

## **Pluralism and the Place of Religion in a Democratic Society: Emphasizing Rorty's View**

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### **Abstract**

Asking about the place of religion in a democratic society refers straightforwardly to the kind of pluralism we adopt. Given that intra-societal tensions mark out a democratic pluralistic society, then it seems that there is no doubt that there should be a place for religion and religious people in it. What is crucial for a democratic society is taking a suitable view on pluralism. There could be, at least, two versions of pluralism: Incommensurable or radical and commensurable or moderate. It is argued that the incommensurable account of pluralism confronts with serious problems both theoretically (like the impossibility of outer critique) and practically (like replacing persuasion with force). Rorty advocates a commensurable pluralism based on pragmatic conventions or "know-how" skills without any meta-narrative or translation manual among the doctrines of rival views. However, along with Davidson, it is stated that some kind of translation among the rival views is inevitable. In addition, it is argued that commensurable pluralism could not be limited to merely know-how skills and it needs some know-that insights. This view of pluralism not only opens the door of dialogue, but also provides a basis for removing superficial differences or conflicts between the rivals. Real differences, however, could remain and should be tolerated.

**Keywords:** Pluralism, Religion, (in) Commensurability, Democracy, Meta-Narrative, Rorty.

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## **Introduction**

Asking about the place of religion in a democratic or plural society could lead to different answers depending on the meaning of pluralism. There are different conceptions of pluralism. In the present essay, pluralism will be discussed in terms of a division of commensurable and incommensurable pluralism. Briefly, commensurable pluralism regards different points of views in a relationship of overlapping areas. In other word, it is held that different points of views have something in common, either being contents of knowledge or methodological considerations or something else. According to this kind of pluralism, while there could be particularities for every point of view, there are commonalities among them as well which make it possible to have reciprocal relationships and ways of contact and discussion.

On the other hand, the incommensurable pluralism holds that different points of view have no overlaps in purposes, contents, or methods. In fact, different viewpoints are like different worlds with different interests and findings and methods. Accordingly, there could not be any kind of reciprocal relationships among them, neither could be any kind of discussion among them by appealing to some touchstone considerations.

The question that concerns here, namely the place of religion in the democratic society, will be answered following these two kinds of pluralism. First, the incommensurable pluralism's account will be explained along with an examination of its

foundations or presuppositions. Then, Richard Rorty's view on commensurable pluralism and the place of religion according to him will be explained. It will be argued that while his account of commensurable pluralism seems more defensible than the former position, his conclusion on the place of religion does not seem reasonable.

## **Incommensurable Pluralism and the Place of Religion**

Incommensurable or contrastive pluralism regards different areas for life or knowledge without there being homogeneity among them. This position has taken by neo-orthodox theology, religious existentialists, and Oxford analytic philosophy.

Among neo-orthodox theologians, Karl Barth, the most important Protestant theologian of twentieth century, held that science and religion have different characteristics in terms of subject-matter, method, as well as purpose or end (Galloway 1973). As for the subject-matter, religion (Christianity) deals with God's manifestation in Jesus Christ, whereas science deals with nature. Also, in the case of method, religion considers intuitive ways for knowing God as the most important method, whereas science uses intellectual methods for knowing the nature. Finally, as far as the end or purpose is concerned, religion wants to draw the human beings attention toward God, whereas science tries to know the nature experimentally.

Religious existentialist philosophers have also generally considered a contrast between religion and



science. Here, too, the contrast is meant extensively in terms of subject-matter, method, and end. Martin Buber (1937), for instance, considered the subject-matter of religion as the particular relation between God and the human that he termed as "I-Thou" relationship. This relationship indicates a personal and direct relationship between the human and God. On the other hand, in science, there is another kind of relationship between the human and the nature that he termed as "I-It" relationship.

Accordingly, the method would also be different. In religion, because of personal relationship between the human and God, there will be a kind of method which we might consider as participation or personal involvement. However, in science, namely in "I-It" relationship, personal involvement is not possible and the researcher uses methods of observation and experiment. In other words, the researcher is an spectator rather than a player. Finally, the end or purpose is also different. Religion seeks the encounter between the human and God as the end, whereas science considers knowing and controlling the phenomena as the goal.

Analytic philosophers of Oxford have also usually taken a contrastive position in the relation between religion and science. Studying ordinary language, they have pointed out that there are different language games each with its own rules. Talking about different language games is taken usually to provide the background for considering contrasting relations among different areas of human life. Later, Wittgenstein, distinguished experimental

from grammatical propositions. The former are descriptive that refer to facts, whereas the latter are normative in which rules are important. Thus, Wittgenstein (1974, p. 184) holds that grammar is not dependent on reality; rather, grammatical rules initially determine the meaning and to that extent are arbitrary. The normative nature of language provides the background for language games. Each language game has its own rules and, hence, meanings. To confuse the rules of different language games will lead to providing meaningless statements. For instance, if we say, "2 plus 2 is sinful", we have stated a meaningless sentence. This is due to confusion between the concepts and rules of two different language games, namely mathematics and religion.

Different language games are related to different "forms of life". Actions and interactions of the human have led to different forms of life, like science, religion, literature, and so on. There might be a kind of similarity among some forms of life, like the similarity among the members of a family ("family resemblance"). Nevertheless, each language game has its own particular rules so that confusing the rules of different language games lead to meaninglessness.

Paul Hirst (1970), among others, has brought the idea of incommensurable pluralism to the realm of knowledge. Following Wittgenstein's forms of life, he talks about forms of knowledge. He has referred to seven forms of knowledge: Logic and mathematics, physical sciences, knowledge about



mind and others' minds (including history and social sciences), moral knowledge, aesthetic knowledge, religious knowledge and philosophical knowledge. Each of these forms of knowledge has distinguishable cognitive structure with distinct forms of reasoned judgment and, thus, should be regarded as a unique manifestation of the human reason.

As is clear, the criterion for distinguishing a form of knowledge is a particular kind of reason and evidence that it uses for determining the truth or falsity of its statements. Where Hirst refers to the unique characteristic of a form of knowledge he actually takes the position of incommensurable pluralism. Because of this uniqueness and because of distinct kind of evidence in each form, confusing concepts and methods of different forms leads to providing meaningless statements. Thus, Hirst (1974) claims that combinations like "Christian physics" is meaningless because of confusing two different realms of knowledge. When Hirst considers religion as one form of knowledge, he means, in fact, the scientific study of religion. But, as far as religion in terms of scriptures' content is concerned, he is reluctant to consider it as a distinct form of knowledge. Rather, he prefers to consider it as geography or a hybrid knowledge composed of different parts of different forms of knowledge (Hirst, 1965, p. 46).

Incommensurable pluralism admits a place for religion only if the latter could play a complementary role in relation to other institutions

or branches of the society. In the case of complementary role, Donald Mackay's (1974) work is worth mentioning. He criticizes two views on the relation between religion and science and suggests a third viewpoint. In the first view, a "supplementary" relation is held between religion and science. This relation indicates that one might use religion's explanations about the world for filling in the gaps of scientific explanations. This shows that, according to this view, the explanations of religion and science are of the same kind and this is exactly what Mackay concentrates his criticism on. According to him, this view confuses two different kinds of explanations.

In the second view, an absolute separation is supposed between religion and science. It is meant by this kind of separation that the explanations of religion and science are not of the same kind, and, furthermore, these explanations are not about the same subject matter. Thus, there could not be any kind of exchange between religion and science. Mackay criticizes this view because of its excessive position on separating religion and science so absolutely.

Referring to his preferred position on the relation between religion and science, Mackay talks about "complementarity". It is meant by this word that religion and science have different explanations of the same subject matter. In other words, religion and science might talk about the same thing but their explanations are different. Thus, the concepts and explanations of religion and science are not of the same kind and therefore they could not be combined



as it was supposed in the supplementary view. However, they could be beside each other and considered as two distinct and, at the same time, complementary explanations of the same phenomena. In order for these two kinds of explanations to be complementary, there should be four provisos. First, the two descriptions should be about the same thing. Second, each one of the descriptions of the common subject should or could be comprehensive. Third, the two descriptions should be stated differently. And fourth, preconditions for using the concepts in the two descriptions should be mutually exclusive so that the aspects of the phenomenon stated in one of the descriptions should be necessarily excluded from the other.

It is clear that Mackay's view on complementarity indicates an incommensurable pluralism. That is why, according to this view, there could be no exchange between the two kinds of explanations and that these two explanations could solve no problem for each other, even though they altogether could better solve problems of the human.

### Significance of Incommensurable Pluralism

Incommensurable pluralism in its more general form has been encountered considerable criticisms. The important versions of this general form that belong to Ludwig Wittgenstein (with regard to forms of life), Peter Winch (with regard to cultures in the realm of social science), and Thomas Kuhn (with regard to paradigms in natural sciences), among

others, have been under elegant scrutinies. These scrutinies meet the particular form of incommensurable pluralism regarding the relation between religion and science.

One of the criticisms on incommensurable pluralism in general is that it does not admit external critique. Jarvie (1970, p. 235), for instance, has argued against Winch in this way. According to Winch (1958), for criticizing a culture, one should understand it and this requires that one be present and live within the culture. This indicates that critique could have only an inner figure. In other words, one can criticize a culture by appealing to its inner criteria. However, Jarvie claims that there is no reason for limiting critique to its inner form, particularly because there have been interesting external critiques on cultures and theories and this is a fact that Winchian view could not account for.

Another critique on incommensurable pluralism is that it involves contradiction. Criticizing Kuhn, Toulmin (1972), for instance, states that incommensurability of different paradigms in Kuhn's view indicates that these paradigms are not comparable to each other: "...the proponents of competing paradigms practice their trades in different worlds...Practicing in different worlds, the two groups of scientists see different things when they look from the same point in the same direction." (Kuhn, 1970, p. 150) Toulmin's point is that in order for being a competition between paradigms there should be something common between them. Otherwise, what does really competition means?



Thus, he concludes that scientific revolutions require some kind of commensurability between paradigms, rather than incommensurability.

Donald Davidson's (1974) "argument from translation" does the same thing in criticizing the incommensurable view. Davidson claims that in order for there being plurality among different views, there should be some kind of translatability among them. This argument includes these seven steps (Fay, 1996, p. 84):

1. To claim that others live in a different conceptual world from us is to claim that they speak and think.

2. To claim that others speak and think we need to know that they are actually saying something, rather than producing noises.

3. To know that others are saying something we need to know at least some of what they mean.

4. To know what others mean we need to be able to translate their utterances into our language.

5. But to translate their utterances we need to ascribe to them various beliefs, desires, attitudes, and ways of connecting these mental elements.

6. But to ascribe such mental elements to them we must assume that they share with us a background of common beliefs, desires, and principles of thought, that we live in the same world.

7. But to have a shared background of epistemic capacity, belief, and principles of reasoning is to live in the same world as they do.

Thus, Davidson claims that talking about different and contrastive "conceptual schemes" could

be considered as a third dogma (in addition to Quine's two dogmas). Davidson's argument undermines all kinds of incommensurable pluralism including Kuhn's incommensurability between competing paradigms.

It is worth mentioning that Davidson's argument does not necessarily reject Quine's "indeterminacy of translation". In fact, he is in agreement with Quine to the extent that translatability does not require that there be 'determinate rules' for exact translation between two systems of thought. Nevertheless, his argument undermines any claim to the effect that different cultures, theories, or paradigms have quite different worlds so that they could not be compared to each other.

### **Commensurable Pluralism and the Place of Religion**

Having considered the criticisms on incommensurable pluralism, we need to embrace a more defensible version of pluralism. This kind of pluralism could be termed as commensurable. Richard Rorty's view is worth explaining here.

Commensurability might indicate that there is a super cultural device or a met a narrative for translating one language into the other. This version of translatability is surely what Rorty rejects because he believes in a general pragmatist claim to the effect that there is no a historical metaphysical framework into which everything could be fitted. This rejection, however, does not lead him to talk about "islets of language" with unbridgeable divisions.



Criticizing Lyotard's incommensurable pluralism, Rorty does not accept Lyotard's interpretation of Wittgenstein on language. He takes Lyotard to claim that, according to Wittgenstein, there is no unity or transparency of language, rather only "islets of language" without there being translatability among them. According to Rorty, Wittgenstein does not deny that there could be causeways among different language-games without there being a meta-narrative or meta-language: "These causeways do not take the form of translation manual, but rather of the sort of cosmopolitan know-how whose acquisition enables us to move back and forth between sectors of our own culture and our own history – for example, between Aristotle and Freud, between the language-game of worship and that of commerce, between the idioms of Holbein and of Matisse" (1991b, p. 216).

According to him, the most important evidence for taking commensurable pluralism serious is the inclination for conversation among the people who advocate different language-games: "There is just as much unity or transparency of language as there is willingness to converse rather than fight" (ibid, p. 218).

On the other hand, Rorty holds that the incommensurable view leads to permitting force among the rivals. Referring to Lyotard's view on the insurmountable diversity of cultures, he says: "I take him to be saying that, because of this insurmountability, one culture cannot convert another by persuasion, but only by some form of imperialist force" (ibid, p. 214).

Rorty has broadened the realm of his commensurable pluralism so that religion's language-game is also included in it where he says that there are causeways "between the language-game of worship and that of commerce". In fact, compared to the time that his *Philosophy and the Mirror of Nature* (1979) was written, he now feels that religion should be taken into account along with philosophy and science: "It now seems to me that to think properly about the kinds of questions I was trying to answer in PMN one needs to keep three balls in the air at once – science, philosophy, and religion" (Rorty 2000a, p. 214).

In order to think about the positions of these three important areas, Rorty refers to the main question that matter for each of them. According to him, the main question of science is "how do things work?"; that of religion is "what should we be afraid of?" and that of philosophy is "is there something non-human out there with which we need to get in touch?" .

In the case of religion, Rorty admits that there are religions of fear as well as religions of love (ibid, p. 218n). So, we might complete his suggested main question for religion by adding this one: "what should we love?".

While Rorty admits that there are religions of love, he denies that religions continue to show this function (ibid). Instead, he claims, "religion is in the process of being transfigured into democratic politics. What is left behind in the churches is the fear that human beings may not be able to save



themselves without help – that social cooperation is not enough” (ibid).

Even though Rorty holds, at first, that “one needs to keep three balls in the air at once – science, philosophy, and religion”(Rorty 2000a, p. 214) he finally dismisses religion from the scene. This is because he has given a reductive account in which religious love is reduced to and transfigured into cooperative relationship of human beings. This account does not seem adequate. Even though in the religions of love, cooperative relationship among people, who are all regarded as the creatures of God, could be a derivative of love of God, the latter could not be reduced to the former, as, in parallel, God could not be reduced to people. It is clearly doubtful that cooperative relationship among the people of democratic societies is replaced by love of God because religious people in these societies keep their beliefs in God alongside their cooperation with others. In fact, the religion’s claim is to provide a supportive source for human beings’ cooperation by appealing to love of God.

The other weakness in Rorty’s reductive account of religion is related to his formulation of the main question of religion in terms of fear. That is why he seeks the answers to the all three kinds of above-mentioned questions in power: “All three are questions about the whereabouts of power, and they obviously interlock. If it turns out that things (for instance, diseases, volcanoes, the wind and the rain) work without the intervention of invisible persons,

we may eventually have less to be afraid of than we had once thought” (Rorty 2000a, p. 215).

However, given the above-mentioned qualification on his formulation of the religion’s main question, this conclusion will not follow. Replacing fear by love of God, as Rorty himself admits, prevents us from considering power as the main element in answering the religion’s main question. This is because, unlike fear, love is not power-centered. Hence, it is possible today for human beings to love God after knowing the natural causes to which Rorty refers.

Instead of thinking about religion in a reductive account, we can keep its particular place alongside those of philosophy and science. Rorty (2005, p.39) states that religion should not be a rival for science or philosophy but consequently concludes that religion could only have emotive content. Even though religion is not a rival for science or philosophy, it could have cognitive content as well as value elements. In fact, pluralism of democratic society requires that different functions of all different institutions be active. This multi-functional relationship is more fruitful and more fitted to the plural democratic society. This fruitful relationship derives from complementary as well as rivalry relationships among the different institutions.

As far as religion in relation to other branches or institutions of democratic society is concerned, both complementary and rivalry relationships could



occur. As for the former relationship, religion fills a gap, namely the need for love, in the human soul that neither science nor philosophy could compensate for it. As mentioned, contrary to Rorty, this gap could not be filled by love of people in the realm of politics if the dominant discourse of politics permits talking of love to others at all. Cooperation required in politics is usually understood in terms of contract among people and contract is a safe medium among the rivals who fear from each other, rather than being a background for love. This seems to be admitted by

Rorty where he says: "More frequently they [tensions] are resolved by appeals to what he [Dworkin] calls "convention and anecdote." The political discourse of the democracies, at its best, is the exchange of what Wittgenstein called "reminders for a particular purpose" –anecdotes about the past effects of various practices and predictions of what will happen if, or unless, some of these are altered" (Rorty 1991a, p. 201).

In addition, given Rorty's avoidance of any kind of human nature or meta-narrative behind different language-games, how could one talk about loving others. Why should we love others? Who are these 'we' and 'others'? Rorty is thinking about the human in terms of a Quinean web whose logic is adaptation in "the hit-or-miss way": "For purposes of moral and political deliberation and conversation, a person just *is* that network... She is a network that is constantly reweaving itself in the usual Quinean manner – that is to say, not by reference to general criteria (e.g., "rules of

meaning" or "moral principles") but in the hit-or-miss way in which cells readjust themselves to meet the pressures of the environment" (ibid, p. 199). This picture of a person and interpersonal relations is more suited to fear than love.

On the other hand, as far as the rivalry relationship is concerned, religion can pose questions and challenges for other institutions in a democratic society. These challenges are mostly derived from religious values. A well-known example of these kinds of challenges has been shown about abortion. Sometimes religious beliefs lead to posing challenges. Here also there has been a well-known example, namely questioning Darwin's theory of evolution by appealing to creation. It is interesting to note that Feyerabend (1981) has admired this challenge because it leads to breaking the dominance of evolution theory. As he reasonably says, this is not to say that the creation theory is true or it should be widely accepted. Rather, what is important is the appearance of challenge itself. Religion has potentiality to pose such challenges to other institutions or branches of a democratic society.

## Conclusion

Rorty's view on commensurability pluralism seems more defensible than incommensurable pluralism. While the latter provides a static relationship among the institutions of society, the former can account for dynamisms among different institutions. In such a dynamic background, we can better understand complementary as well as rivalry relationships between



religion, on one hand, and science, philosophy, and similar constituents of society on the other.

Even though Rorty has chosen a better background for dealing with pluralism, his account on the religion does not seem reasonable. Firstly, he approaches an account of religion by which religion is reduced to politics, whereas the reductive strategy is not congruent with pluralism.

Secondly, he reduces inter-relations among different language-games to skills of conversation. However, it seems that some common grounds among the language-games, without necessarily embracing an absolute meta-narrative, are required. Otherwise, it would not be possible to account for some needed relationships in the society. For instance, Rorty's view on person as a Quineian web, without appealing to a background for human dignity, does not make it possible to talk about love among people. In providing such a background, religion has shown its own potentiality.

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