Neopragmatism and the Christian Desire for a Transcendent God: Is a Meaningful Dialogue Possible?

Let me begin by clarifying key words in the title of the paper—"neopragmatism," "desire," and "transcendent God"—and then address the point of the question: Is a meaningful dialogue possible? The neopragmatist perspective with which I will dialogue is that of Richard Rorty, arguably the most important representative of this form of doing philosophy. The desire (and the intellectual requirement) that God be in some sense "other," and thus not subsumable under human description without remainder, I take to be basic to the logic—the "deep grammar"—of Christian belief and practice. Trying to get Rorty and the theologian to ruminate about the need to assert God’s transcendent reality may prompt some readers to rephrase the above question from Is a meaningful dialogue possible? to Is there a point to such a dialogue? Prima facie such readers may have a point; for Rorty is a self-avowed atheist whose liberal utopia will be "enlightened, secular through and through" and one in which "no trace of divinity remained. . ." (Rorty 1989:45).

The radically historicist moorings of Rorty’s philosophy, coupled with his incessant invectives against absolutes, noncontingent truth, and transcendence, have led theologians and philosophers of religion to rather different judgments about the viability of meaningful dialogue with the philosopher’s neopragmatism. Jespers, for example, declares that many Christian theologians will find Rorty’s disavowal of transcendence prohibitive of meaningful dialogue (Jespers 1993:249), while Robbins (1994; 1997) considers Rorty’s perspective quite congenial for constructing a form of religious humanism. I find myself somewhere between Jespers and Robbins. With Jespers, I acknowledge that Rorty’s dismissal of transcendence poses real problems for the theologian’s desire to speak of God as transcendent Other; however, with Robbins, I find much of Rorty’s neopragmatism powerfully incisive, stimulating, and convincing—particularly Rorty’s trenchant critique of the conceptual (and moral-ethical) excesses of Western metaphysics and foundationalism, as well as his courage to envision a way of thinking and living that honors the utter historicity, linguisticality, contingency, and finitude of human existence. In this paper, then, I will risk a dialogue with Rorty’s neopragmatism precisely around the possibility of construing transcendence in such a way that it honors the Christian demand for God’s "otherness," while in doing so it not take leave of history, contingency, and finitude. This dialogue will be threefold: First, I assess Rorty’s understanding of religion and its quest for transcendence. Second, I argue that Rorty’s construal of transcendence is too restrictive, prompting him to unnecessarily throw the theological baby out with the metaphysical bath water. Finally, I present briefly the contours of a postmetaphysical understanding of God’s transcendence that respects Christianity’s need for God as genuine Other, but that at the same time takes seriously Rorty’s emphasis on history, contingency, language, and time.
It is crucial to note at the outset that Rorty’s misgivings about theology and its attempt to speak about God as transcendent Other are of a piece with his critique of Western metaphysics and foundationalism. Therefore, to appreciate Rorty’s views on religion and on God, it is necessary to take a brief look at his critique of Western philosophy.

For Rorty, there are two ways in which thoughtful people, by situating themselves in a larger context, can make those lives meaningful. Rorty names the first way the desire for "objectivity" and the second the desire for "solidarity." People who desire solidarity do so "by telling the story of their contribution to a community"—the community can be the actual historical one in which they live, or an imaginary future one (Rorty 1991:21). People who crave objectivity describe themselves "as standing in immediate relation to a nonhuman reality" (21). These two ways express themselves in two very different self-images:

Insofar as a person is seeking solidarity, she does not ask about the relation between the practices of a chosen community and something outside that community. Insofar as she seeks objectivity, she distances herself from the actual persons around her not by thinking of herself as a member of some other real or imaginary group, but rather by attaching herself to something which can be described without reference to any particular human beings (21).

As Rorty tells it, the intellectual tradition of the West—from Plato to the Enlightenment, and beyond—has been for the most part a story of the quest for objectivity. Beginning with the Greeks, philosophers have unmediated access to this "something which can be described without reference to . . . human beings"—call it Truth, the Good, Reality, God, or whatever—by constructing metaphysical systems in which the following sorts of concepts have a point: the distinction between knowledge and opinion and between appearance and reality; truth as correspondence to reality; thought or language as a medium of representation; epistemology; realism versus relativism, and so on. Descartes’ attempt to locate this immediate relation to "nonhuman reality" in the thinking cogito and Kant’s hope to reach objective truth by way of the invariant, universal structures of consciousness are simply two celebrated examples of the same Western desire for objectivity—for ahistorical foundations for truth and morality that would escape the vicissitudes of time, chance, and contingency. For Rorty, logical positivism and the debates in the philosophy of language over "realism versus antirealism" and "representationalism versus antirepresentationalism" are merely twentieth-century attempts to update Western philosophy’s foundationalist quest for certainty (Rorty 1991:1-17). So are attempts by philosophers of science to name science a "natural kind"; that is, to privilege science in terms of the rest of culture by way of "a special method, or a special relation to reality" (Rorty 1991:46).

Rorty thinks that philosophy’s search for ahistorical, absolute foundations for truth or goodness, or the nature of reality or of human beings has been a failure; the "Platonic tradition" has simply "outlived its usefulness" (Rorty 1982:xiv). Beginning with Philosophy and the Mirror of Nature (1979), Rorty has invoked the talents of (among others) Nietzsche, the later Wittgenstein, Derrida, James, Dewey, and Davidson to launch a sustained and often brilliant critique of Western philosophy. The chief reason for the failure of Western philosophy, Rorty avers, has to do with its "impossible attempt to step outside our skin—the traditions, linguistic or other, within which we do our thinking and self-criticism—and compare ourselves with something absolute" (Rorty 1982:xix). For Rorty, the Western intellectual tradition is littered with failed attempts to provide a method, an epistemology, an ideal language, or a metaphysics that will make it possible to transcend the "finitude of one’s time and place, the ‘merely conventional’ and contingent aspects of one’s life" (xix) and intuit directly the nature of Truth or Reality.
or Nature or God. The ineluctable historicity and finitude of our lives, coupled with the ubiquity of language, make that impossible; we never encounter reality "except under a chosen description" (xxxix).

The pragmatist sees the repeated failure of the Platonic tradition as reason enough to abandon it—to suggest that we "change the subject" (Rorty 1982:xiv). In changing the subject, the pragmatist seeks to foster among intellectuals the desire for solidarity. Partisans of solidarity do not look for skyhooks with which to escape from contingency so that they may see reality whole—they do not aspire for a God’s eye view. They are content to live in the thick of history, time, chance, and finitude. Pragmatists resist the temptation to hypothesize "truth" or "goodness" or "reality," thus turning them into objects with "essences" about which one should have an epistemological theory (Rorty 1982:xiv, xviii). Instead, they repudiate the very notion of "anything—mind or matter, self or world—as having an intrinsic nature to be expressed or represented" (Rorty 1989:4). Truth is not "out there" in the world, waiting to be discovered by applying the proper philosophical method (5); rather, truth is a property of sentences (Rorty 1982:xiv), an "expression of commendation" (Rorty 1991:23) for beliefs that are currently paying their way. The world is indeed out there, existing in space and time independently of human beings; but the world does not possess an intrinsic nature—hence, it "cannot propose a language for us to speak" (Rorty 1989:6). Nor do human beings have an intrinsic nature. The pragmatist insists that "socialization, and thus historical circumstance, goes all the way down—there is nothing 'beneath' socialization or prior to history which is definatory of the human" (Rorty 1989:xiii). If there are no ahistorical essences to be discovered, then language ceases to be viewed as a medium, "something standing between the self and the nonhuman reality with which the self seeks to be in touch . . . " (Rorty 1989:10-11). Language neither represents the nature of reality or the world, nor expresses the nature of the self; instead, language is a tool helping human beings cope with reality (11).

In turning away from the quest for objectivity, partisans of solidarity turn to concrete communities, working to make such communities democratic, open, and free. Such liberal utopias exist for the purpose of providing the space needed for creative individuals—Rorty calls them "strong poets"—to engage in projects of self-creation, reweaving the inherited scripts of their lives so as to "give birth" to themselves. Facing the terror of being merely a "copy" or "replica," strong poets continually redescribe the lives they have inherited, making the past bear the impress of their creative self-assertion; in this way, the strong poet will be able to say with Nietzsche, "Thus I willed it" (Rorty 1989:29). The solidarity that provides the social bonds in Rorty’s liberal community, as Wallace observes, does not exhibit the positive ethic of normative philosophy and theology, which upheld the universal ideal that insofar as all people possess an inner light or are bearers of God’s image, social organization has a sure foundation upon which to reconcile differences and build community. Rather, his answer is a negative ethic of bourgeois individualism: the acquisition of a private vocabulary implies the importance of public institutions and spaces for making this acquisition possible and fruitful. "Without the protection of something like the institutions of bourgeois liberal society, people will be less able to work out their private salvations”" (1996:58).

Rorty’s ideal of the strong poet and the morality of the ceaseless play of aesthetic self-creation provides an appropriate entry-point for a discussion of Rorty’s view of religion and theology. For Rorty, self-creation is possible only in the space left by the demise of the desire for "objectivity"; that is, the strong poet’s desire for imaginative self-creation becomes the very opposite—and takes the place of—the theologian’s and the metaphysician’s desire to be "guided" and "constrained" by nonhuman powers, and not left to their own devices (Rorty 1982:xxxix). That is why Rorty’s ideal society will be atheistic,
secular through and through, one in which no trace of divinity or transcendence remained, and in which human beings would no longer feel the desire—or see the need—to be responsible to nonhuman forces (Rorty 1989:45). Such a culture will necessarily be a dedivinized and detranscendentalized one.

It is important to keep in mind that Rorty does not distinguish between Western philosophy’s quest for "objectivity" and theology’s quest for a transcendent Deity—these two projects are inextricably intertwined. Indeed, Rorty sees at the root of modern metaphysics and foundationalism a distinctly theological motivation: talk about the human being or the world as somehow possessing an intrinsic nature which may be "discovered" by the poet or the scientist is a consequence of a theological view which understood the world as a divine creation, as "the work of someone who has something in mind, who Himself spoke in some language in which He described his own project" (Rorty 1989:21). The theologian’s attempt to find the appropriate language in which to speak about the transcendent God is no different from the metaphysician’s attempt to discover the right language through which to gain unmediated access to Truth or Goodness—both projects attempt to establish "links to something Beyond" (Rorty 1982:xlii-xliii), to escape from history, time, and change in order to compare themselves "with something absolute" (xix). Since Rorty cannot conceive of any form of religion (or, by implication, any theology) "which would not be subject to [his] objections to the Platonic tradition" (Louthan 1996:179), he debunks theology by appealing to the same epistemological arguments he uses to show the conceptual incoherence of metaphysics and foundationalism, and the uselessness of notions such as the appearance/reality distinction, language as medium of representation, and the correspondence theory of truth.

However, to limit a treatment of Rorty’s misgivings about theology to a conceptual and metaphysical level would be a mistake. For, as may have become clear by now, Rorty’s opposition to theology’s need for a transcendent God and metaphysics’ quest for ahistorical foundations has a deeply moral and ethical basis in his thought. For Rorty, religious devotion to God’s reality is diametrically opposed to human self-reliance; and, Rorty avers, "it would be more courageous, more self-reliant just to rely on ourselves, on our own group efforts" (Louthan 1996:179). But one may ask: Why is relying on ourselves more desirable than relying on God, or on some other nonhuman power? Why privilege the virtue of self-reliance?

In answering these questions, let us note the stark dichotomies that have become apparent in Rorty’s philosophy thus far: either objectivity or solidarity; either transcendence or contingency; either obedience to nonhuman powers or dionysian self-creation. Moreover, observe that the quest for objectivity and transcendence is always an attempt to escape from history, language, and contingency. The "nonhuman powers" are always absolute, ahistorical, beyond time and chance. Rorty’s position thus creates a logic of mutual exclusion, presenting the thoughtful interpreter with a simple either/or choice in terms of the self-image and the allegiances she may aspire to: either a pragmatist or a metaphysician, either a believer in an ahistorical God or a strong poet and self-creator, and so forth. Furthermore, the logic of mutual exclusion creates a relationship of power that is absolute: that which is ahistorical and beyond time and chance is not malleable, not subject to human manipulation, and thus floats free of human creative influence. Such imperviousness to human power makes these ahistorical realities not only useless for human projects, it makes them positively anti-human. The anti-human nature of these nonhuman powers comes through clearly in the following passage in which Rorty describes the project of the metaphysicians—the Greek philosophers, the empirical scientists, and the German idealists. All of them were going to explain to us the ultimate locus of power . . . . They would thereby inform us what we
really are, what we are compelled to be by powers not ourselves. They would exhibit the stamp which had been impressed on all of us. This impress would not be blind, because it would not be a matter of chance, a mere contingency. It would be necessary, essential, telic, constitutive of what it is to be human. It would give us a goal, the only possible goal, namely, the full recognition of that very necessity, the self-consciousness of our essence (Rorty 1989:26).

Note that to the extent that ultimate power resides in the "powers not ourselves," human beings are necessarily disempowered. No wonder that Rorty construes the unilateral distribution of power in terms confrontation: we are compelled by these noncontingent realities; they cause us to see the way things "really are" (Rorty 1979:163); they constrain us to see the truth about the world (Rorty 1982:xxxix). To the extent that Nature’s own impress has been impressed on all of us, true self-creation is impossible. Creative imagination finally remains mimetic, merely mirroring the necessary "self-consciousness of our essence." The existence of an ahistorical essence—an impress that is necessary and essential—elides the authentic freedom the strong poet needs to demonstrate that he is not merely a "copy" or "replica" of the "blind impress that chance has given him," that he is able to "make a self for himself by redescribing that impress in terms which are, if only marginally, his own" (Rorty 1989:43). Not only do transcentent realities diminish genuine human freedom and novelty, they are also deeply alienating: insofar as human nature is invariant and necessary, the strong poet will always be forced to repeat a preexisting script. She will never be able to make her life bear the idiosyncrasies of her impress; that is, in the final analysis, she will never be able to truly own her life, to be able to declare over it, "Thus I willed it" (see Rorty 1989:29). For Rorty, then, allegiance to nonhuman powers, including the transcendent God of Christian theology, is finally inimical to human freedom, novelty, and creativity. In short, for humans to flourish, the gods must die. To return to the above questions: For Rorty, self-reliance becomes an ethical act of profound courage, because it chooses for human solidarity, freedom, and self-determination against the false security of the necessary, the noncontingent, and the transcendent.

II

How does the theologian respond to Rorty’s construal and critique of metaphysics and foundationalism—and, particularly, his critique of the Christian desire for a transcendent God? Rorty presents the theologian with a two-pronged challenge: On the one hand, Rorty suggests that the notion of a transcendent God is conceptually incoherent. That is, since such a notion shares the foundationalist assumptions of metaphysics, it suffers the same fate. On the other hand, belief in a transcendent God is ethically undesirable. That is, in our day, such a belief has become a hindrance to self-reliance, to a trust in the powers of human imagination and ingenuity to realize heretofore unimagined possibilities. In responding to Rorty’s critique, it helps to note that the conceptual and ethical aspects of Rorty’s critique presuppose each other. It is precisely because Rorty’s argument creates such absolute conceptual oppositions between, say, objectivity and solidarity, or transcedence and contingency, that the notion of transcendence comes to be seen as the very opposite of human freedom and flourishing. In other words, Rorty’s ethical objections to transcendence gain their argumentative force only because of the sharply dichotomous way in which terms like "transcendence" and "solidarity" function in Rorty’s conceptual apparatus. To be sure, if transcendence is necessarily ahistorical, atemporal, and extralinguistic, then it falls victim to Rorty’s criticism of metaphysics, foundationalism, realism, and so forth. Further, if transcendence is necessarily the metaphysical construct that Rorty claims it is, then its power is unilateral, confrontational, oppressive, and inimical to human flourishing. But there is no need for the theologian to accept these forced dichotomies in Rorty’s argument. Indeed, whether Christian theology
has ever construed God’s transcendence in the ahistorical, absolutist terms that Rorty suggests, is highly debatable. In any case, the theologian should refuse to accept the strained oppositions of Rorty’s argument. Instead, she should extricate talk about God from the metaphysics with which Rorty lumps it, and make the case for a postmetaphysical and postfoundationalist construal of God’s reality. Such a view of the divine Other floats free of Rorty’s dichotomies, and reinscribes the desiderata of human freedom and creativity, and of God’s transcendent otherness in ways that are thoroughly historical, contingent, and liberative. I will sketch the contours of such a theological understanding of God below.

It is theoretically significant that some scholars, notably Mark Wallace and Mark C. Taylor, attribute Rorty’s seeming "tone-deafness" to transcendence—to "otherness," including the Divine Other—to his vestigial attachment to the canons of positivist thought. As Wallace observes, for the positivist "the gods are dead and human experience is devoid of any epiphanic moments where something More or Novel can be manifested to the interpreter" (Wallace 1996:60; also Wallace 1993:250). He continues:

In vintage Enlightenment form, Rorty champions the exigency of throwing off the shackles of authority and convention. . . . In fact, however, his strident constructivist orientation is of a piece with the longstanding Western emphasis on the authority of the rational self as the final tribunal for all claims to truth (Wallace 1996:60).

Similarly, in his essay "Paraletics," Mark C. Taylor argues that the subject-centered structure of Rorty’s hermeneutical "dialogue" elides genuine otherness by "colonizing" the other (1990:129); therefore, "the ‘other’ is not really other but is actually a moment in one’s own becoming" (131). While I agree with Wallace and Taylor that Rorty’s suspicion of the utility of the transcendent, and specifically the notion of a transcendent God, may be rooted in his analytic-empiricist background, one should also keep in mind Rorty’s critical and highly nuanced relation to the Enlightenment heritage. So, for example, J. Wesley Robbins is quite right to criticize Taylor for attributing to Rorty typical Enlightenment predilections such as human usurpation of divine creative powers, and the sorts of dualisms that necessitate "an economy of representation" and truth as correspondence with reality (Robbins 1992:391). For Rorty, the death of God does not turn human subjects into little gods, aggressively stamping out any appearances of divinity. In fact, Rorty explicitly rejects the "aggressive atheism" of people like Sidney Hook who tried to argue that theism is unworthy of serious consideration because it is insufficiently "scientific" and "rational" (see Rorty 1991:63-77). Rorty realizes that such aggressive atheism inevitably forces the pragmatist to play the metaphysician’s self-refuting game. Rather, Rorty’s rejection of transcendence and the gods, and his counsel that human beings wriggle free from tutelage to nonhuman powers and instead opt for self-reliance, may have more to do with the moral he draws from the failed history of the Western metaphysical—and with it, the theological—tradition. The conceptual and ethical aporias besetting metaphysics and theology mean that these traditions have ceased to be "live options" for us inhabitants of the rich North Atlantic democracies; they are simply not working anymore (Rorty 1991:33). Therefore, Rorty is hopeful that, as postmodern human beings increasingly exercise their poetic powers of self-creation, worries about metaphysical questions—but, particularly, a desire for transcendent powers—would die the death of "benign neglect" (Rorty 1995:195).

This discussion of Rorty’s "tone-deafness" to divine otherness, and his predilection for a humanism without transcendence, serves to create an opening for a genuinely postmetaphysical construal of religious faith and of God’s reality, in two ways: First, the fact that Rorty’s intellectual commitments find their roots in the conceptual and moral assumptions of a very specific philosophical tradition—namely, the Enlightenment tradition with its privileging of human autonomy—relativizes Rorty’s critique of
theology in the following way: It makes the theologian dubious enough about the motivations behind Rorty’s dismissal of God that she may be emboldened to look for new ways of construing the divine reality that the assumptions of Rorty’s intellectual heritage would make him either unable or unwilling to countenance. Second, the theologian may agree with Rorty’s critique of metaphysics—and even theology—as he defines these intellectual traditions. However, the theologian may rightly take issue with Rorty’s counsel that we will be better off to simply abandon the divine in favor of secular societies of strong poets. For that counsel, together with Rorty’s suggestion that "a world of pragmatic atheists . . . would be a better, happier world" (Rorty 1995:195), is not the consequence of a sustained argument. Rather, it is the function of an existential choice—after drawing a moral about the ongoing utility of his metaphysical heritage—to adopt a certain self-image of what would make for human freedom and flourishing. The theologian may certainly retort that Rorty’s casual foreclosure on her own existential choice to wager her life on the fragile hope that human freedom and flourishing lie in the possibilities opened up precisely by a postmetaphysical experience of the transcendent God, is disingenuous and illegitimate. The demise of metaphysics (and theology as Rorty defines it) does not necessarily lead to a "happy atheism"; unless, of course, one shares Rorty’s prior existential commitment that the only worthy utopia is one bereft of experiences of divine transcendence. That is to say, disappointment over the putative failure of metaphysics does not logically entail a secular existence in which "no trace of divinity remained. . . ." Nor, therefore, does it occlude the legitimacy of wagering a religious faith on the rhetorical possibilities proffered by a genuinely postmetaphysical construal of the divine Reality.

III

In this final section of the paper, I will respond to Rorty’s conceptual and ethical objections to theology’s desire for a transcendent God alluded to earlier in the paper. My response clearly will not be a full-fledged doctrine of God; rather, I will make some brief comments on how a postmetaphysical construal of God’s reality would address Rorty’s objections. To do so, I turn for insight to the theological model proffered by Mark I. Wallace in his recent book, Fragments of the Spirit: Nature, Violence, and the Renewal of Creation (1996). In it, Wallace offers a promising way of construing God’s reality in a postmetaphysical key. While there is no way to do justice to the subtlety and complexity of Wallace’s argument in the remaining pages of this paper, I want simply to allude to one or two of its salient features in order to address Rorty’s objections.

Let us look first at Rorty’s conceptual objections to the Christian desire for a transcendent God. By refusing to think of God under the philosophical categories of being, a postmetaphysical model avoids the conceptual aporias Rorty associates with metaphysical flights from history, time, and contingency. For God is neither Tillich’s "ground of being" nor philosophy’s "highest existent, [its] ens a se, pure actuality, being-itself . . . prima causa" (Wallace 1996:64-65). Captive to these categories of Being, God’s transcendent reality is often portrayed in just the ahistorical, atemporal, extralinguistic ways which Rorty so forcefully criticizes. Rather, Wallace follows thinkers like Jean-Luc Marion in asserting that God should be envisaged as without being (65). Ironically, only by extricating God’s reality from the metaphysical categories of being, can God’s authentic transcendence by maintained. The totalizing nature of metaphysical conceptualizations simply cannot "account for the arbitrary nature of the Other whose reality cannot be grasped, objectified, calculated, or categorized" (65-66).

Wallace proposes that a fruitful way to bypass the reifying metaphysical categories of being is through a retrieval of the biblical-theological understanding of God as Spirit (Wallace 1996:65). Admittedly, to
accomplish this means overcoming modern suspicions of spirit as either Hegel’s all-consuming World Spirit (78) or as a supernatural, vapid, ethereal reality transcending history, language, and contingency (121-122). For Wallace, these suspicions are countered, however, by rendering the Spirit’s reality not in the terms of substance or being but rather rhetorically "in relation to the structures of lived existence" (122). A rhetorical construal of the Spirit means that the Spirit exists in a transformative relationship with the concrete social systems that alternately serve to block and enable human renewal. The Spirit is not a self-subsistent, static entity that exists apart from its coinherence with other living beings. Rather, the Spirit has its very life in communion with the liberative and healing relationships that various persons and groups share with one another. This approach desubstantializes the Spirit and understands the Spirit’s work in adjectival rather than nominative terms, in spite of the way the word "Spirit" is conventionally used as the syntactic subject. Far from this model denying the reality of the Spirit, it rather posits this reality as a dynamic life-force that circulates among the transformative power relations that undergird aspects of postmodern culture (Wallace 1996:122-123).

By "desubstantializing" the Spirit’s reality—by refusing to consider the Spirit "a self-subsistent, static entity"—and by insisting on the Spirit’s "coinherence with other living beings," a rhetorical understanding of the Spirit affirms the utterly historical, linguistic, and contingent nature of God’s reality. Indeed, as Spirit, God has no reality apart from history, time, and language. The Spirit’s radical inherence in the concretions of history, time, and language is of a piece with thinking of the Spirit’s work as "adjectival" rather than "nominative." "Adjectival" delineates the Spirit’s as power. Specifically, the Spirit emerges as the normative power of transformation and healing in "concrete social systems." Power is radically relational, which means it has no reality apart from its concretions in historical and social situations. Limning the Spirit as power suggests that the Spirit need not—indeed, should not—be hypostasized: The Spirit is not self-subsistent, capable of sustaining an existence apart from the dynamic of power relations that constitute concrete social and historical contexts. Instead, the Spirit reality—God’s reality—just is the normative power to effect transformation and healing in concrete historical situations. For my model, then, God’s reality—God’s "being," if you will—is historical without remainder. God’s reality is coterminous with its instantiations in the contingencies of history, time, and chance. Such a radically historicist construal of God’s reality renders the divine fragile, subject to vicissitudes of renewal and decay that accompany historical change. As William Dean has said, a historicist theology considers whatever is real—including the reality of God—to be "conceived within history, directed at history, and grown in a historical chain . . ." (Dean 1988:1).

But a postmetaphysical theology must resolutely eschew the "metaphysical comfort" of what Dean calls an "older historicism," which, while acknowledging the ever-changing realities of history, time, and contingency, nevertheless argued that "beneath the change there was a structure impervious to the vicissitudes of time and perspective and that the thinker’s job was to introduce that structure into present history as faithfully as possible" (Dean 1988:4). More often than not, Christian theologians construed this abiding, ontological "structure" as God. However, it is just this rearguard action to smuggle in a metaphysics of the finally extrahistorical Divine Being that a historicist, postmetaphysical theologian cannot accept. For to do that, she reasons, is to expose the theologian to the range of Rorty’s criticisms of metaphysics all over again.

Insinuating God’s reality without remainder in the vicissitudes of history, contingency, and chance raises this question: Does the claim of God’s radical inherence in concrete historical contexts not evacuate God’s being of any transcendence? In other words, does a postmetaphysical theology purchase the
The historicity of God at the expense of God’s “otherness,” thus violating the "deep structure" of Christian faith? Further complicating the issue is the fact that, as the earlier discussion showed, for Rorty, it is precisely when metaphysicians and theologians "go transcendental" (see Rorty 1982:173) that imminent flights from history, time, and contingency are not far behind. The challenge before a postmetaphysical Christian theology is, then, just how to affirm God’s genuine "otherness," but in a thoroughgoing historicist key.

Perhaps the place to begin is to uncouple the issue of God’s transcendence from Rorty’s problematic construal of it. As we saw, Rorty’s interpretation of transcendence as necessarily a relation of the historical to the ahistorical, the temporal to the atemporal, and so forth, occludes a radically historicist understanding of God’s transcendent Reality—for it construes transcendence as a static, ontological relation of mutual exclusion: either historical existence utterly devoid of epiphanic moments ("the gods are dead") or epistemic and moral constraint by ahistorical, metaphysical powers. A postmetaphysical theologian will not be misled by the "contrastive" logic of Rorty’s dichotomous view; in fact, she will reject it. For if, as the historicist theologian would have it, God is not the ahistorical, metaphysical Entity Rorty makes him out to be, but instead is thoroughly insinuated in the passage of history, time, and contingency, then God’s transcendence—God’s "otherness"—is entirely historical too. The ineluctably historical nature of God’s otherness, therefore, necessarily requires a different logic from that of Rorty’s position. I contend that a rhetorical construal of the polyphonic witness of the biblical text suggests a logic of the Spirit’s transcendent reality which moves the historicist theologian beyond the tired stalemate Rorty’s position has created.

But how exactly will it do that? It does so by suggesting that the logic of God’s otherness derives crucially from the identity of the divine Other mediated through the plural discourses of the biblical text. Contra Rorty, God is not a metaphysical entity "discovered" underneath the multiple layers of the text, waiting to be adequately represented by the proper theological or metaphysical language. Rather, as we saw earlier, limned in the register of power the divine Other is a reality whose very identity emerges from within the dynamic play of the concrete interpretive situation. The historical nature of the Spirit’s reality means that God’s transcendence, far from being a static, ontological relation between history and the ahistorical, is actually a function of the dynamic relational interplay between text and interpreter in a concrete context. But of what exactly does God’s transcendence exist in a concrete interpretive situation? How exactly is God "other"? Once again, it is the identity of the divine Spirit emerging from the polyphonic interplay of the Bible’s multiple discourses that holds the clue to the meaning of the transcendent relation. Recall that we described the Spirit as the normative power of transformation, liberation, and healing in a given social context. The "otherness" of the Spirit resides precisely in the normativity of the power relations comprising the hermeneutical context. That is, God’s transcendence constitutes the othering power of liberating love in a historical situation. Precisely to the extent that it enables liberation the divine love transcends the constraints and limited resources of a given situation. Divine transcendence is thus transposed into a moral-ethical key: The Spirit is experienced as transcendent in a concrete interpretive context just insofar as she brings to the situation morally and spiritually superior resources for transformation, liberation, and healing. Put another way, through a rhetorical imaginative engagement with the biblical text, the "otherness" of God is experienced as the lure of new modes of being—of transcendent existential possibilities. Or, in the language of the Christian theological tradition, the otherness of the divine Mystery is the otherness of grace, of the promise of a radically new way of being in the world.
Construing God’s otherness in the way I have prohibits interpreting transcendence as either a generic quality of the divine life or as a static, ontological relation between eternity and time. Rather, God’s otherness is always the function of the normativity of power within a concrete historical context. This makes the Spirit’s otherness radically contextual. Because ineluctably insinuated in the power relations of a particular historical context, God is always "situationally transcendent," to borrow Jerome Stone’s felicitous phrase. The Spirit’s transcendence—her gracious ability to bring liberation and healing—is thus a fragile and vulnerable performance; indeed, it is as fragile and vulnerable—even fickle—as the historical contexts within which the Spirit is insinuated.

With Rorty, a postmetaphysical, historicist theology considers the ahistorical god of metaphysics, together with the phantom security and stability it offers, more trouble than it’s worth. But contra Rorty, the theologian perceives in the death of the metaphysical deity an opening for refiguring the divine reality as the transcendent-as-normative agent of liberation and healing.

Speaking of God’s transcendence in a moral-ethical register also helps to respond to the second of Rorty’s objections to theology; namely, that the Christian desire for a transcendent God is ethically undesirable. Recall two aspects of Rorty’s critique: First, he claims that the existence of transcendent realities—including the gods—is fundamentally opposed to projects of human flourishing and freedom. Second, since the divine entities thought up by metaphysics get in the way of human self-creation, we lucky inhabitants of twentieth-century North Atlantic democracies should increasingly rely on our own imagination and resources, and persuade as many of our theistic friends that they too can live without the metaphysical comfort of divine providence. In other words, as travelers on the way to Rorty’s liberal utopia, we should try our best to redescribe our self-image in such a completely secular fashion that the desire to worship anything at all would wither away, would simply lose its point.

Again, I will make just one or two brief comments. First, as has been pointed out on several occasions in the previous discussion, Rorty’s verdict that belief in any form of transcendent sacred reality is inimical to human freedom and flourishing is a direct function of his uncompromising relegation of the divine to the realm of the ahistorical and the atemporal. This necessitates a contrastive relation in which the transcendent powers unilaterally constrain their human counterparts, compelling them to see the immutable "nature of reality," the "truth about the world," "the will of God," or whatever. Such a coercive relation naturally impugns the integrity of human creativity and self-determination.

Note, however, that without Rorty’s ahistorical God, there is no oppressive transcendent relation either. So, the postmetaphysical, historicist construal of God’s transcendent reality outlined thus far seems to open up conceptual space for rethinking the nature of human relation to the sacred in such a way that it elides Rorty’s charge of antihumanism. Again, the key to responding to Rorty’s ethical objection resides in how the divine Other is identified. If the Spirit is the power of liberating love emerging from within the dynamic power relations in concrete situations, then she lures but never coerces, persuades but never constrains, beckons but never compels. Indeed, to coerce, constrain, or compel would be to fundamentally contradict the nature of love. Moreover, precisely as liberating love the "otherness" of the Spirit is experienced as the gracious lure of superior moral and spiritual resources for the journey to wholeness and selfhood (see Wallace 1996:59).

Furthermore, since the Spirit is always already insinuated in the polyphonic and often conflictual dynamic of relations of power that characterize concrete historical contexts, the Spirit’s power is never unilateral, and thus never coercive. Indeed, as we saw earlier, the gracious identity of the divine Other in
a concrete, historical situation is always a product of both the interpreter’s creative imagination and the "new modes of being in the world that the [biblical] text imagines" (Wallace 1993:239). The non-coercive logic of the perichoretic relation between the Spirit’s reality and the interpreter thus produces an interpretive context in which the interpreter in freedom both creates and discovers. As Wallace puts it so well: "Insofar as the one who wagers religious hope discovers novel possibilities for existence within the imaginative discourses of a religious tradition, she is also empowered to invent a life that is a recovery of those very values and possibilities" (Wallace 1995:59).

If my case for God’s transcendence so far holds, then the following conclusion would appear plausible: Pace Rorty, the theologian has resources for construing God’s transcendent reality in a postmetaphysical register that is radically historicist, and for characterizing the logic of that transcendent relation in a way that does not impugn human freedom and flourishing—on that contrary, it promotes and enables these desiderata.

IV

It is unlikely that my postmetaphysical, radically historicist construal of the Christian God would satisfy Rorty—even if it could be shown that this model accounts adequately for Rorty’s conceptual and ethical objections to transcendence. For, fundamentally, the offense to Rorty’s moral sensibilities is the Christian’s desire for a transcendent deity at all. Indeed, Rorty’s hope is for a thoroughly secular utopia in which "no trace of divinity remained" (Rorty 1989:45)—one in which all longings for transcendence would have died the death of "benign neglect" (see Rorty 1995:195). This hope is fueled by Rorty’s wager that "a world of pragmatic atheists . . . would be a better, happier world than our present one" (195).

To call Rorty’s hope for a world of "pragmatic atheists" a wager is important; for it helps us see that the existential choice of what values, principles, and practices should orient one’s life—the choice of what Rorty calls one’s "final vocabulary"—is not settled by a context-transcending theory of truth or rationality. Indeed, as Rorty has pointed out, there is no "noncircular argumentative recourse" (Rorty 1989:73) when it comes to defending the fundamental assumptions of one’s final vocabulary. However, while both Rorty and the Christian theologian can certainly provide good reasons for committing themselves to their respective final vocabularies, as good pragmatists they also know that trying to decide the utility of incommensurable forms of life at this level of abstraction is futile and counterproductive. They both know that, ultimately, the "difference that makes a difference" resides not in the coherent logic of a theory, but in the practical fecundity of concrete forms of life: Do these forms of life foster solidarity and create concrete communities of freedom and flourishing? This question transposes the choice between emulating Rorty’s strong poet and continuing to wager one’s existence on the possibilities and values of a religious tradition into a pragmatic inquiry about the moral and spiritual resources of these two forms of life to enable meaningful lives. Transferring the dialogue to a practical one about consequences and ends, may embolden the theologian to inquire whether "[b]eyond Rorty’s Enlightenment dedivinization of the world for the sake of human flourishing, . . . an apprenticeship to the new modes of being projected by the divine Other might not be a more authentic mode of liberation than Rortian self-creation" (Wallace 1996:61). As in Rorty’s case, this musing too is just a wager. But, for the Christian at least, it is a wager that solicits an act of fragile trust and hope—and an invitation to risk a life heeding the call of an enigmatic Spirit who blows where she wills.

And that is a risk I am prepared to take—at least for now.
Hendrik R. Pieterse
Nashville, Tennessee

Sources Cited


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