal engagement with sacred texts and building their own readings from this dialogue rather than through hierarchical instruction. The ability to read the biblical texts for themselves stands as the ground of possibility for experiencing the divine and because of their wide accessibility (via translation and mass distribution) Christianity stands to be an open, and likely the most liberal minded of historical religions. This status can only be reached however by an entire rejection of dogmatizing the sentiments of one believer and expectation for others to eat, sleep, and breathe in the same manner. In his prioritization of personal living engagement in contrast to the history of the formalized lifeless Religion stands as an historical predecessor to our current era's postmodern responses to religious problems.

As an overlooked ancestor Herder's work must be classified within the pluralist camp of the exclusivism-inclusivism-pluralism spectrum. His refusal to stand his religious beliefs at the center of religious possibility disqualifies him for the label of an exclusivist. Distinguishing between inclusivism and pluralism is more difficult to show clearly. Although he does claim Christianity to be the most widely 'applicable' religion, he does not nor can the conclusion be drawn that he expects Christianity to envelop the rest of world religions past, present, or future. He does, through his own religious sentiments, view the religious other as equally valid in their own contexts. They are equally legitimate on their own inspired feelings and by extension of Herder's concept of Humanität requires no external validation, such validation could only be taken as the very dogmatizing which he critiques. Herder should be understood as a pluralist because of this refusal to over-inflate personal experiences to the elevated status of law. The gritty personal level of lived language takes the privileged position of importance with regards to religion.

The importance of contingency and the importance of preserving it is a sentiment equally preserved by both Herder and Rorty. Although one was a committed cleric and the other a stout anti-cleric, both men supported the possibility of changing sentiments and took their own beliefs as precisely that. Both pluralist theorists, being taken as the ground of an open theology which keeps alive future religious changes, lead to the final constructive project of this dissertation. In this section these two thinkers find new life in pursuing the goal of simply continuing social conversations religious or otherwise.

### **3. Creating an Ironic Theology.**

#### **3.1. Ironic Theology.**

The final closing chapter of this dissertation takes up the task of contributing to the larger theological and philosophical discussion. The preceding historical chapters are taken as a practical suggestion for how we could be addressing the pressing problems which have long preoccupied theologians and philosophers of religion. The theory crafted in this chapter has been titled as ‘Ironic Theology’ because of its owing to Rorty’s famous *Contingency, Irony, and Solidarity*. This theological suggestion builds from Rorty’s three principles which are embodied by his liberal ironist figure. The principles of ironism are adopted as loose pragmatic guidelines for the future of theological work.

This pragmatic turn shifts the theological task away from questions of divine nature, eschatology, etc and tethers them to strictly practical questions. This is primarily the case with questions regarding the status of other world religions. Ironic theology is a Rortyan understanding and application of the social life of religion and one of greatest social problems facing Christianity in the global world is how it should interact with them. Following from both Rorty and Herder, the status of religious belief is set in the background while political action is brought forward. Religious merit is seen in how the religious beliefs of an individual shape the personal and societal life of the believer. The backbone of this position is its commitment to preserving future progress of not only ourselves, but also the religious other. The religious view of the other citizen is a springboard of learning and not a target of debate with the aim of refutation and potential conversion. Engagement with those who live through a different vocabulary is a goal in its own right because there is always the chance that we leave such instances of discourse with a newly learned tongue.

Once this framework has been formed from the remains of foundationalist religion, Ironic theology is placed alongside other pluralist approaches to world religions in order to showcase its difference from them and pragmatic advantages. The central theorists most similar to my own position discussed were Paul Knitter and John Hick who are both committed to religious pluralism. It is argued that the key difference between ironism and the positions of Hick and Knitter rests on their commitment to foundationalism. Although they do promote a colloquial friendly relationship with the religious other, Hick and Knitter find themselves still acknowledging dogmatic questions which are dissolved as pseudo-questions by the Ironic theologian. Once this distance is made Ironic theology takes its seat on the open border of pluralism, this anti-foundationalist approach to religious belief remains teasingly bound and free from any one creed which is its primary advantage against other theologies of religion with regards to interreligious dialogue.

### **3.2. A Few Final Words.**

In closing, it is my sincerest hope that this text has lifted up a new voice in the world of theology of religion. The introduction and inclusion of an ever-widening group of scholars, artists, and humans writ-large is and will continue to be a crucial aspect in the increased dialogue between different people. Readers may close this book with a sense of disappointment, confusion, or a sly chuckle at the lack of any single strong suggested point for future inquiry. However, this ambiguous sigh is my intention and the suggestion of simply keeping our ears open to the sound of foreign tongues is all that is necessary for preserving the future of humble human conversation.

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