

## Conversation and Closed Beliefs: How to Talk to a Fundamentalist

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Suggesting a way to stabilize the volatile mixture of religion and politics in public, Jeffrey Stout, in his book *Democracy and Tradition*, calls for “conversation” as a guiding principle in social and political life:

“By [conversation] I mean an exchange of views in which the respective parties express their premises in as much detail as they see fit and in whatever idiom they wish, try to make sense of each other’s perspectives, and expose their own commitments to the possibility of criticism” (Jeffrey Stout, *Democracy and Tradition*, 10-11).

If we can finally get everyone involved in the conversation, Stout says, maybe we have a shot at securing a peaceful pluralistic and democratic society. In response to Richard Rorty’s claim that religion is a conversation stopper and should therefore be banished from public life altogether (Rorty, *Philosophy and Social Hope*, 168-174), Stout firmly replies that it belongs in the public sphere as a legitimate voice that must be taken seriously. However, for belief holders, there is also a responsibility to “expose their own commitments to the possibility of criticism.” Conversation partners need to meet each other halfway.

In principle, this sounds like a beautiful path to a brighter future. But in reality, our society is full of people (including ourselves more often than we’d like to admit) whose views are not open to critique from others or even themselves and cannot provide reasons for their commitments. With surprising insight, one of the Urban Dictionary’s ([www.urbandictionary.com](http://www.urbandictionary.com)) definitions of “fundamentalist” rings true but also sounds a little too familiar:

“2. Fundamentalist: Person so desperate to be able to say things like "There can be no compromise!" and think things like "I am right and everyone else is wrong!" that they give up all critical thinking, accept literally the parts of a holy book that support their prejudices and take an unquestioning stance on one interpretation of a religion. They won't, of course, admit that it's only an interpretation; it's the ONE AND ONLY TRUTH. They often like to write words like TRUTH in BLOCK CAPITALS.”

How often do I hold a position that I think is unquestionably the TRUTH? If we go with this insightful but tongue-in-cheek definition, fundamentalists are found in all fields, not just religion, and most, if not all, of us have just a little fundamentalist in us. But this is exactly what Richard Rorty wants to get rid of in public life, because once you come up against the point where your conversation partner is no longer willing to budge, conversation reaches a deadlock. So the question remains: how can conversation be a guiding principle for public life when a portion of the population isn’t even open to discussion because of their beliefs?

Stout’s proposal to include religion in conversation as we “try to make sense of each other’s perspectives,” sounds like a productive way forward, but I think it needs to be qualified with an acknowledgement of the deep complexity of religion and religious belief. Religion, for many

people, is not a compartment partitioned off from all others; it informs and is informed by all of life, and few hold their religious convictions for only reasons of religious piety. Much of the difficulty and complexity in politics and even interpersonal relationships seems to arise out of this: we often do not understand the reasons for our own beliefs well enough to think critically about them. And if we do understand them, some beliefs are simply off limits from critical inquiry.

I think a distinction should be made here between “open” and “closed” approaches to religious commitments. Closed beliefs are those that are either inaccessible to critical inquiry or consciously off limits to criticism. In light of this distinction, Richard Rorty’s critique of religion in the public sphere holds consistent, as long as it is limited to closed religious beliefs. Understood in this way, of course closed religious beliefs are conversation stoppers; they are by definition rational impasses. The question remains, however, whether or not it is fair to say that closed religious beliefs, which many (if not all) of us hold to some extent, simply have no place in politics and public life.

Stout’s analysis, similar to Rorty’s (with this clarification), eloquently addresses how to introduce *open* religion to politics, or, alternatively, it suggests the need to *make* religion open to critical conversation; if you hold closed religious commitments, you need to open them up to the “possibility of criticism.” For closed believers, this is a legitimate cause for concern. Once beliefs are opened up, it is impossible to guard against the possibility of erosion. I suspect Rorty, and maybe Stout as well, would call this a good thing because of the way it might widen, nuance or modify our beliefs. But the constant flow of conversation can also carve canyons in our commitments so that we hold less and less strongly to them the more critical we become.

But this is just not a viable option for all religious people; some beliefs are understood to be simply off limits to modification and should be protected at all cost from erosion. So how do we deal with these closed beliefs in public life? Can we only allow some religion to enter politics if it is in the process of “opening” and only as long as it functions as an eventually defensible “IOU,” reasonable defense pending? And perhaps most importantly, is it fair to demand that religious belief holders need to crack open their closed core of sacred beliefs?