A transcendental critique of some assumptions of the "silencing-of-Christian-voices" lobby

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Abstract

Christian voices in public are currently (as was often the case in the past) confronted with the accusation that it has behind it a cruel ethos. A well-known spokesperson for the current attack is the American philosopher Richard Rorty. This article explores and questions his alternative paradigm of secularism. A first reconnoitring into Rorty's paradigm: Although he demands that all public debate should take place devoid from religious sources, he cannot avoid appealing to something similar, namely to follow a radical form of ordinary life as ultimate direction for his vision for public life. A related exploration: As revelatory source Rorty reverts to the notion of consensus. Consensus, however, as is the case with religious sources, cannot be assumed to harbour undisputable knowledge. We thus have to make our peace with a pluralism that has room for as many voices as possible. A third exploration: Consensus is seen as authoritative because of the motive of human self-creation, which assumes the rejection of the (also) Christian notion of a given law for things. Rorty nevertheless reverts back to given norms in his thinking; he has to combat cruelty with assumptions that are deeply rooted in Christianity. It would thus be self-defeating to try to silence Christianity by trying to point out that a specific Christian accent is not valid because it proceeds from invalid assumptions – secular voices make use of similar kinds of assumptions.

Key words:

Richard Rorty, Nicholas Wolterstorff, religion, direction, Christianity, secularism, ordinary life, sources, consensus, self-creation, cruelty.

Opsomming

Christelike stemme in die openbaar word tans (soos in die verlede dikwels die geval was) gekonfronteer met die beskuldiging dat dit 'n wrede etos veronderstel. 'n Bekende woordvoerder vir die huidige aanval is die Amerikaanse filosoof Richard Rorty. Hierdie artikel ondersoek en bevraagteken sy alternatiewe paradigma van sekularisme. 'n Eerste verkenning van Rorty se paradigma: Alhoewel hy eis dat alle openbare debat sonder godsdienstige bronne moet plaasvind, kan hy nie vermy om iets soortgelyks te doen nie, naamlik om 'n radikale vorm van die gewone lewe as uiteindelike rigting vir sy visie vir die openbare lewe te volg. 'n Verwante verkenning: As openbaringsbron maak Rorty staat op die term konsensus. Konsensus, soos die geval is met religieuse bronne, kan egter nie aanvaar word as onbetwiste kennis nie. Ons moet dus vrede maak met 'n pluralisme wat ruimte bied vir soveel stemme as moontlik. 'n Derde verkenning: Konsensus word gesien as gesaghebbend op grond van die motief van menslike selfskepping, wat die verwerping van die (ook) Christelike idee van 'n gegewe wet vir dinge veronderstel. Rorty beroep hom egter op gegewe norme; wreedheid moet bestry word met aannames wat diep in die Christendom gewortel is. Dit sou dus selfondermynend wees om die Christendom te probeer muilband met 'n poging om die veronderstellings vir 'n spesifiek Christelike aksent uit te wys as nie-geldend – sekulêre stemme maak van soortgelyke soorte veronderstellings gebruik.

1. Introduction

Is there a place in South Africa for the Christian worldview in public spaces? What is meant by this question? Wolterstorff's (2012:298-299) description of "freedom for religion" gives some indication. For some, he says, "religion does not go beyond ... religious activities". There are however, people for whom "exercise of their religion goes well beyond". Wolterstorff has in mind activities like "day school ... university ... politics ... business ... medicine ... sports ... charity, and so forth". Thus, "freedom *for* religion" is to become in a comprehensive way religiously involved in public institutions and practices.

The South African constitution seemingly makes room for such comprehensive religiously distinctive activities in public spaces[1]. However, as is the case with the United States of America, the scope of what is meant by freedom *for* religion is by far not an agreed upon issue in South Africa. In fact, the country is currently only at the start of a legal debate on the question whether religion should be restricted in severe ways or allowed to more fully integrate in public discourse and practice by those who so chooses[2].

By asking about room for the Christian worldview, it is assumed that a plurality of paradigms is possible to function in the public sphere. Wolterstorff (2012:300-301) argues that there is a central reductionist "Idea" that makes sense of ideas about freedom for religion that gives direction in his own country, the United States. Central to this reductionism are the concepts rationality and universality. This study will not contribute to an elaborative argument for the pluralism Wolterstorff has in mind in place of the rationality *cum* universality slogan. The aim is rather to question[3] the assumptions of the objection against Christian voices in the public sphere.

A transcendental critical method[4] will be used for this critique. Although atheists and secularised theists would call themselves "non-religious" (at least in affairs outside the church) and are thus seemingly neutral, they (apparently unaware) make use of an assumption that can be called one's 'ultimate direction'[5], a characteristic central but not exclusive to the "big" religions

1 Cf. the Constitution of the Republic of South Africa (1996) in its Bill of Rights section 15, especially subsection (2) Section 15 stipulates that "(1) Everyone has the right to freedom of conscience, religion, thought, belief, and opinion. (2) Religious observances may be conducted at state or state-aided institutions, provided that (a) those observances follow rules made by the appropriate public authorities; (b) that they are conducted on an equitable basis; and (c) attendance at them is free and voluntary."

2 The question came recently forcefully to the fore in the so-called OGOD case, i.e. Case no: 29847/2014 of the High Court of South Africa (2017).

3 See Popper's (1963:37ff.) advice on falsification and Plantinga's (1992:295,308ff.) distinction between Christian philosophical criticism and a positive Christian philosophy.

4 The concept "transcendental" is since Kant well-known in philosophy as a way to describe how certain fundamental a priori concepts enable or make possible our knowledge of the world outside the human self (Grayling, 1992:506). However, a transcendental investigation has a wider application than merely epistemology. It can also be used as a philosophical method to investigate the roots of ideas.

5 Mouw and Griffioen (1993:89) explain the concept *directional* (as it will be used in this article) as follows; "thinkers are inclined to speak of the 'religious' where we refer to the 'directional'". They acknowledge that some will use religion in a "very general sense of someone's orientation toward the divine reality". However, there is also a very general but "much narrower" use of the term *religion* that will not be used in this article. This narrow use refers "to specifically religious institutions ... and concrete worshipping practices" and

(Christianity, Islam, Judaism etc.). This article will not be a comprehensive analysis of secularist views but merely an attempt to reconstruct and criticise some assumptions that support this ultimate direction. The article will focus especially on the views of the philosopher Richard Rorty – who wants a ban (at least during a particular radical phase in his thinking) on expressing the Christian perspective in public.

2. The cruelty accusation

Secularists will make the point that Christianity has a long heritage (since Constantine the Great, Roman emperor 306 to 337 A.D.) of treating those outside this confession unjustly and that many Christians are still dehumanising those who live in ways that depart from Christian orthodoxy. In the South African context this accusation can recently be sensed in the so-called OGOD-case against public schools that still have religious practices. The evaluative suggestion is that the Christian paradigm should be severely restricted.[6]

The tactics of this moderate silencing of Christians in the American situation is, according to Marsden (2015:21-22), to lump together evangelicals and militant fundementalists as if there is no significant difference between the two groupings. Opinionated evangelicals are not welcome in academia because when liberal academia are confronted with even mild evangelicals they see before themselves "fundamentalist culture warrior'" and thus people who automatically severely resist current liberal political causes like "same-sex marriages". Marsden warns that liberals "may claim to be moral relativists" but on a number of "politically charged issues, they are moral absolutists". This intolerance is for instance visible in the hiring practices of universities. Marsden agrees that this intolerance does not put "liberals in a special category" – one can assume that evangelicals and conservatives will do the same when they are in the power position. The implication of

"address a narrower scope than the plurality of basic religious directions, in which the overall patterns of our lives are displayed".

6 Although the applicants ostensibly have only equal treatment as objective, the demand from the applicants in the South African High Court Case no. 2984/2014 (2017:3-4) goes a bit deeper: They ask that it should be "declared as a breach of the National Religion Policy and as unconstitutional a range of defined propositions, including promoting only one religion in favour of others; associating itself with any particular religion; requiring of a learner to disclose (to the school) adherence to any particular religion; and permitting religious observances during school programs". A genuflection is thus made towards pluralism, but all these practices are also deemed "coercive and abusive". The sense is that anything distinctively Christian will be targeted.

Marsden's remark is that both secularists and evangelicals need to be more careful and nuanced in their judgements and practices.

Unnuanced liberal intolerance is visible when Rorty deals with the existence of Christian voices in public. He is already confronted with the unacceptability of his more outrages claims by well-known Christian thinkers (e.g. Nicholas Wolterstorff, Stanley Hauerwas and Cornel West)[7]. I nevertheless think there is still a need to also use the transcendental strategy in the dissension with Rorty. This would be to give a step back from his direct conflict with Christian voices in order to identify and evaluate his motives in participating in this culture war and point out that his viewpoints coincides in their nature with that of Christians.

Rorty accuses Christians for instance of persisting with homophobia because of their sadism and greed. Their position, says Rorty (2003:143-147), is motivated by "sadistic impulses". The problem with Christianity "is not the possibility of religious war, but the sort of everyday peacetime sadism that uses religion to excuse cruelty". Rorty acknowledges that some Christians "sometimes try to distinguish themselves from the gay-bashers by saying that even though sodomy is an abomination, Christians must be kind and merciful". But, says Rorty, "gays and lesbians ... persist in thinking that if the churches would stop quoting Leviticus and Paul on the subject of sodomy ... there would be fewer gay-bashers around". Rorty thinks that the only reason for this "exclusivist bigotry" is that it "brings money and power to ecclesiastical organizations". To support his suggestion that even moderate and kindly inclined Christians must be looked at with suspicion, he mentions the remark sporadically made by some Christians during the Nazi era that, "though of course Hitler was a bad thing, it cannot be denied that the Jews did kill Christ". Rorty seemingly wants to warn moderate Christians that they have an image of not doing anything to fend of severe instances of cruelty.

Christians will have to acknowledge that the perception about them, and that indeed the attitude of many believers, do not reflect the law of neighbourly love towards people who differ – an attitude which is demanded in Scripture. Although Rorty's nuance-less evaluation of the Christian religion is questionable, this investigation will not defend the history of Christianity but will rather look into the background framework of Rorty's arguments. An important building block in this background will be to understand his liberalism of anti-cruelty for which he refers to Judith Shklar.

7 The critical voices against Rorty are going well beyond Christian dissidence. I am indebted to one of the reviewers of this article who point out that these voices are reflected in the dissertation of Julia Clare.

3. Background to Rortyan anti-cruelty

In Judith Shklar’s case against cruelty one can sense a radical secularism. Shklar (1984:9) declares that her’s is “a judgement made from within the world in which cruelty occurs as part of our normal private life and our daily public practices. By putting it unconditionally first, with nothing above us to excuse or to forgive acts of cruelty, one closes of any appeal to any order other than that of actuality”. She acknowledges that anti-cruelty “is perfectly compatible with Biblical religiosity”, but she remains sceptical because “the habits of the faithful do not differ from those of the faithless in their brutalities ... To put cruelty first therefore is to be at odds not only with religion but with normal politics as well”. She (1984:11) added to this her indebtedness to Montaigne who claimed that “Christianity had done nothing to inhibit cruelty. He could not even admit that his hatred of cruelty was a residual form of christian morality. On the contrary, putting cruelty first exacerbated his antagonism to an established religiosity that seemed to him hypocritical at best, and actively cruel at worst”. A first observation about Shklar’s position is her (1984:2-3,8) hiearchy of sins according to which cruelty is “a distinct and unmitigated evil” in itself and not because it is a rebellion against God or any other norm higher than human life. For Christians the sin against the divine order is the supreme criterion but for secularists like herself, the cruelty of humans against each other is “unconditionally the *summum malum*”.

A second observation and point of departure for Shklar (1984:2) is the perception that “we can live neither with nor without” cruelty in the ordinary way of life. One can argue that this makes cruelty both a norm and a transgression. For Shklar this “put us face to face with our irrationality”. This leaves Shklar (and ultimately Rorty also) with an unexplained paradox. Shklar (1984:8,11) nevertheless identifies Christianity as a perpetrator of this dubiousness because Christianity does not transform Christians in non-cruel beings. In its place she therefore wants to promote a “secularist humanitarianism” which, at least, sees cruelty as the *summum malum*.

A Christian critique could argue, firstly, that if sin against the divine order is on top of any list of sins, and if this order exclude cruelty, it would mean that ordinary sins (like cruelty) is indeed not acceptable – there is no dubiousness about this. Secondly, to operate with an all-inclusive sin against the divine order as the *summum malum* (as Christians do) will undermine the idea of a hierarchy of ordinary sins. Cruelty is not more important than hypocrisy, snobbery, betrayal, misanthropy and similar sins that Shklar has in mind. Thirdly, one can ask why she operates with a *summum malum* as ground motive? If any ground motive or ethos should be on top, from a Christian

point of view, it would rather include a positive statement, a *summum bonum*. Such a statement would assume the sovereignty, including the creational and redeeming work, of Christ. If any sovereign of the same nature can be identified in the case of Shklar's secularist humanitarianism, it is probably the freedom-obsessing and self-creating human being – who is (also from a point of a secular "actuality") the author of both cruelty and anti-cruelty. Clare (2010:32) indeed mentions *en passant* that underlying Shklar's (1984:2) view "cruelty ... is often utterly intolerable for liberals, because fear destroys freedom", in which the notion "*often* ... suggests that ... there are occasions on which a liberal might find cruelty tolerable". However, "it is not their abhorrence of cruelty that defines liberals here, but the reason they give for that abhorrence, namely their attachment to freedom".

Overtly for Shklar cruelty is not merely a vice amongs vices – it is a *summum malum*. One can even go as far as to say that it indicates for her a comprehensive ethos or ground motive. This will be important when we want to understand Rorty's link with the liberalism of Shklar. Rorty too does not see anti-cruelty merely as the core of the political ideology liberalism, but as an encompassing ethos for modern secularist life (Clare, 2010:33-35).

Liberalism, also that of Rorty, that declares cruelty the *summum malum* radically reject religion per definition. Divine cruelty and the cruelty that belongs to this ethos, is inseparable to the core of Christianity. For this reason there should be a radical separation with religion. It is against this background that Rorty's attack against Christianity needs to be placed.

A Reformational reaction to this worldview should acknowledge the very dark side to Christianity (a history that includes cruelty) and then refer back to an Augustinian view of the absolute depravity of the human being and therefore a need for grace. This, however, is an answer that Shklar and Rorty will not swallow because their secularist humanitarianism in the end does not only operate with a *summum malum* but also with a *summum bonum* which puts the self-creative human being on top of the hierarchy of existence. Human beings do not need divine grace. They will have to find the good in themselves to reform the evil in our world.

Clare's (2010:35-38) evaluation that "Rorty leaves the notion of cruelty itself quite vague" is significant in this regard. Clare (2010:38) argues that "the only significant way in which Rorty adds substance to his notion of cruelty is to draw attention to one particular form of cruelty – namely humiliation". But, she argues, if Rorty for instance resists white supremacists (and one can add his evaluation of what he sees as Christian homophobia), Rorty himself runs "the risk of being cruel, humiliating them and thereby causing

them to suffer". The point Clare (2010:39) wants to make is "that we need a more diverse moral vocabulary than merely the single word, cruelty ... and we simply need more, and more detailed descriptions and re-descriptions".

The diagnosis for the inconsistency in Rorty's use of anti-cruelty I shall develop below will not proceed by making more detailed distinctions about cruelty. Rorty's inconsistency with one version of cruelty stands as it is. If a more detailed distinction emphasises evil and not merely one manifestation of it namely cruelty, the paradox may become less severe. However, the point Clare mentions *en passant* about secularists namely their attachment to a secularist version of freedom which will necessarily include a severe form of (individual and communal) self-creationism, seems to me a more promising point to start diagnosing the problems in current secularist anti-cruelty liberalism.

4. Ordinary life

Rorty's argument to silence Christian voices assumes the typical modernist construct of a split between the public and the private in which he (1999:170) confines religion along with family-ties, love lives and poem-writing to the "private" and "non-political". A number of (related) critical questions can be asked about this construct: Is the split between private and public consistent with Rorty's mantra of not being a dualist?[8] Is Rorty consistent in his categorisation of aspects like our love lives to the private sphere? Can the labelling of family-ties and love lives as *private* really be upheld in the modern world? If our love and family lives are labelled *public*, the question can then be asked: Why should we treat religious convictions as private?

It is already clear that according to its own terms recent modernity also undermines this stark split.[9] For many moderns family life and sexuality take a significant importance – to such an extent that it undermines the modern idea that these aspects of life should be confined to the private. Charles Taylor (1989:211-212) explained that for ancients *ordinary life* had

8 Rorty (1999:xvi-xvii,xx) identifies his enemy as Greek dualisms like the one between "Found or made?" (Rorty, 1999:xx). Wolterstorff (2012:44) also questions the inconsistency in Rorty about being a non-dualist but not when it comes to the private – public split.

9 My own view is that the typical modern split between private and public is a simplification of a much more complicated situation. One should at least operate with the notion that there exist multiple spheres of life (state, education, businesses etc.) that exists around clearly identifiable functions (justice, formation, economic life etc.) in our lives as human beings together. Each of these spheres are hallmarked by a more or a less openness to and involvement of other human beings – thus the notions of public and private.

to be distinguished from *the good life*, with the latter in a hierarchical higher position and ordinary life in an "infrastructural role". For the ancients a life focused on mainly the ordinary life is "not a fully human one". The good life was about "theoretical contemplation and participation as a citizen in the polity". A motive, which came with the Reformation and profoundly shaped modernity, is called by Taylor the "affirmation of ordinary life". This ethos is "concerned with production and reproduction, that is, labour, the making of the things needed for life, and our life as sexual beings, including marriage and the family ... basically they englobe what we need to do to continue and renew life". With the entrance of the affirmation of ordinary life, all so-called higher activities were looked at critically. For instance, the scientific revolution rejected the higher ideal of "theoria" (i.e. contemplation of the cosmic order) as "being vain and misguided, as a presumptuous attempt to escape the hard work of detailed discovery". In its place we need to do science in a utilitarian way "for benefit and ostentation, or ... practical enablements".

It is clear from Taylor's portrayal that ancient thinking aimed at a hierarchical division (dualism) between ordinary life and the good life. The question can be asked whether the modern turn-around of the relationship between these two 'lives' get rid of the hierarchy and dualism. Is it not rather the case that all emphasis is now on an ordinary life without the 'higher'? Ordinary life has become a mere secularist naturalism and with that, the good life has become a naturalist ordinary life.

Rorty (1999:170-171) says he does not want to trivialise the life of reproduction (ordinary life), but wants to emphasise that it is not "relevant to public policy". Nevertheless, the modern emphasis on erotic love (ordinary life) leaves a significant mark on Rorty's public moral focus – which can be seen in his arguments for freedom of sexual orientation. Rorty (and probably many other believers in the modern private – public split) finds himself caught in-between the ancient hierarchical dualism and the modern reduction of all of life to a naturalist view of the ordinary life. He very much still thinks like the ancients that the life of a citizen in the public sphere is of foremost importance. However, his drift is towards an affirmation of ordinary life, to emphasise *this* life, the secular life, which emphasises identities and practices of production and reproduction.

The suggestion that the modern emphasis moves specifically erotic love to a central public position is not far-fetched. Marcuse's arguments in the sixties and seventies already emphasised this[10]. Recently Luc Ferry (2013:18)

10 See Marcuse's Eros and civilization (1970).

argues that “we have entered ... a new definition of the good life as the loving life ... in which love has transfigured everyday life and given meaning to existence”. He (2013:35) labels it a “second humanism, after the period of deconstruction of the first humanism”. What does Ferry (2013:1) mean by love? His answer: “Although love is ... as old as humanity ... its emergence within the modern family ... the shift from arranged marriage ... to marriage chosen freely ... for the flourishing of love ... has changed the tenor of our lives”. He adds that this change is “not just in the private sphere. Art and politics have also been profoundly altered by this change” – one can speak of the “impact of these revolutions in private life on the public sphere”.

If this movement of erotic love from the private to the public sphere has become common practice, it can be asked why religion should remain private. In fact, should it not be argued that religion is also part of our public (good) life? Again, Ferry’s comments on the issue seems to confirm the suggestion. Why the need for a new answer to the question of the good life? Because, Ferry (2013:36-37) says, now “love renews the question of our relations to the sacred ... it leads to a making sacred of the other, a transcendence of the beloved, which nonetheless remains completely circumscribed within the sphere of immanence to humanity”.

Although Ferry’s secularist sacralisation of the beloved and reduction of the religious relationship to a relation with fellow human beings will be rejected from a Christian point of view, he confirms that religion can be part of the so-called public sphere. This, as Marsden (2015:20) remarks, would be better than the “liberal convention of posing as the neutral observer”. It will make privatisation of religion obsolete and gives us “another richer way to promote equity in public intellectual life”. Therefore, “inclusive pluralism should recognize not only race, class, gender, sexual orientation, etc., but also religious differences”.

Even Rorty will in the end have to agree with this inclusion of religion in what we now see as the ordinary life. His tone is anyway not different from what one will hear amongst some Christians. Rorty (2003:142) for instance is of the opinion that the sense of being part of something powerful that members of a church have, should be substituted by an “increased sense of participation in the advance of humanity – theists and atheists together, shoulder to shoulder – toward the fulfilment of social ideals”. In the centre of (this anti-pluralistic) “sense” of a unified human direction Rorty sees “social justice”, which should be seen in place of the “need for religion”, “to hope for pie in the sky”, or the “temptation for the poor to murder the rich”. The remarks of Rorty, of course harbours intolerance to directional plurality in

the same way that post-Constantine Christians formulated it. In a self-critical moment Rorty (2003:142) acknowledges that the "social ideals we secular humanists champion are often cast in religious terms". But he immediately hopes that secular ideals "will eventually cease to be so stated" because this simply "gives aid and comfort to ecclesiastical organizations, and thus to religious exclusivism". Nevertheless, the sense that Rorty finds himself, especially with his emphases on ordinary life and social justice, on the same level as some intolerant religious voices, lingers.

It can be remarked that the 'ordinarification' of the public ethos can also be interpreted in the opposite direction than that of secularisation. The original intention of the Reformation was to make religious conviction part of ordinary life. Religious beliefs should not be part of a pretended 'higher' sphere that only belongs to theology and the church. This making of religion part of ordinary life is what Ferry does, and ideologies like Nazism, Fascism and Communism did unashamedly – their secularist ideologies were cast in a kind of religious tone and practiced with a comprehensive implication as do most religions. Rorty is also on this way.

5. Sources

In this section an important paradox in the radical secular paradigm, which wants to exclude religion from the public sphere and which Rorty also subscribes to, will be explored.

In a secular world (the current popular appearance of ordinary life) no extra-natural forces or sources are acknowledged. Rorty confirms this with the claim that there are no sources to appeal to in making evaluations in public spaces like politics and academia. Rorty (1999:171) acknowledges that Christians want a public sphere that is "open to religious and non-religious argument". He thinks this is an unjust demand because he "doubt[s] that we'll get anywhere arguing theism vs. atheism". We should rather try to see "if we have shared premises" if we want to solve public issues. The implication of this demand is that the discussion should take place in a purely secular tone and excludes God and His will from the picture.

It is nevertheless doubtful whether Rorty's proposal will create a neutral space and evade irreconcilable differences. In Rorty's (1999:171) view examples of sources for knowledge are documents like scientific and scholarly reports and theories, the writings of well-known philosophers, high court proceedings and decisions, and religious scriptures and proceedings and decrees of religious

groupings and officials. Of these, he evaluates especially religious sources negatively as a "conversation-stopper". Theists, he argues, usually react to some controversial issue with the notion that their viewpoint is required by their understanding of God's will to be found in the Bible for protestants, while decrees from the Pope or tradition can be added in the case of Roman Catholics. It should be noted that Rorty identifies a meta-source (God's will) behind the visible religious sources (the Bible, decrees from the Pope etc.), which is the real target of his gag-order.

In politics Rorty (2003:141-143) initially insisted that "democratic societies should ... think of themselves as having exchanged toleration for an assurance that believers would leave their religion at home when discussing political questions in public". He acknowledges that he reconsidered this position after engaging with Wolterstorff. Rorty thinks Wolterstorff is "right to insist that both law and custom should leave him free to say, in the public square, that his endorsement of redistributionist social legislation is a result of his belief that God, in such passages as Psalm 72, has commanded that the cause of the poor should be defended". Wolterstorff (2012:302) is of the opinion that Rorty changed his position from wanting religion to be on "a tight leash ... but some fifteen years ago he conceded that there was nothing to the charge that ... religious belief as such is irrational". It can be noted, however, that the earlier Rorty (1999:172-173) already acknowledged that liberal atheists like himself are not always consistent when saying that believers have no right to base their political views on their religious faith, whereas atheists have every right to base theirs on Enlightenment philosophy. Rorty also granted that his tradition cannot claim that the voices of outstanding liberal philosophers or the "will of the Supreme Court of the United States" are more applicable to moral decisions than the will of God. Wolterstorff (2012:44-46) observes that the real point Rorty make is that a discussion has to stop somewhere and that the limit he has in mind is "one's circle of fellow believers" whether they are fellow Christians or fellow Darwinian pragmatists.

It needs to be remarked that Rorty's post-Wolterstorff position is not simply one of making more room for religious sources. The early Rorty (1999:172) already thought that more or less space for religion is not the point of his struggle. For him the point is that the only thing liberal theory has to show is that some claim or decision in a pluralist public sphere is "best made by public discussion in which voices claiming to be God's, or reason's, or science's, are put on a par with everybody else's". This sounds like a fair pluralism that Christian voices can also subscribe to. However, Rorty added that the only thing religious arguments can offer is "religious sources" for beliefs. He therefore insisted that "the fact that one of us gets his premises in church and

the other in the library is, and should be, of no interest to our audience in the public square". He then made an important inference: In fact, "we should be suspicious of the very idea of a 'source of moral knowledge'".

In his later reconsideration Rorty (2003:143) still maintains that it can happen that some Christian "says that his reason for opposing legislation that permits same-sex marriage ... is his commitment to the belief that Scripture ... trump[s] all the arguments in favor of such legislation". In this case, Rorty argues, "I cannot help feeling that, though the law should not forbid someone from citing such texts in support of a political position, custom *should* forbid it". Rorty (2003:147-148) therefore argues that the one condition he wants to insist on is that "religious believers should not justify their support of or opposition to legislation *simply* by saying 'Scripture says' or 'Rome has spoken; the matter is closed'". Thus: "What should be discouraged is *mere* appeal to authority".

Does Rorty remain consistently suspicious of the idea of sources and mere authority? He (2003:148-149) acknowledges that a mere appeal to authority is "not confined to the religious". He therefore reformulates himself by saying "instead of saying that religion was a conversation-stopper, I should have simply said that citizens of a democracy should try to put off invoking conversation-stoppers as long as possible". A conversation-stopper will be "citing unarguable first principles, either philosophical or religious". Thus, as Wolterstorff remarked, the viewpoint of the later Rorty acknowledges that an *unarguable first principle* or *conversation stopper* cannot be escaped.[11] This raises the question about what Rorty's own *first principle* is. What is his own final authority?

6. Consensus

The traces of this authority can be sensed when Rorty (2010:419-420) suggests that all authority in politics and scholarship is "custom". He thinks both Scriptures and science get their "revocable authority from social agreement". The implication of this for Rorty is that "non-theists make better citizens of democratic societies than theists" because the recognition of God's

11 One of the reviewers of the article makes the important point that (and I quote this anonymous reviewer) one should "grant Rorty the importance of postponing the conversation stoppers. There should at first be an extensive search for common ground, for transcendental points of reference, mutual internal critiques and introduce the conversation stoppers only once the avenues for a mutually understood common ground has indeed reached its provisional limits. This is also the Dooyeweerd picture of communication with alternative positions".

will as authority cannot be reconciled with the assumption that "agreement among human beings is the source of all norms".

Why this argument of Rorty for a radical anthropocentric source of normativity? A non-human authority, Rorty (2010:420-422) answers, presupposes knowledge "independent of human needs and interests". It envisions a metaphysical kind of knowledge, which is not available to us. What is available is "short-term goals such as getting the structure of the human genome, or the financial situation of a corporation". This is knowledge where humans are "in the picture all the time" because we create this knowledge.

For Rorty radical social constructivism is the ultimate source of knowledge. An epistemological test for our beliefs, he (1999:173) says, is to ask the question whether they can "gain the assent" of all persons. This is the importance of "consensus". Religious people do not lose much in the public square when they have to present their arguments in "purely secular terms". The latter demand only means that they have to drop "reference to the source of the premises of their arguments". But what if we gain consensus that progress in politics and science is only possible if we ultimately rely on dissension. Democracy can, after all, not function without an agonic discussion and science cannot get nearer to truth if it does not listen to a plurality of voices.

Rorty (2003:144) claims that the struggle is not "between reason and unreason", because there "is nothing called 'reason' that stands above such struggles". He remarks that on "the subject of the vacuity of epistemological foundationalism, Wolterstorff and I are as one" in the conviction that "there is no particular ground for believing that all reasonable and rational people will eventually come to agree". At this point Rorty seems, paradoxically, not to insist on consensus as ultimate source[12]. It can thus be argued that Rorty believes somewhat in consensus while Wolterstorff completely dismisses not only reason but also consensus as ultimate "control belief". Wolterstorff (2004, location 744-758) very strongly believes that "our Christian faith should function as guide and critic in our practice of ... disciplines".

Wolterstorff (2004:758-777) argues his dismissal of consensus with reference to Descartes' problem with "the diversity of human opinion". Descartes grew up with a thorough perception that "his teachers disagreed with each other". This indicated for Descartes that something was missing, and that the missing element was that "the sciences had not yet been set on their proper foundation". This, says Wolterstorff, was "a fateful assumption" because it was the start of the modern conviction that "a true science will gain the

12 Wolterstorff (2012:42) is also of the opinion that Rorty portrays on this point a "tension ... if not contradiction".

consensus of all rational persons ... True science is consensus science".

Wolterstorff (2004:785-797) points out that the "whole Cartesian picture of genuine science has come under powerful attack" since Popper's thesis of *falsification* which implies that consensus "is at best an eschatological hope" and Lakatos' view that "science advances by way of a plurality of tenaciously held-to theories". Wolterstorff (2004:805-803) thinks that Rorty still holds onto the consensus tenet of Cartesian foundationalism. However, says Wolterstorff (2004:808-810), we live in the ruins of Cartesian foundationalism. In its place, we should "see science as the articulation of a person's view of life, in interaction, of course, with the world and with one's fellows". This implies that we "have to start taking seriously the actual pluralism of the academy"[13].

Rorty makes very little room for the Christian perspective because one of his *unarguable first principles* is consensus, which does not really allow a pluralism of worldviews to continue in public space. Despite the fact that Rorty wants to operate without faith beliefs (unarguable first principles) and denies to have any such, consensus functions as such an ultimate belief in his thinking.

In the next section it will be pointed out that Rorty cannot really fall back on the notion of consensus to give the authority to his strong silencing of Christian voices. Consensus is in the end riddled with a subjectivism and relativism that cannot sustain such definite prohibitions.

13 In his discussion with Rorty, Wolterstorff (2012:47) remarks that they did not embark on a public discussion with the assumption that they have shared premises. Moreover, Rorty does not "come even close to living up to his own demand" because he very strongly let his own Darwinian pragmatist point of departure lead him throughout the discussion. Wolterstorff therefore cannot see how we could "limit ... ourselves to common premises when speaking in public". Dooyeweerd also, many years ago, sensed the pluralism and the implication the collapse of Cartesian foundationalism could have for control beliefs at a hidden level in academia. Dooyeweerd (1948:16) remarked that any student of philosophy will find "himself much embarrassed and even disappointed" about the "profound disagreement" between the different schools of philosophy especially about the "most fundamental principles of philosophy". The schools Dooyeweerd has in mind "all profess to be founded solely on purely theoretical and scientific principles" because they all belong to a view that confesses the "autonomy of reason in science". If the latter were true, Dooyeweerd says, it remains "astonishing that they cannot succeed in convincing one another by purely scientific arguments". Dooyeweerd (1948:17) therefore concludes that "theoretical principles" are not the "true starting point" of these philosophical schools and that this starting point is "hidden beneath" their scientific theses. It is therefore important for Dooyeweerd that these "deeper roots" have to be "discovered in order to establish a real contact between philosophic adversaries".

7. Self-creation

Rorty’s support for consensus assumes communal human self-construction or self-creation and thus a radical freedom from anything outside the human self. It will be argued that Rorty’s ban on cruelty (with which he hammers Christianity) implies that he cannot but acknowledge some given universal standard. This contradiction between his support for self-creation and non-cruelty in Rorty will receive attention in the following two sections.

An ultimate belief in human individual self-creation can be sensed when Rorty (2010:423) introduces the concept “self-reliance”. He makes the link with consensus when he says that “we human beings are answerable only to one other”. He wants the human being to be as independent as possible. He therefore adds: “We are not responsible either to the atoms or to God”. The implication is that for Rorty self-creation is both an individual and communal effort.

He nevertheless (Rorty, 1999:118) suggests a tension: “There is only the shaping of an animal into a human being by a process of socialization”. Rorty insists that this socialisation should be augmented by “the self-individualization and self-creation of that human being through his or her own later revolt against that very process”. Rorty (1999:114-115,126) points to two one-sided positions in the self-creation process: The radical left “talks first about freedom” (i.e. freedom for individual self-creation). The new generation should be freed from “convention”, the “old familiar truths” and “prejudice”, which they pick up in the socialisation process. It is society that deprives the youth of freedom and of their “essential humanity” by moulding them into “cogs in a vast, inhuman socioeconomic machine”. Those on the political right, on the other hand, will describe conventions as “self-evident truths”. Thus; “once the soul is afire with love of truth, freedom will follow”. He then adds a significant remark: Freedom consists for the latter grouping in realising “one’s *true* self”.

One may get the impression that Rorty is navigating in the direction of a dialectical synthesis between individual freedom and social consensus. This, however, is not the important point for Rorty. He has another fish to fry namely the reference to a true self. Rorty (1999:114-116) sees right and left as only apparently on opposite sides because they share the ideal of an “essential humanity” that is supposed to lead to a “natural connection between truth and freedom”. Rorty (1999:117-118) wants to get beyond this notion of a given essence. He wants to realise a more radical freedom. There is no such thing as a “true self” or “human nature” that needs to be realised

through society or that needs to be saved from the repression of society in the process of education.

For Rorty (1999:117-118) "truth" is not some essence or nature but the result of human (social and individual) construction. With this Rorty radicalises the concept of freedom to mean "self-creation". He does not want to merely settle for a dialectical relation between a given nature (truth) and human freedom, but he wants to see the triumph of radical freedom. To move towards this position, Rorty (1999:xviii) argues that the "central question" to be asked should be about *utility* and not essences or an inherent nature. The "traditional problems of Western philosophy ... were useful at one time, but are no longer useful". It is not appropriate to ask the question "what is really there" because we don't have any "use for the reality – appearance" distinction any more, and also not for "the distinction between the found and the made". He hopes to replace the old distinctions "with the distinction between the more useful and the less useful ... because we have different problems to solve than those which perplexed our ancestors".

Rorty wants to step outside the dialectics of Western thinking. But does he succeed? Is his focus on the *more useful* not an acknowledgement of still being the captive of the dialectics between nature and freedom – that there is a non-freedom that needs to be combated? In a remark he seems to recognise this underlying tension: He wants "a Darwinian account of human beings as animals doing their best to cope with the environment – doing their best to develop tools which will enable them to enjoy more pleasure than pain" (Rorty, 1999:xxiii). Although Rorty thinks he can be free from a nature inherent to the human being, he is clearly not free from a threatening outside nature.

Where does his emphasis on self-creation and utility leave Rorty with regard to the Christian religion? There is for him nothing outside the human being: "I see theism as the resilient enemy of human self-reliance, and metaphysics as merely a surrogate for the traditional theistic insistence that we humans need to abase ourselves before something non-human" (Rorty, 2010:424). His commitment is to the cause of a dominating anthropocentric freedom in a world where "everything we say and do and believe is a matter of fulfilling human needs and interests". This is his "way of formulating the secularism of the Enlightenment ... of saying that human beings are on their own, and have no supernatural light to guide them to the Truth". He wants (like other post-Nietzscheans) "to manage reality rather than to represent it" (Rorty, 1999:xxvii) and thus maintains the Enlightenment assumption of a

threatening force (nature) outside the almighty human being, who is herself without any given nature.

However, Rorty's aim is even more radical than mere control. He has utopian dreams. He rejects the idea that truth, or essence, or nature is something given. What we "call 'true'", he (1999:119-120) says, is "whatever belief results from a free and open encounter of opinions". This consensus, he emphasises, should lead to a "utopian hope", a vision that we shall create human beings that are "unimaginably wonderful, different and free". But can Rorty guarantee that whatever his secular consensus will come up with, will be indeed wonderful and free?[14] Wolterstorff (2012:46) points out that anthropocentric atheism came up with the "murderous" ideologies of Nazism and Communism and then makes the important remark that "pretty much anything that human beings care deeply about can be a menace to freedom – including, ironically, caring deeply about freedom".

8. Are all orders equally arbitrary?

The question that Rorty's argument against an essence (or inner nature raises), is whether he will be able to contain a struggle with only the external enemy *nature*, or will the internal enemy (a human essence) also makes its re-appearance somewhere in Rorty's reconstruction of the human dilemma.

In accordance with his total rejection of an inherent human nature and commitment to radical freedom and self-creation Rorty (1999:116,118,123,125) foresees a synthesis between human socialisation and individualisation in education processes. According to this synthesis *primary and secondary* education will be a "matter of familiarizing the youth with what their elders take to be true" and not "to challenge the prevailing consensus about what is true". It is only at college level that individualisation begins to challenge the "prevailing consensus" where the "inculcation" of a "narrative of freedom" should become the core of the self-creation process (Rorty, 1999:123).[15]

14 Gijsbers (2016:15) points out that Rorty's scepticism does not even want to create a new paradigm with which it can be explained how to criticise the old ways of thinking. This would be to remain within the grip of the old ways of thinking which we should radically leave behind us. Gijsbers' critical question is whether such radical transition is possible. His suggestion is that such a move will create new problems.

15 For this purpose he states that college teachers should not be concerned with training students in their various specialities; they should be granted the chance to "give whatever courses they feel like giving" (Rorty, 1999:122). In fact the "only point in having real live professors around ... is that students need to have freedom enacted before their eyes" (Rorty, 1999:125).

Typical Rorty, the mentioning of inculcation and self-creation in the same context sounds self-contradictory. This sense is strengthened when he adds a second important aim for a college education, namely to "make vivid and concrete the failure of ... America to be what it knows it ought to become" (Rorty, 1999:123). This goal is dubious in the bigger context of his project of self-creation: To become something one *ought* to be, does not sound like self-creation without prescription, essence or inherent nature. Rorty could argue that this *given* is the result of human consensus. If this is the case, his project of freedom will become a shipwreck because of the authoritarianism inherent to a prescription from the larger social consensus.

This tension is also visible in his definition of liberals (which he borrows from Judith Shklar). Rorty uses normative language when he (1993:xv) says a liberal is someone "who thinks that cruelty is the worst thing we do". A liberal is someone who "hopes that suffering will be diminished, that the humiliation of human beings by other human beings may cease". This description suggests a strong sense of some extra-self normativity. Rorty would like to evade this inference: A liberal, he (1993:xv) insists, is someone who cannot give a reason for this demand because she subscribes to "the contingency of her own most central beliefs and desires – someone sufficiently historicist and nominalist to have abandoned the idea that those central beliefs and desires refer back to something beyond the reach of time and chance". Elshtain (2003:151-153) is not impressed with this historicist and nominalist motivation for the "don't-be-cruel rule". She points out that the twentieth century was probably the cruellest century "on a public-political scale". To argue against this background that "liberal societies condemn torture" simply because "the contingencies fell out this way", is not good enough. Rorty needs to face up to the fact that liberal societies are "the heirs of a very strong account – a Hebrew-Christian story – of why cruelty is sinful and must be stopped". Ironically, Judith Shklar (1989:23) traces her kind of liberalism back to the sixteenth century Reformation. She argues that "liberalism's deepest grounding is in place from the first, in the conviction of the[se] earliest defenders of toleration, born in horror, that cruelty is an absolute evil, an offense against God or humanity". To this can be added Wolterstorff's (2012:46) remark that "Yes indeed, religion is sometimes a menace to the freedoms of liberal society. But the full story of how we won the freedoms we presently enjoy would give prominent place to the role of religion in the struggle".

Rorty is not unaware of the tension in his thinking. He acknowledges that if the distinction between finding and making is upheld, he is in trouble. If he claims to have discovered *invention*, he is in danger of contradicting himself.

If he says, on the other hand, he invented invention, he seems "to be being merely whimsical" – "why should anybody take our invention seriously" (Rorty, 1999:xvii-xviii). Taylor (1998:99-100,102) targets the capriciousness in neo-Nietzscheans (Taylor has Foucault and Derrida in mind, but Rorty can be added) by calling it a position according to which all positions and views are equally valid or unvalid and merely based on human "fiat". This view discredits all given normativity and affirms radical anthropocentrism. The reason for this is that neo-Nietzscheans are intensely concerned that "spiritual outlooks" can be linked to all sorts of inequality and the oppression of assumed lesser beings (cf. Rorty's anti-cruelty-rule). But this concern for the well-being of others suggests that neo-Nietzscheans are not consistent in their appeal to discard all normativity and authority from outside the human self. It is significant to listen to Taylor's (1989:99) articulation of this inconsistency: "The point of view from which we might constate that all orders are equally arbitrary … is just not available to us humans. It is a form of self-delusion to think that we do not speak from a moral orientation which we take to be right".[16]

In order to deal with this kind of tension, Rorty argues that postmodern pragmatists like himself should "stop using the distinctions between finding and making, discovery and invention, objective and subjective" and he adds that "perhaps calling ourselves 'social constructionists' is too misleading". Pragmatists rather "must repudiate the vocabulary our opponents use, and not let them impose it upon us" (Rorty, 1999:xviii). It should be recognised that Rorty is rather consistent in his abolishment of traditional notions of truth and normativity. In place of the latter he reverts to power in a process of a slow paradigm revolution. His strategy is the "gradual inculcation of new ways of speaking, rather than of straightforward argument within old ways of speaking" (Rorty, 1999:xix). The kind of questions this will raise: Is his strategy anything more than a belief statement? Does Rorty ultimately function outside a religious motive in his thinking? Wolterstorff (2012:50-52) indeed thinks that the "religious" overtones in Rorty is of a Darwinian

16 Reformational thinkers also makes the point that although postmodernists deny having any grand narrative, they do in fact proceed from such a narrative. Strauss (2004:371,273-274) for instance remarks that postmodernists are deeply self-contradictory because of their overemphasis of the individual and historical sides of reality in the attempt to claim that there are no "conditioning order (universal structures) for ... entities". The irony is that although these postmodernists pretend to be sceptical about the legitimacy of universal claims, the universal claim of this school is precisely that "everyone only has his or her partial story without any 'universal' claim to truth". Bartholomew (2009:96,100) also recognises this paradox: Although postmodernists usually look with scepticism to so-called *grand narratives* they are also, with the confidence of a believer in some *grand narrative* or own world view, very sure that there are no *grand narratives* or world views.

pragmatist nature and that this "religion" ultimately wants its vision of an evolving freedom to be imposed by public institutions (the government especially) on the population in its entirety. The imposing and authoritarian tone is in the end the really important problematic door opened by Rorty. In place of it, and I agree, Wolterstorff (2012:52) would rather settle for a pluralism where we "live together ... without either of us demanding the other [to] shape up so as to conform to our own Sublime".

9. Conclusion

South African society ostensibly makes room for Christian views in public institutions. However, a paradigm with a concomitant set of fundamental beliefs against accommodating Christian voices in public is currently active in the South African public sphere. One of the strong arguments of this paradigm will be an accusation of cruelty against Christianity. The aim of my exploration was not to refute this accusation by arguing systematically for a non-cruel Christian view, or that Christians are in fact not cruel, or to give a definition of cruelty that will excuse Christians, but to point to the ultimate directional motives in the arguments of a prominent spokesperson of the lobby to ban Christianity from the public sphere, the American Richard Rorty, who indeed makes use of the anti-cruelty argument. In the exploration the aim was to get a better picture of the worldviewish motives that inspires or at least allows the quest for silencing Christian voices in public. (If the aim of the arguments against Christianity is not to silence, it is at least to make a nuanced opinion about the Christian view very difficult.) The drift of my own argument is that the anti-Christian voices demand for themselves the same kind of assumptions that Christian voices also want to be valid in the public sphere.

A first more particular remark in this transcendental analysis is that the silencing lobby makes use of a radicalised version of what can be called the *affirmation of ordinary life*. This is a motive that has an origin in (especially Reformational) Christianity itself. In its secularist (Rortyan) guise, this motive develops into a naturalism, which rejects per definition the integration of a source outside this secular world. Rorty's arguments in the ambit of the affirmation of ordinary life are nevertheless pervaded by self-contradictions. One such example is his continued subscription to the liberal division between public and private affairs. According to this dualism, gender and sexuality (ordinary life) as well as religion are private affairs. However, it appears that gender and sexuality are increasingly regarded as public affairs. This transition is also to be noted in the mind of Rorty. The question can therefore

be asked, what makes gender and sexuality so different from religion. Why can the latter not also be considered of public interest? On a more radical tone: Why can religion not be seen as part of ordinary life and public life? If the latter happens, it will indeed be more in line with Rorty’s non-dualism viewpoint and the aim of some Reformational thinkers to put ordinary life on the religious agenda.

A second problematic motive in Rorty’s silencing of Christian voices from the public debate is his demand that *consensus* should be the only source of revelation in the public sphere. Any source outside consensus between human beings must be discontinued. He argued this despite the strong indication that consensus itself is a mirage and that it could be the onset for a neo-authoritarian intolerance. The alternative to the Rortyan silencing of Christian sources should thus be to give as many as possible sources (also Christian sources) a chance to be the starting point for the proposal of solutions for public problems.

A third motive in the Rortyan paradigm is that consensus assumes a radical idea of self-creation. In the Rortyan model, self-creation tries to get rid of any ideas of a given nature and prescriptions – ideas, which on a worldview level, are usually also endorsed by Christians. The Rortyan approach aims to open a door to a pragmatic power politics in which Christian voices can simply be shaken out with the naturalist argument that it refers to things that do not exist. But Rorty’s idea of self-creation finds itself in a world that is perceived to be a purely threatening environment. What do people do who feel threatened? They are looking for stability beyond the self. It also seems to be the case with Rorty. A prescription in the form of non-cruelty re-appears in his thinking. Rorty thus confirms one of the foundations of a Christian view for the public sphere namely the given-ness of normativity that guides our lives.

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