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THE PRAGMATIC
SECULARIZATION OF THEOLOGY

The line of thought common to Blumenberg, Nietzsche, Freud, and Davidson suggests that we try to get to the point where we no longer worship anything, where we treat nothing as a quasi divinity, where we treat everything—our language, our conscience, our community—as a product of time and chance. To reach this point would be in Freud's words, to treat chance as worthy of determining our fate.

—Richard Rorty,
Contingency, Irony, and Solidarity

The time has passed when Theology can reign as queen of the sciences, putting each other voice in its place and articulating, with a conviction approaching certainty, the presuppositions all share. For if all voices indeed share some presuppositions, they would not nowadays be theological. In [the public] arena, a hearing for theological ideas must be won, if they are to get a hearing at all.

—Jeffrey L. Stout,
Ethics After Babel

At the beginning of this century, Professor of Systematic Theology Charles Augustus Briggs of Union Theological Seminary argued that a university that has no theological school is no real university because it has no department comprehensive and entailing enough to unify the various discourses of higher learning. "Theology is and must always be the mother and queen of the sciences" (Briggs, 1897, 39). Augustus H. Strong, the

Baptist theologian at Rochester, gave a rousing amen to Briggs's judgment when he argued that the study of philosophy and science is and ought to be conducted in the service of Christ. He said that if such a course of study excludes or brackets Christian theology, it is intellectually impoverished (Strong, 1907, vii–viii).

We now face the end of this century, and American academic theologians are struggling for legitimacy against other voices that are calling into question intellectually and publicly academic theology. Two such critics are Richard Rorty and Jeffrey L. Stout. They enthusiastically announce that as a major intellectual discourse, metaphysically ordering meaning and value in Western culture and determining the legitimacy of Western morals, theology has come to an end for the properly initiated secularist. The quotations cited at the head of this chapter establish their basic dispositions toward theology. When comparing Briggs and Strong to Rorty and Stout, the latter two thinkers find little that is intellectually viable in the production of academic theologies. The differences among these thinkers signal a world of discourse well lost to my contemporaries. Briggs and Strong participated in a world where American philosophers and theologians shared common assumptions about meaning and value. Such agreement is not likely today.

In this chapter, I examine Rorty's and Stout's critiques of theology. My reading of these thinkers is based on their supposition that there exists no rationally neutral means of rendering theological claims commensurable with the atheistic—and hence for them secular—presuppositions of neopragmatism. In this chapter, I focus on Rorty's and Stout's judgments about theology's fate. I treat their arguments in terms of a secularization of theology that results in the incommensurability of pragmatism and theology (CB, chapter 1, 1). A number of thinkers have discussed Rorty's argument in detail, therefore, my discussion will be quite cursory (CB, chapter 1, 2). However, I will focus on Stout's argument at length.

As stated in the introduction, coming to terms with Rorty and Stout requires unpacking the way each thinker approaches the idea of secularism. Admittedly, secularization is a confused concept in the writings of both thinkers. First, it refers to a historical, intellectual process by which theological ideas are thought to be displaced by some competitive ideas and ideals, in this case, pragmatism. When applied to theology, pragmatic ideas and ideals are then said to render theology, its justifications, and its substantive content unreasonable. Second, secularization signals a process by which theological ideas are expropriated into the meaning of a rival

system of ideas. When this happens, the legitimacy of theology is undermined by a transfer of its content (what Blumenberg calls a "certain transfer of ownership") to its conceptual competitor.

Third, the secular signals a substantive content and the pragmatist's commitment to the idea that radical contingency circumscribes human intentions in knowledge, truth, and morals and exonerates and makes regulative the humanistic values of Western liberal democracy, without appealing to theological justifications or arguments. What unites Rorty and Stout is their consensus that pragmatism is incommensurable with theology because pragmatism—as a secular philosophy—is not translatable into the objective conceptions of metaphysics, grand teleologies, and traditional Western accounts of theism by which Rorty and Stout define theology. For Rorty and Stout, the pragmatic secularization of theology makes theology a doubtful industry.

RORTY AND THE END OF THEOLOGY

Rorty is profoundly silent about theology. It is a silence reminiscent of the absence of God in the writings of George Herbert Mead. In searching for God in the writings of Mead, one quickly comes to see Mead as a thoroughgoing and consistent naturalist whose pragmatism allowed no room for the God hypothesis. Rorty's writings are also comparatively silent and for similar reasons. He is determined to continue the critical project of pragmatism after postanalytic philosophy. However, in *Contingency, Irony, and Solidarity* (1989), there are, nevertheless, a few places where theology is discussed. And these instances are quite revealing of how he understands the pragmatic secularization of theology.

For Rorty, pragmatism not only displaces metaphysics and theology. More accurately, it usurps the legitimate domain left vacant by the displacement of theology. Rorty's critique of theology is coincident with his negative judgments about metaphysics. In telling the story of the rise, reign, and fall of Western metaphysics, Rorty also sees himself as simultaneously telling the tragic story of theology. Theology and metaphysics are the culprits which have fed the pretense toward perfectionism in Western moral and religious thought (Rorty, 1989, p.xii). They are discourses that "ask us to believe that what is most important to each of us is what we have in common with others—that the springs of private fulfill-

ment and of human solidarity are the same" (ibid., xiii). Rorty finds himself in solidarity with thinkers such as Nietzsche, Freud, and Davidson, among others, who regard "metaphysics and theology [as] transparent attempts to make altruism look more reasonable than it is" (ibid.).

Rorty sees himself as carrying out the critical consequences of pragmatism in philosophy, displacing every attempt to account for human actions in nonhistorical terms. According to Rorty, theology depends on justifying itself in terms of a priori foundations in philosophy, religion, and morals. Therefore, a theologian or metaphysician (used synonymously by Rorty) "believes in an order beyond time and chance which both determines the point of human existence and establishes a hierarchy of responsibilities" (ibid., xv). According to Rorty, what lie at the heart of theology and metaphysics are ultimate questions regarding the origins and destiny of human life, questions which are answered in terms of God's existence (ibid., xv).

By contrast, pragmatism categorically rejects such theological self-justifications. It disarms theology of its pretense toward certainty in matters of truth, knowledge, and ultimate human fulfillment. Programmatically, pragmatism calls for a liberation of Western thought both from theology and metaphysics. It seeks the release of thought from the need for nonhistorical foundations by making time and chance regulative and not absolute thought. The secularization of Western intellectual history intends a substitution of "Freedom for Truth as the goal of thinking and of social progress" (ibid., xiii). Rorty proposes that metaphysics and theology are fundamentally justified in terms of truth. And where truth is unsettled by radical contingency, private irony, and linguistic solidarity, metaphysics and theology must suffer the fate of truth. Therefore, if metaphysics is no longer plausible, then theology also is no longer plausible.

In the position once occupied by metaphysical and theological ideas, a secular pragmatism ascends to fill the void. The ascendancy of pragmatism over metaphysics and theology makes possible the resurgence of a "utopian politics [that] sets aside questions about both the will of God and the nature of man and dreams of creating a hitherto unknown form of society" (ibid., 3). Pragmatism renders absurd ideas that propose that human nature and culture cohere insofar as they are oriented toward the purposes of God and/or nature. According to Rorty, theological fictions (kingdom of God, immortality of souls, afterlife, etc.) justify themselves on the

premise that "the world is a divine creation, the work of someone who had something in mind, who Himself spoke some language in which He described His own project" (ibid., 21). Rorty thinks differently.

Rorty's pragmatism advances a nonmetaphysical and nontheological version of intellectual history. His is a pragmatic naturalism that proposes that we view "[our] language and our culture as much a contingency, as much a result of thousands of small mutations finding niches (and millions of others finding no niches) as are the orchids and the anthropoids" (ibid., 16). In Rorty's writings, pragmatic naturalism calls for a thoroughgoing rejection of a priori metaphysics and theology. For him, neither metaphysics nor theology is a plausible source for constituting human meaning at the close of the century. Both are displaced by a secular faith that rejects metaphysics and theological claims as just so many reifications of subjective states: fictions. And the functions that the metaphysical philosopher and theologian once served intellectually and morally are now usurped by iconoclastic social critics. For Rorty, the naturalistic orientation of pragmatism requires the end of theology.

There are good reasons for suspicion regarding Rorty's description of theology. First, his account treats theology in a manner that disregards its historical developments and revisions. Rather, theology is treated as a grand metanarrative that hardly resembles either the modern or the contemporary state of the discipline. Second, Rorty does not provide a substantive delineation of the theologians he has in mind when he defines the disciplinary orientation of theology by a priori logic and antidemocratic sensibilities. Third, his description and rejection of theology appear, in the end, to be motivated by dispositional hostilities. Not much by way of genuine, substantive claims is disclosed about the historical and contemporary production and projects of theology beyond caricatures. However, Stout's argument goes beyond Rorty's, adding to Rorty's neo-pragmatic critique of theology the weight of historical and substantive details.

THE FATE OF THEISTIC MORALS

In *Ethics After Babel* (1988), Stout sees our contemporary debates in moral philosophy as consequences of the demise of metaphysical ontology, foundationalist epistemology, and a loss of

widespread agreement not only in ethics but also in theology (CB, chapter 1, 3). Central to Rorty and Stout is their common rejection of a unified system of ethics that has the capacity for overcoming moral disagreement by some universal or transhistorical principles or laws. Stout argues that faith in such a system is merely beset with the pretensions of Babel. However, Stout thinks that the plurality of morals is a serious problem. And his own position is that it is not a sign of "the confusion of tongues in a society that has fallen from the coherence and community of an earlier age" (Stout, 1988, 7). Neither are we warranted in undue skepticism, nihilism, and relativism in light of moral pluralism. Our contemporary moral situation is related to the plurality of social practices and institutions that we have reason to affirm (*ibid.*, 7). Stout suggests that "[our] moral languages exhibit a division of conceptual labor, each doing its own kind of work. But they also sometimes get in each other's way" (*ibid.*). He finds himself uncomfortable with thinkers who regard the issue of moral pluralism frivolously. Rather, he recognizes that the legitimacy of a great many values that we prize depends on whether our moral claims are true or false.

Stout is always careful to offer an account of pragmatism that resists its identification with moral relativism. However, his own attempts to answer the charge leave an ambivalence between two concepts: justification/warranted assertibility and truth. I suggest that this ambivalence is what leaves Stout a mitigated Rortian pragmatist. Stout rejects the charge that pragmatism necessarily commits one to moral relativism. For Stout, it is a matter of common sense that claims to moral disagreement make sense if "there is some truth of the matter in ethics to disagree over and only if I am prepared to say of people who disagree with me over the truth of moral propositions that it is they who are wrong" (*ibid.*, 24). The difficulty occurs where Stout seems to identify truth with warranted assertibility in his account of belief justification. At one point, he says that "truth is, for us, here and now, warranted assertibility" (*ibid.*, 26). However, he later says that justifications are contextually relative where truth is not (*ibid.*, 28–29). The problem occurs here. Stout insists that there are good reasons for holding truth claims in our contemporary moral debates, but these reasons will be based on contextual wisdom. He also insists that truth claims are not relative in the same ways as are justification claims. What is not clear in Stout's position is what one is to make of truth, since it apparently is connected with justified beliefs but not identified with them.

In a subsequent essay, "On Having a Morality in Common," Stout tries to clear up the ambivalence. He asserts that there is a real conceptual difference between adjudicating moral disagreements, justifying beliefs, and moral truth (Stout, 1993, 228). While Stout is clear that both adjudication and justification are relative to specific contextual conditions, he asserts that truth in ethics is not relative as are either adjudication or justification (*ibid.*). After numerous attempts to clarify the concept of 'truth' that will be acceptable to him without committing himself to something like absolute knowledge, Stout remains vague about its pragmatic meaning. He insists only that truth behaves differently than adjudication and justified beliefs (*ibid.*). To be sure, truth behaves with a peculiar permanence, simplicity, certainty, and universality that is not characteristic of either adjudication or justified beliefs (*ibid.*). What is not clear is how these traditional philosophical marks of truth are compatible with the contextualist account of knowledge that Stout proposes (*ibid.*, 231).

As I read Stout on this matter, the significant difference between justification and truth is one of simplicity and universality to relativity and fragility (*ibid.*, 230). Because Stout defines truth in terms of traditional philosophy, simplicity, a high grade of certainty, and universality, his characterization of truth is hard to square with his rejections of metaphysical ontology and theology. That is, it is hard to talk about truth in the "traditional" senses that Stout commends without the benefit of the traditional metaphysics that once supported traditional notions of truth. This is an ambiguity in Stout's pragmatism that renders him a mitigated pragmatist. To be sure, Stout's talk about truth is specific to moral truths and not to religious ones. He insists that talk of moral truth is not incongruent with his secularist claims. He says that "countless moral truths—some known, others not known—have universal applicability. My kind of contextualist need not deny any of them" (*ibid.*). For Stout, there appears to be a pragmatic necessity for affirming moral truth claims, especially given human propensities toward radical evil and cruelty (*ibid.*). Moreover, he thinks that moral truth claims peculiar to Western liberalism can be defended in pragmatic terms without committing the moralist either to moral relativism or to dogmatism.

Stout proposes that truth claims that are proffered in the languages of human rights and that define the moral and public commitments of Western liberal societies, however thinly conceived, nevertheless achieve a remarkable level of rational consent and

agreement among members of our societies. However, he also is aware of the ways that radical moral disagreements obtain at local political levels (Stout, 1988, 225). He argues that we must at least achieve some measure of "agreement with respect to justice and a partnership for the common good" (ibid., 241). His preferred metaphor for this sort of agreement is the moral garment made of many patches. In this case, we "take the many parts of a complicated social and conceptual inheritance and stitch them together into a pattern that meets the need of the moment. . . . The creative intellectual task of every generation, in other words, involves moral bricolage" (ibid., 292).

For all his talk about moral bricolage, however, Stout can find little relevance for theology in the public debates on morals. When compared with Rorty, Stout's critique of theology is polemical and not simply nontheological. For Rorty, the plausibility of theology is a nonquestion because pragmatism usurps whatever meaning theology once had in American intellectual culture. Therefore, the question of theology cannot be taken seriously as a mode of discourse on public morals. Stout also thinks that a secularist account of pragmatism excludes theology, but for him, theology nevertheless remains a serious contender to moral legitimacy. For Stout, the critique of theology is a consequence of pragmatism and remains a viable aspect of secular criticism (ibid., 109).

Stout is not concerned with the old antireligious polemics that sought to interrupt the necessity of religious foundations for the legitimacy of morals. The view that religion is not a necessary basis for morality has long been accepted in the West. Therefore, the independence of morality from religious belief is no novelty of contemporary moral philosophy. Nevertheless, Stout sees himself as maintaining the polemical posture of earlier secular moral philosophers who tended to regard religious ethics as the "other" against which secular moral philosophy defined itself (ibid., 109). However, he thinks that much of the prior secular polemics was merely reactionary, "never [developing] anything like a real dialogue, which might have allowed secular moral philosophy to work through its merely antithetical relation to the religious traditions" (ibid.). Stout's aim is to work through the merely antithetical relation of secular criticism to religious traditions.

For Stout, postanalytic philosophy creates a context where secular moral philosophers can rethink former critiques of religious ethics because the categories that once made it possible for analytic thinkers to separate the logic of morals from that of religion have

collapsed in the wake of post-Wittgensteinian philosophy and the resurgence of pragmatism. Stout thinks that secular criticism can no longer simply dismiss theology by begging the question of its relevance on categorical grounds. He assumes that a real dialogue ought to be possible between pragmatists and traditions of religious ethics and that theology ought to be a relevant mode of discourse on public morals even though it is not. Shortly, I will argue that contrary to his claims that dialogue with theology ought to be possible, in the end, Stout makes categorical claims that undermine his overtures toward conversation.

Stout's position is that if the conversation between pragmatism and theology breaks down, it is because theologians often fail to contribute anything relevant to the conversation on public morals which other discourses do not already accept or say, or which others have no good warrants for accepting (*ibid.*, 164). He does not argue that theology is irrelevant insofar as it signals the faith and practices of religious communities. This is the realm of discourse where he thinks it properly belongs. Therefore, theology as a function of ministerial education is not the point at issue. However, relegating the primary context of theological language to religiously specific cultic communities certainly limits the range of influence that theology is expected to have on a public morality that valorizes the privatization of religion (*ibid.*).

Stout's critique is most accurately targeted at the academic theologies of the university—the public that he clearly has in mind when he constantly refers to theology's irrelevance among the educated secular public (*ibid.*, 163–64, 169, 187). He insists that academic theologians cannot successfully communicate to an educated secular public the relevance that religious ethics holds for a public morality either without alienating themselves from the distinctive religious traditions that they are supposed to represent or without alienating the public whom they wish to influence, but one that no longer takes for granted or is persuaded by theological ideas (*ibid.*, 164). If I read Stout's argument correctly, there are several reasons why he thinks that appeals to theological ideas among a secular public of moral bricoleurs are untenable.

One, the success of moral bricolage depends on moral materials that can be patched together. This implies, however, that some measure of agreement exists between the materials being patched. Two, moral bricolage has as its goal a provisional intention regarding the patchwork of moral languages that are suited for our common goods and values. Theology can meet neither criterion and

remain theological, that is, if its moral claims are regarded as exclusive, distinct, and absolute. The absolutist and dogmatic disposition of theology, therefore, renders it incommensurable with pragmatism.

Stout's argument is that academic theologians are in a dilemma of irrelevance because they often intervened in public matters in ways that "merely [repeat] the bromide of secular intellectuals in transparently figurative speech" and "theologians with something distinctively theological to say are apt to be talking to themselves—or, at best, to a few other theologians of similar breeding" (Stout, 1988, 163). Whether these theologians can speak faithfully for their religious traditions by articulating their ethical and political implications, without also withdrawing to the margins of public discourse among educated secularists essentially unheard, signals the double bind of theology, says Stout (*ibid.*, CB, chapter 1, 4). Stout thinks that the attempts of most theologians to overcome the dilemma have been aggressive enough but not very successful.

David Tracy is faulted for making some sort of foundationalist turn in hermeneutical phenomenology. In turning toward philosophical hermeneutics and critical theory, Tracy is faulted for making a turn toward universal ground rules in order to justify theology's voice among rival discourses seeking ascendancy. Stout regards Tracy's fundamental theology, as well as other voices pre-eminently concerned with theological method, as an instance of "throat clearing," which "can go on for so long before you lose your audience" (*ibid.*). He also regards such attempts at theological method as failed projects from the beginning. They are not likely to persuade educated secularists who have abandoned the quest for method altogether and have accepted the dictum that "there are no methods for good argument and conversation save being conversant—that is, being well versed in one's own tradition and on speaking terms with others" (*ibid.*, 165–66).

Stout's antifoundationalist critique of Tracy, however, is not particularly persuasive because it is not altogether clear what is foundationalist about Tracy's project. Although it is easy enough to argue that much of it is metaethical and metadoctrinal, certainly Stout is not in principle opposed to metaethical discourse (except perhaps only in theology where it is foundationalism). It does not follow that when theologians rely on the insights and vocabularies of other communities of discourse, in their attempts to assure for their project a fair hearing at the table of conversation, that they are

making a case for epistemological foundationalism. Such a conclusion follows no more than saying that when Stout himself evokes the languages of epistemic justifications and warrants or offers analytic accounts of the conditions that circumscribe moral languages and conversation that he also is making a turn to a new foundation for any future metaphysics of morals.

Even if one takes seriously, as Stout does, the dictum that "there are no methods for good conversation except conversing," it will not follow that procedural conditions required for assuring the success of the conversation must be rejected. Stout himself thinks that there are prior conditions that have to be met if conversations are to be successful. He thinks that there are some minimal conditions necessary for assuring the success of moral conversation among competing voices. Some family resemblances between "moral vocabularies, purposes, patterns of reason, and judgments" are necessary (Stout, 1993, 215). Therefore, why think of these conditions as "foundations" when they are evoked in the context of academic theology? In a few paragraphs, I hope to show that the answer to this question is closely connected to what Stout takes to be the normative materials of theological reflection.

When discussing James M. Gustafson's project, Stout thinks that Gustafson's pragmatism is promising because of its rapprochement with his own emphasis on moral bricolage. Gustafson's rejection of foundations, his reliance on the plurality of histories, traditions, and social contexts as boundaries of meaning in public discourse, his modesty with respect to the claims made for absolute authority and truth of religious claims, and Gustafson's own moral bricolage are all promising elements that Stout finds generally persuasive. However, it is Gustafson's penchant for consistency that also brings him under Stout's double bind. According to Stout, Gustafson risks irrelevance by his loss of any significant connection to anything distinctively theological. He also risks irrelevance by his failure to provide secular interlocutors with reasons why theological construals of the powers and processes that bound human experience should matter to them, given their own construals of human experience.

Central to Stout's critique of theology is his insistence that a "conversable theology must have something distinctive, something recognizably theological to say. It must at least make clear what difference theology makes and how an educated person could reasonably believe its distinctive claims" (ibid., 169). According to Stout, Tracy and Gustafson are academic theologians who try to

clarify the distinctive contributions of theological claims to public discourse only to find themselves alienated from the sources and legitimacy of the religious traditions with which they identify. They also fail to persuade the intellectual culture that they would like to influence about the viability of theology in moral bricolage. This secular public is not likely to be persuaded by theological claims.

The success of Stout's critique of academic theology depends on whether it is sufficiently descriptive of the state and functions of theology in the academy. In order to raise doubts about his critique of theology, I shall confine myself to what Stout takes to be the normative materials that define the function of theology in the academy. In *The Flight from Authority* (1981), Stout tends to define theological discourse in relation to classical theism and the problem of lost authority. In that text, he argues that in the theological tradition an appeal to authority was an appeal to the historical warrants for assuring the integrity of faith. And the supreme warrant for faith was located in theism and divine revelation.

Stout tells the story of how these distinctive elements of the theological reflection (theism and divine revelation) were progressively subverted and decentered by philosophical criticism among Christian humanists themselves. Consequently, theology became the handmaid of philosophy rather than philosophy's queen. The original function of theology, which was foremost concerned with the explanation of sacred doctrine, was progressively transferred to philosophical apologetics. And the languages of evidences (internal/external), proofs and demonstration, religious experience and nature, knowledge and reasonableness supplanted theological authority. Stout's earlier book, therefore, restricts the normative materials of theology to theism and divine revelation. And it restricts the function of theology in the academy to its classical intention, namely, the explanation of sacred doctrine.

The critique of theology in *Ethics after Babel* presupposes the classical terms and functions of the discipline as constituting the normative voice of theology. If I am right, Stout's questions about whether appeals to theological ideas add anything viable for public morality today ought to be heard as a question about whether theism and divine revelation can add anything viable for a public morality. Stout thinks not—at least not for the educated secularist. His criticisms are warranted in certain respects. He rightly supposes that theologians who insist on the viability of theistic morality for moral bricolage must be prepared to convince fellow secular

bricoleurs why they also should be persuaded of the relevance of theistic morality for public moral debates. Such theologians ought not to presume the viability of their discourse in debates on morals.

Stout also is convincing when he insists that academic theologians who jettison claims for the distinctiveness of theistic morality in their attempts to speak relevantly to an educated secularist risk irrelevance. In agreement with Van A. Harvey (1881, 1889), Stout holds that academic theologians risk irrelevance simply because they have nothing distinctive to offer the secularist for critical musing. For theologians, the problem is this: if they are to respond reasonably to Stout's criticisms, they would be warranted in turning to a fundamental theology or to theological arguments. However, Stout's antifoundationalist critique of theology rules out, from the outset, any such turn on the part of the theologian. Therefore, his criticism effectively mitigates the possibility of theology answering his posed dilemma.

To further the argument, I propose to take Stout's dilemma as a false one that is based on a categorical error. The error is Stout's identifying academic theology normatively with classical theism and functionally with the successful communication of sacred doctrine. Stout's normative definition of theology is couched in such a way as to beg the question of theology's multiple reoccupations in Western intellectual history. Sometimes theology normatively refers to the Doctrine of God. Sometimes it refers to the entire matrix of historical processes which are directed teleologically toward some consummate end. And sometimes theology is equated with the cultural identity of a people, effectively taking the form of a political theology but signaling nothing of the classical terms. Therefore, defining the meaning of academic theology in terms of classical Western theism appears arbitrary in light of contemporary theology.

Stout stacks the rules of the game against the voice of theology in a way that settles the outcome of the game from the start. His exclusive insistence on the criterion of distinctiveness (distinctiveness meaning ownership of the traditional theological vocabularies of one's tradition), as the primary rule of the game, settles the game against academic theology from the outset. Again, the dilemma seems quite persuasive as long as we are talking only in terms of classical theism and atheism. Indeed, no theologian who intends to advance his/her theistic claims in order to persuade atheistic secularists why they also should be persuaded of theology's relevance for moral bricolage can do so without, at the same time,

risking irrelevance. However, the burden and risk are peculiar to the exchange between theists and atheists. The impasse between such critics does not signal an authentic dilemma between theology and pragmatism, even if it does say a great deal about the incommensurability between theism and atheism.

On the terms provided by Stout, I suggest that there is no dilemma because there are no genuine lively alternatives in play, each of which are equally compelling or translatable the one into the other (at least not if the game is set up in terms of theism and atheism). If the issue is one of intellectual persuasion, the chances of theists (whether those overly preoccupied with the exclusive claims of their tradition or those who are eclectic) persuading educated secular moral bricolours (who may also happen to be atheists) of the legitimacy of theistic morality are not likely to succeed. The success is undermined because persuasion would mean blurring the categorical distinctions that identify atheists and theists.

If Stout's insistence on the criterion of categorical distinctiveness is given up, however, then perhaps the impasse to successful communication between theology and pragmatism can be overcome. Yet, to be an atheistic secularist is precisely to resist the persuasion of religious perspectives and theological languages. The categorical differences between the theologian and the educated secular atheist are therefore a matter of definition and hence formal. Talk about the atheist's openness to persuasion by the academic theologian amounts to a rhetorical posturing that allows atheistic secularists to see themselves as oppositional to theology, confining the fate of academic theology to the impasse of intellectual and moral irrelevance, but without appearing merely arbitrary or without having to define themselves in terms of a categorical rejection of religious discourse (1988, 187).



In summary, the Rortian trajectory in neopragmatism intends the further secularization of theology in which pragmatism and theology are rendered incommensurable discourses. In chapter 6, I will return to the incommensurability thesis in a critical manner. In contrast to Stout, Rorty emphasizes the radical incommensurability between pragmatism and theology. For him, pragmatism usurps the domain left vacant by the pragmatic secularization of theology's metaphysical criteria and content. However, Stout appears to hold a mitigated position in comparison to Rorty. He is a mitigated incommensurabilist who remains intellectually invested in acade-

mic theology but stresses the pragmatic displacement of theology in public debate. Stout's distinction between "religious discourse" (as a linguistic activity proper to the faith and practices of religious communities) and "academic theology" holds for him the possibility of breaking from those critiques of theology and religion that are categorically oppositional toward religious ideas.

Stout's argument is that academic theologians cannot presume that their theistic moralities will have or ought to have influence on the debates concerning public morality. Theological ideas are not merely antithetical to the claims that Stout wants to proffer for public morality. They are also intellectually irrelevant when voiced by theologians as highly distinctive narrative utterances or when voiced by theologians who hold them as intellectual possibilities not only for themselves but also for everyone in dialogue with them. Stout's restricting the relevance of academic theology to classical terms (theism and divine revelation) and functions (explanation and transmission of sacred doctrine) has an ironic result. While seeking to carry out a secularist critique of theology, without defining his objections to theology on categorical grounds, Stout's insistence on the criterion of distinctiveness (in this case, between theists and atheists) assures the cogency of his critique, only by insisting on the categorical opposition of atheistic secularism to theistic morality.

Like both Rorty and Stout, I also hold that the tensions that characterize our present debates about the marginalization of theology in American public life can be accounted for adequately in terms of a pragmatic secularization of theology. However, I also hold that even if atheism and theism are shown to be incommensurable, it will not follow that pragmatism and theology are equally incommensurable. Rather, I am led to think that while philosophical pragmatists and academic theologians may pose different answers to our cultural questions about meaning, value, human intentions, and ends, communicative understanding and agreement between the two are not only possible but desirable. However, this possibility depends on the degree to which our various discourses center on shared realities and are oriented toward the moral fulfillment of common goods which define our democratic form of life.

My judgment is optimistic. However, mine is an optimism that undergirded the classical pragmatists' reconstructive philosophy throughout the disciplines, including theology. Mine is also an optimism that classical pragmatists bequeathed to American theol-

ogy. In chapter 2, my task is to make explicit the ways that classical pragmatists intended in their critiques of theology its philosophical reconstruction. They did not only lay the basis for an atheistic critique of theology. In the following chapters, I want to show how they made possible a pragmatic theology.