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Dated: May 6, 2013
Stout’s Democracy without Secularism: But is it a Tradition?

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Abstract: This article critiques Jeffrey Stout’s suggestion in Democracy and Tradition that the practice of critical democratic questioning itself forms part of a historically unique secular tradition. While the practice of democratic questioning makes a valuable contribution to the project of fostering an “enlarged mentality” among the adherents of any particular tradition, Stout’s contention that this practice itself points to the existence of a substantive tradition, one that stands apart from and is not reliant upon the moral sources of the traditions it engages, remains problematic.

1. Freedom, Constraint by Norms, and Faith

“Freedom,” Jeffrey Stout tells us in Democracy and Tradition, “is a kind of constraint by norms.” In saying this, he is nodding his head toward those theologians and thinkers like Stanley Hauerwas, who emphasize the essential role that tradition, in particular the Christian religious tradition, plays in maintaining the commitments, institutions, and practices through which its members are able to acquire excellent skills, virtuous habits, and good characters. It is in the space created by such traditional constraints, Stout says, that people become free to do most things that are worthwhile doing. “These normative constraints,” he adds, “make possible specific kinds of expressive freedom, different roles and aspirations, and therefore different kinds of people.”

Stout also agrees in principle with Hauerwas that a society should be judged according to the kind of people it produces. For Stout, a society can be deemed good if the normative constraints it fosters and promotes (or discourages and opposes) free the development of virtuous character. Thus, the measure of any society consists in the virtuosity enabled by the tradition or traditions that find room to flourish within its borders. I hasten to add that Stout’s particular affirmation of tradition involves conceiving of these in a dialectical fashion. According to this conception, the normative constraints articulated within traditions emerge historically and evolve
over time through the critical and dialogical negotiations of their members. Such a conception of tradition emphasizes the back and forth movement between novel performance and critical reflection, a movement through which a tradition’s norms emerge and change shape over time.\(^2\) Because he understands these norms to be creatures of social practice in this way, he thereby considers the paramount decision before members of democratic societies to be the one concerning “which practices and institutional arrangements we ought to foster.”\(^3\) In giving his answer to this question, he locates what he takes to be (rightly or wrongly) a significant area of disagreement between himself and Hauerwas.\(^4\)

One of the practices that Stout considers eminently worthwhile, and which he thinks Hauerwas does not, is the practice of democratic questioning itself, which he thinks democratic societies have used to good effect when adjudicating between and amongst the various traditions located within them. According to Stout, Hauerwas does not value democratic questioning as a virtuous social practice, but rather understands it “as one of the acids of individualism eating away at tradition.” Although he does not share this negative assessment of democratic questioning, Stout does sympathize with the desire that informs it - namely, the desire to defend tradition from a secularist, liberal ideology that understands tradition as a purely repressive force that needlessly constrains human progress and individual freedom. So, in promoting democratic questioning as a valuable social practice, Stout refuses to do so according to the terms of a secularist ideology with which he has little or no sympathy. He even provides persuasive reasons to resist couching his recommendations within the Rawlsian confines of a “free-standing” conception of public reason.\(^5\) Instead, he chooses to describe democratic questioning as a practice that itself requires the cultivation of virtues and the construction and telling of narratives - that is, a tradition. “Commitment to democracy,” he says, “does not entail the rejection of tradition. It requires jointly taking responsibility for the criticism and renewal of tradition and for the justice of our social and political arrangements.”\(^6\)

What makes Stout’s strategy in Democracy and Tradition so intriguing is its willingness to travel quite a long way with such anti-liberal defenders of tradition as Hauerwas, while at the same time mounting a far-reaching critique of what he understands to be the deleterious effect the latter’s work has had upon the willingness of religious folk to engage in the practice of democratic questioning. Because he values the contribution that traditions, and even specifically religious traditions, make to democratic society, Stout joins Hauerwas and others in denouncing
rigorous secularism as an enervating force in democratic society. It is this worry for the health of a robust democracy that also informs his criticisms of such liberal theorists as John Rawls and Richard Rorty, who in different ways have sought to restrain the expression of religious commitment in public forums. So, in spite of his grave concerns about the sectarianism he reads in the work of religiously motivated theorists like Hauerwas and Alisdair MacIntyre, he nonetheless joins them in arguing against the secularist attempt to “police” religious expression in the public sphere. For him, such restraint hinders the candor required for an open airing of disagreements. In so doing, it prematurely closes down the traditional spaces that allow people to make novel and imaginative moves when fulfilling their responsibility to engage in democratic questioning of their own tradition as well as those of others.

For Stout, then, religious traditions are an important resource in our pluralist society, the elimination of whose influence would serve to impoverish that society. Nowhere is this aspect of his position more clear than in his critical discussion of Richard Rorty’s recommendation that we restrict religious commitment to a private sphere. For this reason, I examine Stout’s critique of Rorty’s position in section two. After that, I will critically explore in more detail Stout’s redescription of the practice of democratic questioning as one that belongs, and is not opposed, to traditional ways of inhabiting democratic society (section three). An important part of that discussion will be an analysis of Stout’s version of “immanent criticism,” through which he feels citizens of democratic societies, regardless of their traditional affiliations, can pursue the sorts of ‘abnormal’ conversations that might take place between people who find themselves separated by deep worldview divides. In the course of that analysis, I will also assess Stout’s claim that democracy itself forms but one tradition among many in a pluralist society. Does he succeed in putting forward such an “antitraditionalist conception of modern democracy as a tradition,” or does his argument here still betray a liberal desire to accede to the cosmopolitan, tradition-transcending role of final arbiter of a pluralistic public sphere? In conclusion (section four), I consider how Stout’s insights on the relationship between democracy and tradition help us understand why we might wish to create more space in democratic society for people to speak with integrity from the place of their deepest convictions and motivations, religious or otherwise. The creation of such space, I suggest, is a necessary first step for such a society to take if it hopes to foster an open dialogue between members of a variety of traditions concerning those
normative constraints which might best free the development of virtuous people and a good society.

2. Rorty’s Undemocratic Attitude Toward Religion

Fear of the potentially undemocratic consequences of entertaining religious reasons in public discussion appears to motivate even a thinker like Rorty, who otherwise does not lend much credence to the secularist liberal metanarrative that is often invoked to support it - the one in which our spurious reliance on authoritarian religious tradition has been vanquished and replaced by our sole reliance on autonomous human rationality. While Rorty has many doubts about the veracity of this story, not the least of which is the epistemological foundationalism that informs it, there is one strand of it that he never seriously questions: He has little doubt that democratic societies better themselves to the extent that they restrain religious considerations from operating in public discussion.10 Rorty’s reasons for wanting to ban religious considerations from the public sphere are familiar, even if the epistemology (or lack thereof) that motivates them is not. In arguing for the undesirability of religious views in public discussion, he concisely illustrates his idiosyncratic wedding of pragmatist philosophy to liberal political creed:

It is never an objection to a religious belief that there is no evidence for it. The only possible objection to it can be that it intrudes an individual project into a social and cooperative project, and thereby offends against the teachings of On Liberty. Such intrusion is a betrayal of one’s responsibilities to cooperate with other human beings, not of one’s responsibility to Truth or Reason.11

It is clear from Rorty’s invocation of John Stuart Mill here that he views the mere entertainment of religious considerations in public discussion to be some sort of unwelcome and in fact harmful intrusion into the public realm of something that should remain private. He states this even more clearly when he affirms what he reads William James to be suggesting in the latter’s influential essay “The Will to Believe.” According to James, says Rorty, “…we have a right to believe what we like when we are, so to speak, on our own time. But we abandon this right when we are engaged in, for example, a scientific or a political project.”12
Why do we abandon that right in such contexts? It is not that Rorty thinks one’s religious faith is a trivial matter, or that it ought not to motivate the public stand one takes on political or other matters of social cooperation. Rorty’s main reason for wanting to restrain any appeal to religious premises in public argument has more to do with the fact that he thinks such an appeal is in “bad taste.” It is in bad taste because “in political discussion with those outside the relevant religious community, it is a conversation-stopper.” For a thinker like Rorty, for whom conversation is the paradigm of intellectual inquiry and social cooperation, this is indeed the worst epithet one could hurl at religious culture. This characterization is particularly damning in our current pluralistic context, in which our ability to continue talking, listening, and relating to each other is an important way of keeping our differences from devolving into violent confrontations.

But is Rorty’s characterization of religion as a conversation-stopper fair or accurate? Stout, for one, finds it particularly unhelpful. Unlike Rorty, he maintains that in public forums citizens of democratic societies are entitled to hold beliefs and to argue from and express premises that they may not be able to justify to all their fellow citizens, and these should include religious beliefs and premises. Yet, like Rorty, he also recognizes that such an allowance creates “a potential impasse in conversation.” He does not, however, chalk this potential for impasse up to the religious adherent’s bad taste or lack of tact, but rather sees it as a “difficulty that arises for all of us ... when we are asked to defend our most deeply engrained commitments.” He goes on to maintain that we are entitled to hold onto these sorts of commitments unless and until they become problematical in some concrete way. The main point I want to take from Stout here is his insistence that we ought to consider the democratic playing field upon which religious and secular citizens contest their positions as one that is level, and thus Rorty’s attempt to tilt it away from religious persons is in bad faith. For this reason, Stout suggests that if a potential discursive impasse between religious and secular citizens of democratic societies is the crucial thing to be avoided, then “the only fair way to proceed is to exclude the expression of many nonreligious commitments” in addition to religious ones, because commitments of the former sort often operate in the same rationally unjustified ways that deep religious commitments do. On Stout’s reading, then, Rorty’s view turns out to be the undemocratic one, the real conversation-stopper, for when it is applied fairly to religious and nonreligious commitments alike, it “will require silence on many of the most important issues on the political agenda.”
It would seem from the foregoing that Stout welcomes, rather than fears, the potential for discursive impasse that motivates Rorty’s desire to privatize religious commitment. Unlike Rorty, who sees this potential as actual (religion as conversation-stopper), Stout espies in it an opportunity for abnormal and imaginative conversational improvisation. For Rorty, the silence or absence of conversation results from the religious person tactlessly professing their private faith in a public discussion where it can have no place or possible relevance.\textsuperscript{17} Stout, on the other hand, sees silence as ensuing from a consistent application of the liberal recommendation to restrain the expression of all uncommonly held motivating premises, whether religious or not, which all of us have on some deep level. Rorty himself admits that all people have, and should not be impugned for having, a “final vocabulary” in which they get to express their deepest desires, hopes, and commitments. What is more, we may legitimately identify ourselves with such a vocabulary, says Rorty, without prior recourse to non-circular means of argumentative justification, means that any rational individual would accept.\textsuperscript{18}

While Rorty would claim that, for both religious and non-religious persons, a final vocabulary can only have private relevance (as when he affirms that religion, “at its best,” should be thought of as “Whitehead’s ‘what we do with our solitude’, rather than something people do together in churches”), there is real cause for doubting that he applies this stricture evenly to religious and secular orientations alike.\textsuperscript{19} And there is even more slippage here, because he also acknowledges the formative role that specifically religious final vocabularies play in the public stands that religious individuals take on particular issues. He considers it hypocritical for liberal secularists to say that “believers somehow have no right to base their political views on their religious faith, whereas we atheists have every right to base ours on Enlightenment philosophy,” adding that “the claim that in doing so we are appealing to reason, whereas the religious are being irrational, is hokum.”\textsuperscript{20} So Rorty does not object to the fact that certain persons’ political stances will be religiously motivated, something he instead accepts as a matter of course. Rather, he objects to the slightly different contention, voiced by Stephen Carter and others, that the public square should be open to specifically religious forms of argument.

The reason Rorty objects to this contention is that he is only able to imagine, as specifically religious forms of argument, those “whose premises are accepted by some people because they believe that these premises express the will of God.” On the one hand, he considers such belief to be neither here nor there; on the other, he thinks such belief necessarily preempts
the possibility of conversation concerning the matter the religious belief is invoked to support. He thinks such a belief is neither here nor there because a nonreligious person may well be able to accept the same premises a religious person accepts, albeit for purely secular reasons (as, for example, when a secular and a religious person both support welfare reform, one because she thinks it is God’s will that she do so, the other because, say, he thinks it maximizes human happiness). And, as we have seen, Rorty thinks it of no interest to a public audience that “one of us gets his premises in church and the other in the library.” So, he concludes that the arguments that take place in the public square, political arguments, “are best thought of as neither religious nor non-religious.” In response to Carter’s complaint that liberal society forces religious people to restructure their arguments in purely secular terms, he replies that such restructuring simply amounts to the recommendation that one drop reference to the motivating source of one’s argumentative premises (again, whether religious or not), and that “this omission seems a reasonable price to pay for religious liberty.”

But has Rorty adequately tallied the cost? That is, would his particular way of restricting religious commitment to the private sphere adequately protect religious liberty? Hendrik Hart raises some pertinent doubts in this regard. He suspects that, when it comes to Rorty’s discussion of religion, “the private is not... a haven where our deepest hopes are safe from persecution or where no one can force us to hope what others want. Rather, the private is now a realm to which hopes are [banished] in order not to have public significance.” What finally motivates his recommendation for the privatization of religious belief, then, is his desire to rid the public sphere of what he understands to be the necessarily non-cooperative, pre-emptive, conversation-stopping effects of the public expression of religious motivations.

Stout, for his part, takes issue with Rorty’s assumption that religious expression in public settings must necessarily pre-empt the practice of democratic dialogue and questioning. For this reason, he does not see the need, as Rorty does, for people to drop reference to the traditional or religious sources that motivate their public stands. What is more, Stout worries about the cost that Rortyan privatization exacts from “the reservoir of substantive respect on which democratic discourse among neighbors can draw.” That is, he thinks such a recommendation mainly serves to enervate pluralistic dialogue at precisely those points where our conversations most need to remain imaginative, robust, sympathetic, and energetic. He thus considers Rorty’s desire to restrict public discussion to premises that are actually held in common to be problematic,
because “reasons actually held in common do not get us far enough toward answers to enough of our political questions. The proposed policy of restraint, if adopted, would cause too much silence at precisely the points where more discussion is most badly needed. The policy itself would be a conversation-stopper.”

For Stout, we might pursue a third option beyond the presumed mutually exclusive choices of either seeking to justify our arguments solely on the basis of commonly accepted principles or remaining silent when such principles are unavailable. This third option favors complete candor, in which discussants “express their actual (religious) reasons for supporting the policy they favor while also engaging in immanent criticism of their opponents views.”

Interestingly enough, in arguing for this third option, Stout appeals to Rorty’s own conception of conversation in the third section of Philosophy and the Mirror of Nature. In doing so, he points out how Rorty’s attempt to privatize religious commitment goes against the very idea of “edifying philosophy” that he champions at the end of that book:

The role of edifying philosophy ... is to keep discursive exchange going at those very points where ‘normal’ discourse - that is, discourse on the basis of commonly accepted standards - cannot straightforwardly adjudicate between competing claims. Conversation is a good name for what is needed at those points where people employing different final vocabularies reach a momentary impasse. But if we do use the term ‘conversation’ in this way, we shall have to conclude that conversation is the very thing that is not stopped when religious premises are introduced in a political argument.

For Stout, conversation starts rather than stops at the brink of such an impasse, thus leading him to describe it as only “momentary.” Even if the full articulation of one’s motivating reasons leads to such a momentary impasse, Stout says, this is no cause for alarm: “One can always back up a few paces, and begin again, now with a broader conversational objective.” I turn now to an analysis of this broader conversational objective, the pursuit of which includes the social practice of democratic questioning. There we shall discover Stout’s preference for and articulation of a certain kind of democratic tradition or tradition of democracy (as distinguished from specifically religious traditions) which he thinks does the best job of fostering the virtues we need in order to engage in the valuable social practice of democratic questioning.
3. Democratic Conversation as/and Tradition

Stout characterizes the practice of democratic conversation from two angles: The first angle I wish to discuss involves his conception of immanent criticism, which he describes as the attempt to acquire a thick understanding of one’s interlocutor’s motivating premises, so as to be able to argue from those premises in an attempt to persuade such a person of the merits of one’s own favored position. Such critique does not proceed from a basis of commonly accepted premises, but instead appeals solely to the interlocutor’s unshared reasons and motivations. The second angle I wish to discuss involves Stout’s understanding of the more general practice of “democratic questioning” itself, which I introduced in the first section of this article. On my reading, immanent criticism is one species within this larger genus, which Stout understands as the valuable social practice of holding one another discursively responsible for the tradition-inspired reasons we offer to each other in pluralistic public settings.

It is clear that in valuing such a practice, one that emphasizes the importance of immanent criticism, Stout desires to encourage a respect for others’ views that sufficiently honors their difference and particularity, while at the same time not forsaking the responsibility to submit these views to critical, public scrutiny when necessary. A tension emerges, however, between Stout’s appreciation of the substantive semantic potential that differing traditions make available to democratic societies, and the non-deferential, anti-authoritarian, and self-reliant attitude which the practice of democratic questioning encourages and promotes. As I intend to show, this tension has an adverse affect on the argument he offers for understanding democracy as a tradition. Can democracy so construed really be understood as one tradition among others, or does it here still pretend to accede to the liberal-cosmopolitan role of tradition-transcending arbiter, judging all traditions according to its particular criteria of discursive accountability?

Before answering this question, I will first examine the way in which Stout’s emphasis on immanent criticism sets his position apart from standard liberal accounts. Specifically, Stout recommends immanent criticism as a feasible alternative to what he takes to be the impracticable import of Rawls’ conception of public reason. In so doing, he objects to the conclusion that one must fail in meeting one’s justificatory obligations to others unless at some point one is “willing to accept a common basis for reasoning that others, similarly motivated, could not reasonably reject.”28 As we saw in his discussion of Rorty, Stout considers this quest for a common
justificatory basis (of whatever stripe) to be neither plausible nor achievable. That such a requirement might even exclude from consideration the public oratory of such prominent figures as Abraham Lincoln and Martin Luther King, Jr. makes it even more problematic from Stout’s perspective.\textsuperscript{29}

While Stout would in general like to see more candor concerning the public expression of our often unshared, deeply held, motivating premises, he does take seriously Rawls’ contention that respect for one’s interlocutors necessarily commits one to the attempt to supplement one’s religious claims with the attempt to offer “an opinion that all members of society might reasonably agree to.”\textsuperscript{30} Like Nicholas Wolterstorff, Stout sees the promotion of mutual respect as an essential feature of immanent criticism, without which it would not be able to do the work it needs to do. He therefore considers the conception of respect assumed in this objection to be flawed, for “it neglects the ways in which one can show respect for another person in his or her particularity.”\textsuperscript{31} That is, to focus exclusively “on the sort of respect one shows to another individual by appealing to reasons that anyone who is both properly motivated and epistemically responsible would find acceptable” is to neglect the importance of striving to understand a person’s particularity and idiosyncrasy. Because immanent criticism involves the attempt to learn from and understand the distinctive reasons that motivate another person’s public stances, this practice instead gives full weight to the particularity of one’s interlocutor. “Why,” Stout asks, “would I be failing to show respect for X if I offered reasons to X that X ought to be moved by from X’s point of view?” Is it because neither Y nor Z are motivated in the same way? What is to stop someone, in case by case fashion, from engaging Y and Z in the same way that she has engaged XI In asking such questions, Stout wants us to see how the practice of immanent criticism can be both “a principal tool of justificatory discourse” as well as “a way of expressing respect for one’s interlocutor.”\textsuperscript{32}

In describing immanent criticism as “one of the most widely used forms of reasoning in ... public political discourse and one of the most effective ways of showing respect for fellow citizens who hold differing points of view,”\textsuperscript{33} Stout is essentially agreeing with Wolterstorff’s call to respect particularity and difference in public discourse:

\begin{quote}
Are persons not often worth honoring in their religious particularities, in their national particularities, in their class particularities, in their gender particularities? Does such honoring not
require that I invite them to tell me how politics looks from their perspective - and does it not require that I genuinely listen to what they say? We need a politics that not only honors us in our similarity as free and equal, but in our particularities. For our particularities - some of them - are constitutive of who we are, constitutive of our narrative identities.34

Wolterstorff not only argues that it is important to respect such particularity, but goes on to claim that our willingness to make room for it in our public dialogues will enrich those dialogues. I as a Christian may not just respect the particular viewpoints of my fellow Muslim or Jewish citizens, to take two examples, but I may also learn something from them. My understanding of a hotly debated public issue can be enriched by learning a particular Jewish or Muslim understanding of that issue. Given this potential for enrichment,

Wolterstorff wonders how it will be maintained “if, in the public square, we do our best to silence all appeals to our diverse perspectives, regarding the felt need to appeal to them here and there as simply a lamentable deficiency in the scope and power of public reason....”35 Like Stout, Wolterstorff rejects the idea that some conception of public reason can become an adequate basis on which to rest our various public discussions. Not only does the restriction of our reasoning to this supposedly common basis fail to honor our particularities and differences, but it also impoverishes such reasoning.

In putting forward his argument for the importance and efficacy of immanent criticism, however, Stout appears to ignore one of its most important implications. This implication has to do with the fact that, in order to work at all, immanent criticism must affirm more than it questions. That is, in questioning one aspect of a traditional perspective by appealing to others, the immanent critic must affirm a significant portion of the traditional source of meaning that motivates his interlocutor’s problematic stand. Stout in fact offers such an affirmation when he seeks to engage in immanent criticism of what he takes to be radical orthodoxy’s complete refusal of the secular as a realm utterly vitiated by a lack of true piety. In criticizing this view, he proceeds to pose the following three “properly theological” questions to the proponents of radical orthodoxy:

• is it not possible to discern the workings of the Holy Spirit, and thus some reflection of God’s redemptive activity, in modern democratic aspirations?
• is there nothing in the political life of modern democracies, or in the lives of those who are struggling for just and decent arrangements within them, that a loving God would bless?

• if the plenitude of God’s triune inner life shines forth in all of creation, cannot theology discern some such light in democratic political community?36

By asking such “properly theological” questions, and by invoking such traditional Christian notions as the Holy Spirit and a loving God with a triune inner life, Stout does not here merely display his rich understanding of Christian tradition and theology, and his concomitant ability to use this understanding to engage in immanent criticism of his opponents views. By proceeding in this way, he also affirms, and thus gives no reason for the radically orthodox to question, some of their tradition’s very deep-seated and authoritative sources of meaning. But at the same time this affirmation comes from someone who purportedly does not hold these views. What is going on here? How is Stout able to affirm sources of meaning that he ultimately rejects? One is tempted to think that either he does not in fact reject them on some level, but instead feels their compelling force, or he succumbs to an Enlightenment dilemma that Charles Taylor has criticized in Sources of the Self in which one’s moral stance becomes parasitic upon the same moral sources that fund the religious orientations that one would pretend to criticize. Such a position, says Taylor, “is parasitic on its adversaries for the expression of its own moral sources, its own words of power, and hence for its continuing moral force.”37 Because I think Stout’s engagement with traditional Christian moral sources is genuinely appreciative, I want to resist going so far as to characterize his desire to engage in immanent criticism of certain manifestations of Christian tradition to be either manipulative or parasitic. To resist that characterization, however, necessitates exploring the possibility that on some level Stout does not reject but instead feels the persuasive force of deep semantic currents that run within a religious tradition that nevertheless houses certain objectionable elements he would still wish to criticize.

To explore this possibility without putting words in Stout’s mouth, however, is a risky enterprise. Thankfully, Stout is gracious and brave enough to offer his reader enough autobiographical detail to help us avoid this pitfall. He tells us that in the days of his “adolescent sublime,” Martin Luther King, Jr. was the hero of his humanitarian cause, and Jesus was “one of
three personifications” of his loving divinity. He then offers us a picture of how these commitments became complicated later in life: “...I have come to know more about these figures of virtue than their hagiographers and publicists wanted me to know. Now that I am less innocent of the complexities, I am no less moved by love and justice, no less cognizant of the place such traits have in a virtuous character, and no less able to put these concepts to work discursively than I used to be.” He goes on to claim that Jesus and King remain “persons of ethical interest,” and that he still spends much time thinking about them as well as such virtues as love and justice. But his preoccupation with these figures and ideas has sufficiently changed since the days of his adolescent sublime, such that he would no longer call himself a Christian. He tells us that now his preoccupations in this regard require “a different, less doctrinal, more improvisational kind of explication. To the extent that King and Jesus exemplify virtues in my imaginative life, they now do so imperfectly and defeasibly.”

By describing himself in this way, Stout identifies closely with a figure he, following Van Harvey, calls the “alienated theologian.” Alienated theologians are rather lonely figures who have “felt the force of reasons that are at odds with their confession of faith” and who thus “abandon some or all of the basic commitments of their faith communities.” Stout argues that while alienated theologians may have given up the right to be spokespersons for the traditional communities in which they have been acculturated, they “should still be welcomed into the democratic conversation along with all citizens of good will.” Part of Stout’s desire to describe democracy as a tradition, I think, has to do with his desire to discover a community that cherishes such virtues as love and justice, but that is not at the same time so rigid and “well-integrated” as to suffocate thought and thereby exclude and alienate its democratic questioners. In expressing his solidarity with the alienated theologian, Stout seems to have found just such community: “Theologically, most of them are moving in the direction of heresies that I embrace, so I welcome their company.”

The intellectual form of the tradition Stout is seeking to describe is the American pragmatism of Ralph Waldo Emerson, Walt Whitman, and John Dewey. According to Stout, these thinkers have made signal contributions to a canonical body of literature that attempts “to bring the notions of democratic deliberation and tradition together in a single philosophical vision.” For him, “pragmatism is the philosophical space in which democratic rebellion against hierarchy combines with traditionalist love of virtue to form a new intellectual tradition that is
indebted to both.” It is in this “tradition” that Stout finds the self-reliant, non-deferential freedom of thought that he thinks religious traditions tend to stifle through their insistence on the authoritative character of ancient scripture and theological doctrine. Absolute freedom is not at issue here for Stout, but rather a freedom that always finds itself implicated in a network of evolving normative constraints. It is a freedom that gives license to individuals to “make something of their inheritance and to discard those of its parts that insult the soul.” While Stout recognizes that Christian traditions have also recognized such situated freedom, for example in their characterization of people as being created in the image of God, he prefers the pragmatist version of this recognition, which repeats this religious characterization forward with one important difference:

Emerson and Whitman also often talk about souls and about something divine or wondrous that can be discerned in a human being. They are self-consciously waxing poetic at those moments. They think of the Christian story as ossified poetry, and are striving for fresh images of their own. Their intent is not to take dogma and argue with it on its own terms. Their intent is simply to express faithfully something they have experienced and to enliven a similar capacity for awe and love in their readers.43

Stout’s apparent assumption here, according to which religious traditionalists must satisfy themselves with “ossified poetry” while the democratic pragmatist is free to pursue “fresh images,” is troubling to say the least. Why should the devil have all the good tunes? Stout here fails to credit the way in which many contemporary religious believers are able to demonstrate deft hermeneutical skill in retrieving contemporarily relevant meaning from the ancient authoritative sources of their tradition, and thus “to express something they have experienced and to enliven a similar capacity for awe and love” in their conversation partners.44 In so doing, they show these authoritative (as opposed to authoritarian) sources to contain an inexhaustible wealth of meaning that is not depleted so long as the tradition itself does not atrophy. While I agree with Stout that the practice of democratic questioning can be a valuable tool in preventing such enervation and in ensuring the contemporary relevance of living traditions, this is not the same as saying that such a practice by itself characterizes the content of an independent tradition, or that it describes a tradition at all. As Matthew Mutter points out in a perceptive review of Democracy and Tradition, democracy as Stout conceives it can only be characterized as a tradition if one
accepts the dubious assumption that “a practice that recognizes no authority or mediation, and in which self-formation relies entirely on ‘employing one’s own standards of worth’, is properly called a tradition.”

Yet perhaps there is a different way of looking at what Stout sees. For, whether we consider it to be a corrosive acid or a valuable social practice, no one can doubt that modern democratic questioning has had a profound effect on the current shape of religious traditions, including the increased freedom and discursive responsibility their adherents have come to enjoy. Stout considers both himself and the rest of us to be beneficiaries of this shift, which he credits for allowing him personally to carry forward important religious values while at the same time jettisoning soul-insulting lies. From the other side, Stout’s ability to engage in effective immanent criticism of the Christian tradition shows him to be less alienated from its store of meanings than he perhaps considers himself to be, as he deftly puts these to work in criticizing what he thinks are some distortions of Christianity in the views of his religious opponents.

In light of the foregoing, one is tempted to characterize Stout not as a secular democrat, but as a post-institutional Christian who pushes at its boundaries harder than most, but who does so with a desire to ensure that its best insights are not lost to the suffocation of dogmatic habituation. Even if this characterization of Stout (or am I implicitly using a too-loose definition of Christianity?) goes too far, Christians and members of other traditions can still be grateful to him for providing them with a valuable service in mounting a persuasive argument for the responsibility of members of different religious traditions to habituate themselves more democratically so as to avoid the enervation that results when a tradition succumbs to dogmatic stasis. While he is less than convincing in his argument for viewing democracy as a tradition, he does help us see the important way in which democratic attitudes and dispositions, including the practice of questioning and demanding reasons, can encourage adherents of religious and other traditions to take up an edifying, yet still pious, quarrel with where they come from, as they return ever again to their tradition’s authoritative and life-sustaining sources of meaning. Any tradition that encourages or at least allows this sort of activity to carry on can be described as democratic to some extent, and so we have no need then to name democracy as a separate, secular, and superarbitrating tradition in pluralist society. Seen in this way, one ought not to think that there is something to religious traditions qua religious (or qua traditions) that prevents
their adherents from appreciating new tunes, or from coming up with new interpretations of old ones.46

4. Religious Tradition, Democratic Questioning, and an ‘Enlarged Mentality’

Even if one remains unconvinced by Stout’s suggestion that democratic attitudes and dispositions are sufficient ingredients to form a substantive tradition, one need not deny the important role such attitudes and dispositions might come to play in any tradition per se. In this concluding section, I wish to highlight that role by exploring Hannah Arendt’s notion of an “enlarged mentality,” especially as that notion has been interpreted by Jennifer Nedelsky. Reflecting on the importance of making room within our traditions for the achievement of such a mentality will finally help us appreciate the way in which Stout’s Democracy and Tradition has made a signal contribution to this effort.

My own understanding of traditions is that they are internally heterogeneous; they are plastic and flexible enough to shelter a variety of people who fall on different points of a spectrum that runs from authoritarian conservatism on one end to democratic progressivism on the other.47 Furthermore, it is not necessary to understand these differing forces as essentially opposed, engaged in all out war for the soul of a particular tradition. One can also view the tension between these forces as productive, as part of what constitutes a tradition’s ongoing dialectic in which its members struggle, disagree, and sometimes come to agreement about how to sift the soul-uplifting from the soul-destroying elements of their own particular tradition. Because traditions are heterogeneous in this sense, it is just as important to practice democratic questioning and immanent criticism within them as it is between them. The upside of this practice, as Stout also affirms, is that, in addition to its admittedly corrosive effects, the attention it pays to particularity has the potential to enrich and enlarge the mentality of the interlocutors who engage in it.48

“Enlarged mentality” is the name Hannah Arendt gives to the result of the effort “to think from the other person’s standpoint” which is involved in a practice like immanent criticism. Our very ability to communicate with others, she says, depends on our ability to perform this operation: “[O]ne can communicate only if one is able to think from the other person’s standpoint; otherwise one will never meet him, never speak in such a way that he understands.”49
An important result of this practice is that, in coming to appreciate another person’s perspective in its particularity, one thereby enriches one’s own. Unless one is being simply manipulative, such effort can lead one to learn and sympathize with those aspects of another’s position that are truly compelling or morally forceful. Jennifer Nedelsky describes the way that such increased exposure to particularity in democratic society can enhance one’s power of judgment:

...if throughout their education, the citizens of a democracy are used to talking with and trying to understand and persuade people from backgrounds and experiences very different from their own, then the universe of standpoints available to their imagination for the purposes of judgment will have the necessary scope for the enlarged mentality that democratic deliberation requires.  

In a footnote to this passage, Nedelsky adds that “mere contact with diverse groups alone will not lead to the spirit of openness necessary for the enlarged mentality to flourish. The institutional settings must foster that spirit.” My sense, which Stout shares, is that the current liberal institutional framework does a rather poor job of fostering such a spirit, especially when it comes to respecting and making room for religious perspectives.

But is Arendt’s conception of the enlarged mentality, however seriously it takes particularity, in the end not itself just one more species of liberal cosmopolitanism? Does its pursuit not amount to one more corrosive acid eating away at particular traditions and the formative communities and identities they make available? Possibly, but not necessarily. For, according to both Arendt and Nedelsky, one never leaves one’s particular identity behind, even as this identity can and does evolve through meaningful contact with different groups. It is true that as our identities grow and change in this way, we may come to reject certain aspects of our tradition that we received through our acculturation into it. But it is also true to say that such critical purchase would never have been possible without the acculturation one’s tradition provided in the first place. While one may fear the potential of betrayal involved in making judgments against one’s community, Nedelsky reminds us that “there had to have been some dimension of that community (or its sub-communities) that equipped the one judging to make this painful judgment.” So, judging against one’s community as a consequence of pursuing an enlarged mentality does not necessarily involve one in a wholesale rejection of it, although this sometimes occurs as well. Nedelsky describes how we find both reactions in religiously-raised women who have come to question patriarchy and sexism: “...some women interpret the
religious traditions they were born into as irredeemably sexist, others devote great energy to proving that the deepest values of their traditions call for a rejection of patriarchal interpretations, however well-entrenched in institutional practice. In taking the latter path, religious women have both created and found room within their religious traditions to transform them in edifying ways. And they have managed to do so while continuing to identify themselves with those traditions. For Nedelsky, “there is always the question of whether the judging actor interprets [the rupture with her community] as a wholesale rejection or a judgment grounded in some dimension of the community whose current judgments she challenges.” In foregoing wholesale rejection, the judging actor takes the more difficult path of picking a quarrel with her tradition in a way that seeks to avoid the violence to one’s identity and constitution that is entailed “in a choice that simply rejects a once-constitutive community.”

The important point to keep in mind here is that such a person should not have to choose between his religious tradition, on the one hand, and the sort of democratic questioning that takes place in democratic societies, on the other. I should not have to check my religious or other traditional identity at the door in order to engage in such discussions, nor should my desire to maintain and publicize this identity lead to the uncharitable assumption that I uncritically accept everything my heterogeneous tradition promotes. What is more, such a requirement only serves to weaken these conversations by limiting the pool of perspectival resources from which the various discussants might draw. It thus forecloses on the possibility of achieving an enlarged mentality that could provide much needed common ground for the participants in these pluralistic discussions.

Finally, it is important to emphasize how the ongoing effort to achieve such an enlarged mentality differs from the liberal cosmopolitan search for common ground. The former effort does not, in Kantian fashion, merely view the other “as an interchangeable instance of the common sense of all the others.” Rather, it takes particularity seriously, and in doing so resists predicting in advance what shape any achieved common ground might take. If nothing else, Stout’s Democracy and Tradition encourages us, in an admirable spirit of human solidarity, to pursue whatever creative discursive strategies will aid us in our various attempts to come to a better appreciation of what divides us and what may yet unite us.

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS
I wish to acknowledge the financial support of a post-doctoral fellowship from the Social Science and Humanities Research Council of Canada, as well as the institutional support provided by the Department of Political Science at the University of Toronto and the Institute for Christian Studies in Toronto. The development of this essay owes much to conversations I have been fortunate to have with Hendrik Hart, Roger Hutchinson, Jennifer Nedelski, Christopher Brittain, Travis Kroeker, Mebs Kanji, the Faculty of the Institute for Christian Studies, as well as the students who participated in the “Pragmatism and Religion” seminar I led there.

NOTES

1. Jeffrey Stout, Democracy and Tradition (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2004), pp. 152, 151: “One becomes free to excel in soccer, jazz, essay writing, or cathedral building by participating in activities that place constraints on one’s behavior, where not just anything one does counts as acceptable, where people of superior experience and accomplishment can serve as role models and offer criticism.”

2. Ibid., pp. 77-85, especially pp. 78-79: “...conformity to the norms opens up the possibility of novel performances, which have the dialectical potential to transform the practice, thus changing its norms.”

3. Ibid., p. 152.

4. In what follows, I will not venture an assessment of Stout’s interpretation and criticism of Hauerwas. As opposed to assessing the fairness of this critique, I am more interested here in describing the way it helps him articulate his positive position. For those interested, Hauerwas has already published a response to Stout’s objections. See Stanley Hauerwas, “Postscript: A Response to Jeff Stout’s Democracy and Tradition,” in Hauerwas, Performing the Faith: Bonhoejfer and the Practice of Nonviolence (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Brazos Press, 2004), pp. 215-241.


6. Ibid., p. 152. I critically explore Stout’s suggestion concerning the relationship of democratic questioning to substantive traditions in section three.
While I will develop the point in more detail later, I must draw the reader’s attention here to the firm distinction Stout draws between “secularism” as an anti-religious ideology and “ secularization” as a historical process of pluralization that is not necessarily antithetical to the public expression of religious commitment. See ibid., p. 93.

8. See ibid., especially chapter 3, “Religious Reasons in Political Argument.” I note here something that Stout does not emphasize, which is the fact that Rawls’ position on religious expression softened considerably over time. As his “proviso” evolved, he gave more latitude to the expression of religious claims in political discussion, and also became less Kantian in his description of how the standard of public reason might be met. In one relatively late statement of the proviso, Rawls argues that any “comprehensive doctrine, religious or secular, can be introduced into any political argument at any time, but ... that people who do this should also present what they believe are public reasons for their argument. So their opinion is no longer that of one particular party, but an opinion that all members of society might reasonably agree to, not necessarily that they would agree to.” Elsewhere, Rawls claims that “the details about how to satisfy this proviso must be worked out in practice and cannot feasibly be governed by a clear family of rules given in advance.” See Bernard G. Prusak, “Politics, Religion, and the Common Good: An Interview with Philosopher John Rawls,” Commonweal 125 (25 September 1998): 14; and John Rawls, “The Idea of Public Reason Revisited,” in The Law of Peoples (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1999), p. 151. I thank Roger Hutchinson for clarifying this point.

9. The quotation is from Stout, Democracy and Tradition, p. 204.

10. Rorty has very recently backed off from his stronger formulations of this position. In a dialogue with Nicholas Wolterstorff, he has introduced a distinction in religious culture between “congregations of religious believers ministered to by pastors” and “ecclesiastical organizations” (by which he means bodies of religious professionals “who devote themselves not to pastoral care but to promulgating orthodoxy and acquiring economic and political clout”). He goes on to clarify that his secularist criticisms of religion are mainly anti-clerical in intent, and are not meant to impugn in toto the public activity of various religious laities. See Rorty, “Religion in the Public Square: A Reconsideration,” Journal of Religious Ethics 31 (2003): 141-142.

12. Ibid., p. 121.


15. In a perceptive essay on Rorty’s attitude toward religion, Hendrik Hart notices an important and instructive ambiguity in Rorty’s appeal to conversation in this context. See Hendrik Hart, “Consequences of Liberalism: Ideological Domination in Rorty’s Public/Private Split,” in Toward an Ethics of Community: Negotiations of Difference in a Pluralist Society, ed. James H. Olthuis (Waterloo, Ontario: Wilfrid Laurier University Press, 2000), pp. 40-41: “Rorty appears to suggest that in the public sphere we promote sharing by means of conversation, where conversation is almost as wide as civilized interaction. It is not only talk, but also film, music, plastic arts, novels, and television. At other times, however, conversation seems to depend crucially on argument, that is, on getting to share beliefs within the space of reasons.” Hart argues that this ambiguity surfaces particularly in Rorty’s discussion of religion, in which the former understanding of conversation is often invoked when the latter is actually at work, and that this leads to a “pseudo-rationalism” and a “pseudo-neutrality” in Rorty’s work that persists “in spite of his real efforts to get rid of both.”

16. Stout, Democracy and Tradition, pp. 87-88. Some of Stout’s critics, such as Christopher Brittain and Travis Kroeker, think that despite this admission Stout still maintains an uneven playing field that unfairly penalizes religious voices. Brittain bases this reservation on Stout’s claim on p. 86 that “[t]here are in fact many situations in which the introduction of religious premises into a political argument seems a sign of bad taste or imprudence on the part of a speaker.” On the same page, Stout explains that this is so because “in a setting as religiously divided as ours is, one is unlikely to win support for one’s political proposals on most issues simply by appealing to religious considerations.” If Stout is to remain consistent and evade such criticisms as those posed by Kroeker and Brittain, he must also declare the bad taste and imprudence of simple appeals to secularist premises in religiously divided settings.

17. See Rorty, “Religion as Conversation-Stopper,” p. 171, where he claims that the “ensuing silence” that follows a religious adherent’s public expression of her religious
motivations in a pluralistic setting “masks the group’s inclination to say, ‘So what? We weren’t discussing your private life; we were discussing public policy. Don’t bother us with matters that are not our concern.’”


19. Rorty, “Religion as Conversation Stopper,” p. 169. For the voicing of such doubt, see Hart, “Consequences of Liberalism,” p. 43: “For Rorty common sense is a public good. A final vocabulary is private. Liberalism is, for an ironist like Rorty, a private final vocabulary. Yet he also speaks of a final vocabulary that is ‘the common sense of the West’, which happens to be that of liberalism. I cannot construe this in any other way than as the classic liberal move of declaring its particular views to be common. In liberalism construed in this way, the public/private split goes all the way down except for liberals. The real distinction becomes an unreal split, but its unreality escapes detection because to its creators it appears as no real split at all. Their heart beats on both sides.”


23. Stout, Democracy and Tradition, p. 177. Stout here offers the image of a “reservoir of substantive respect” in his discussion of Seyla Benhabib’s attribution of a “rationality deficit” to traditions that display “moral conventionalism,” and thus insufficient critical reflexivity. Rorty’s point about religion is different, but I still think Stout understands it to deplete this reservoir no less than does Benhabib’s position.

24. Ibid., pp. 89-90. Stout astutely notes that, because Rorty does not have a problem with the legitimacy of faith claims or vocabularies that cannot be defended without circularity per se, the only ground left upon which he can recommend exclusion of religiously-motivated premises is the fact that they are not actually held in common. Rorty thus has something different in mind when speaking of commonly shared premises than the (early) Rawlsian notion of premises that all reasonable persons would accept.

25. Ibid., p. 88.

26. Ibid., p. 90.

27. Ibid., p. 90.
28. Ibid., p. 67. In positioning himself this way, Stout essentially disagrees that Rawls’ later articulations of the proviso differ significantly from earlier ones. See note 8.

29. See ibid., pp. 69-70, for an extended discussion of Rawls’ position on this score. On the exclusion of the public oratory of Lincoln and King as a possible consequence of the Rawlsian proviso, see Rawls, “The Idea of Public Reason Revisited,” p. 154, n. 54: “I do not know whether the Abolitionists and King thought of themselves as fulfilling the proviso. But whether they did or not, they could have. And had they known and accepted the idea of public reason, they would have.”


32. Ibid., pp. 72-73.

33. Ibid., p. 73.


35. Ibid., p. 111.


37. Charles Taylor, Sources of the Self: The Making of Modern Identity (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1989), p. 339. Taylor makes this criticism in a discussion of the “radical enlightenment” of the French Encyclopedists and others, a radically anti-traditional and anti-religious movement of the kind that Stout clearly eschews in Democracy and Tradition. Even so, Taylor’s point should not be lost on those who would pretend to engage in immanent criticism of their opponents’ views. To what extent does that criticism itself, short of being simply a manipulative strategy, derive its power and moral force from the tradition it contests?


39. Ibid., p. 115.
40. See ibid., p. 138.

41. Ibid., p. 116. I thank Christopher Brittain for highlighting the important role the alienated theologian plays in Democracy and Tradition.

42. Ibid., p. 13.

43. Ibid., pp. 40—41.

44. I owe my appreciation of this point to Murray Johnston.


46. For an example of the sort of “fresh” yet traditional religious interpretation I have in mind, see Flarold Kushner, The Lord is My Shepherd: Healing Wisdom from the Twenty-Third Psalm (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 2003); and Sylvia C. Keesmaat and Brian J. Walsh, Colossians Remixed: Subverting the Empire (Downer’s Grove, Ill.: InterVarsity Press, 2004).

47. See Stout, Democracy and Tradition, pp. 280-281, for the development of a similar understanding of the heterogeneity of religious tradition.

48. Feminist critique of scientific practice provides us with a (non-religious) example of the enrichment that can result from the appreciation of such particularity. Questioning the aptness of the androcentric metaphors that have historically dominated theories in cell biology, for example, has created space in which new perceptions of intracellular and extracellular relationships could emerge. So long as the androcentric metaphors completely dominated their theories, cellular biologists were unable to notice the “energetic” role that the egg plays in human fertilization, for example. See Athena Beldecos, et al., “The Importance of Feminist Critique for Contemporary Cell Biology,” in Feminism and Science, ed. Nancy Tuana (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1989), p. 172.


51. Ibid., p269, n. 70.

52. Ibid., p. 277.

53. Ibid., p. 277.

54. Ibid. p. 266.
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