Divine Darwinism, Comprehensible Christianity, and the Atheist's Wager:

Richard Rorty on Mormonism— an Interview with Mary V. Rorty and Patricia Rorty

Stephen T. Cranney

Note: Richard McKay Rorty was one of the preeminent social philosophers of the twentieth century. His works, Philosophy and the Mirror of Nature *(Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 1978) and* Contingency, Irony, and Solidarity *(Cambridge, England: Cambridge University Press, 1989), helped shape the current discourse in political and moral philosophy, calling into question the presumptions of the analytic philosophy that preceded it. A prolific writer, he touched upon religious themes many times in his work. He died of pancreatic cancer on June 8, 2007. Stephen Cranney conducted this interview with his widow, Mary Rorty, a member of the LDS Church, on August 18, 2009, at her home in Palo Alto, California. Partway through the interview, we moved to a restaurant where their daughter, Patricia Rorty, joined us and participated in the interview. Our focus was Richard's experiences with and feelings about the Church.*

Cranney: Richard mentions in *Philosophy and Social Hope* the dangers of fundamentalist religions and the extent of their political influence. Where did Mormonism fit on the fundamentalist continuum?

Mary Rorty: That's a very interesting question because that's something that has changed a great deal in my lifetime. The thought that Mormonism now considers itself in part an ally of the Evangelical Protestant movement is a surprise to many people, and that's certainly not the side of Mormonism to which Richard had been exposed.

Cranney: Were there any specific instances . . . Of course, he died before Proposition 8 in California.

Mary Rorty: Not really, but there was Proposition 22 soon after we came to Stanford in 1997. The Church put considerable pressure on its members to do precinct walks, put up lawn signs, collect signatures, and contribute money, sometimes in "suggested" amounts to designated organizations. And of course, we shouldn't forget that when the Equal Rights Amendment came up, the Church, though more surreptitiously, got involved in defeating it, starting in 1978. We were married at that point, but it was a much less politicized issue, at least in the Princeton Ward. You didn't have to sign on to any political party's agenda to get involved in that particular discussion.

Cranney: So to the extent that the LDS Church got involved in these political issues, did Richard view that activity as a minor nuisance, or as part of a greater problem of religious involvement in politics, and as possibly structurally threatening to democracy?

Mary Rorty: That's a hard one. There's a lot of stuff in Rorty's work about the public/private distinction. On the anniversary of Thomas Jefferson's Virginia Statute of Religious Freedom—the document that set out the foundational notion of separation of church and state in America—Richard wrote about it. It harmonized very closely with Richard's attitude toward religion and politics: that they were different spheres of life, and that people could be fundamentalist or whatever, but that religious beliefs were their own business. Religion was not a matter for political manipulation.

I think he was quite daunted by, discouraged by—even mortified by—the extent to which, for instance, the George W. Bush administration began using religious questions as the basis for policy rather than considerations of what was good for the people. He saw this trend as reversing progress that had been made over the previous sixty years. He saw it as really a matter of cultural

transformation—one he regretted. That is something that would have become problematic about the Church for him—when the Church starts making an issue out of public policy.

But as far as the Church doing what churches are supposed to do—providing a sense of community, providing support, providing a realm of discourse for people with interests in common—he had no problem at all with that. He wasn't personally interested in that function of Mormonism, but he was not antagonistic. We had absolutely no problems about my raising our two children, Kevin and Patricia, as Mormon. He was, with very few exceptions, completely okay with that. His notion of what to do Sunday morning was to sit around reading the *New York Times* and take bird walks. We moved to the University of Virginia in 1992; and by that time, the kids were old enough to be involved in Sunday School. So one Sunday we'd go to church, and the next Sunday we'd bird watch. He was extremely fond of my Mormon mother, Vivian Varney; and when she was in town, he'd accompany us to church. When we came out to visit my brother, Joel Varney, in Mountain View, California, he would go to church with Mother. He was extremely fond of Mormon hymns. I think his favorite was "O My Father." Can you guess why?

Cranney: The verse about Heavenly Mother?

Mary Rorty: Yeah. He thought that was just a hoot. He thought the theology it represented was novel and fun.

Cranney: Did you ever feel that he possibly viewed the privatization of religion as part of a project to eclipse it, choke it off, and do away with it?

Mary Rorty: No, I don't think so.

Cranney: So his attitude was more "live and let live"?

Mary Rorty: Yeah, he felt that religion was not everybody's thing. But when it was, it was certainly everybody's personal business, everybody's privilege, and everybody's possibility. He'd had a moment when it played an important role in his life in terms of his own intellectual, emotional, and moral development. He grew up in a Troskyite household but explored other religions growing up, so, of course, he was not wont to begrudge others their own religious experiences. Does it make any sense to say some people are congenitally, by temperament, believers, and some people are

not? He was not, by temperament, a believer, but lots of people are, and he accepted that.

Cranney: Did he see the religious element in your life and in the lives of your associates in the Church as a beautiful thing in some ways? To have what he never really obtained—that single worldview of truth?

Mary Rorty: I don't think so. I think that he admired somebody like Desmond Tutu, who on the basis of religion—by means of religion, something that he strongly believed—had been able to advance human freedom. Immense admiration—but envy? No. He didn't think that religious energy was the only way to advance human freedom. He didn't think it was necessarily a better way to advance human freedom than the ways he felt he was finding to achieve the same goal. No envy there. Just admiration.

Cranney: Was he troubled by the absence in his life of any kind of—what would I call it?—spiritual comfort, answers to questions that other people had through their religion that he didn't have because he was not, by temperament, a believer?

Mary Rorty: No. And he was very critical of, skeptical of, alert to, the dangers of peddling that kind of comfort for either political or economic advantage. We were in Thailand, which has some of the most gorgeous Buddhist temples on the face of the earth. We visited one that had an incredible number—perhaps two hundred—gold Buddhas. I thought it was gorgeous, but it made Richard angry. "The gold could have fed the people!" He wasn't dead to aesthetic issues at all, although they were never very important to him compared to the political, but he was offended—offended by the money taken from the poor to build that beautiful temple. He thought that that was mean and bad. I'm very happy with a description of his attitude as being anticlerical rather than being atheistic. The existence or nonexistence of God wasn't the heart of his objection.

Cranney: He talks about *Das Kapital* and the New Testament and how both books are useful because they inculcate values in children that help them empathize with the poor. Did he ever read the LDS canon?

Mary Rorty: Absolutely. Certainly the Book of Mormon.

Cranney: What was his perspective on Mormon scripture? Did he find it as enjoyable as a work of literature?

Mary Rorty: There are lots of things that you can say about any of those things. Richard was very familiar with both the Old and New Testament, as a man who reads voraciously would be, and as a man who started reading voraciously early on would be. He didn't think that the prose style of the Book of Mormon was quite up to snuff, compared to the elegant Shakespearean language of the King James Bible. On the other hand, he had read *Roughing It* before he read the Book of Mormon. You remember Mark Twain's opinion about the prose style of the Book of Mormon?

Cranney: I remember two things in particular. One of them was: "It is chloroform in print. If Joseph Smith composed this book, the act was a miracle—keeping awake while he did it was, at any rate." And the other thing was: "'And it came to pass' was his pet. If he had left that out, his Bible would have been only a pamphlet."[1] Is that what you were thinking of?

Mary Rorty (laughs): That's right. I don't know if Richard read the Pearl of Great Price or the Doctrine and Covenants. I know that he read the Book of Mormon. Of course, the scriptures were lying around the house; and if we were in a Marriott Hotel and he had run out of murder mysteries, he would pick up the Book of Mormon again.

Richard and Harold Bloom were good friends, and both had a great admiration for the capacity of human beings to do things—for their imagination, novelty, ambition, including in the religious realm. Rorty rather admired Mormon theology; he thought that it was a great improvement over Catholicism. We had Sterling McMurrin's *Theological Foundations of the Mormon Religion* (1965) in the house, so Richard's view of Mormon theology was McMurrin's—not necessarily what the Correlation Committee has come out with. If you're a humanist—which he was—he thought that many of the ways in which Mormonism differed from Protestant religions are important. Mormonism is anti-Calvinist and anti-traditional Catholic. He thought that many of those differences were very positive.

One of his disappointments, I think, was when the Church itself became politicized, as it has over the gay-rights issue, because he thought the Church could do better than that. You don't need to grind your rather neat religion down to the lowest common denominator of Elmer Gantry; that's kind of a waste.

Cranney: So he thought of it in terms of: It's a pity, because Mormons have so much potential?

Mary Rorty: Yes. As religions go, it could have done a lot better.

Cranney: So, you said that there were different theological aspects that he felt were an improvement over some traditional religions. Which did you have in mind?

Mary Rorty: On any list of books that he admired, you'd have to include Darwin as well as Gibbon's *Decline and Fall of the Roman Empire*. "As man is, God once was, as God is, man may become," and some of the speculative theology that emerges from that doctrine—he thought that that was really cool, because of the notion of progression. He thought that the idea of eternal progression was just great. He liked the idea of a religion that builds into its expectations for its members a kind of progression on their part. He liked its evolutionary aspect. If you're a humanist, you can see that concept as a profoundly humanist ideal.

There's a kind of possible narrowing barrier-use of monotheism that says, in essence, "There's one God, and He's the only source of anything, and you're a bug in comparison to Him; and if you're not nice to Him, or don't believe in Him, you are damned." He saw Mormonism, in terms of this evolutionary theme, presenting God as an aspiration for human development, not something in comparison to which human beings are devalued. "As God is, man may become." He saw in that doctrine a barrier against some of the more invidious aspects of Christian denominations. It makes it harder to use Christianity in the ways that Nietzsche warned us against.

He wondered if Joseph Smith had read Milton's *Paradise Lost*. And that's a good question. I don't know if anybody knows the answer. Richard liked the idea of the three degrees of glory. He thought that was cool. It avoids the dichotomy of "you're either saved by grace or damned forever." He thought the Mormon concept of salvation was a humane improvement on much of the Christian tradition as institutionalized. He particularly liked the idea that the lowest grade of heaven is like this earth now. That's just fine. If that's as bad as it gets, then that's good enough.

Cranney: Did he ever read much about Joseph Smith? Or have any particular opinions on him?

Mary Rorty: Oh, absolutely. Fawn Brodie's *No Man Knows My*

History: The Life of Joseph Smith, the Mormon Prophet (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1945), for instance, sits in our library. He was charmed and delighted by the brilliance of Brigham Young. The man was a genius. It was the people that he spent some time reading about in the Church, not so much Joseph Smith as Brigham Young, and not so much their theology as the history or sociology. He thought that the history of the early Church was interesting. And the United Order, the kind of social engineering that was done in the early Church, was impressive to him.

Cranney: So does that outweigh the possible negative sentiments he might have had about the theocratic elements of Brigham Young's tenure?

Mary Rorty (laughs): I'm laughing because I very recently went back to *Roughing It* because of some other arcane things that I got involved in, and I was thinking about Mark Twain on polygamy. Richard thought that it would be personally very difficult—for the men. There's other stuff on polygamy that talks about it in terms of the social problems it was designed to solve, how effectively it did that, and the effect on the people who were actually involved in it. If you have six wives and one of them is taking a medical degree and another one is an accountant for your business, the one who still has little kids is running the daycare and another is teaching school, you've got possibilities for a division of labor that are super. He was interested in social engineering and the human ingenuity it could represent.

Cranney: Was his association with the LDS community his primary interaction with orthodox religionists?

Mary Rorty: Not completely. He was, for instance, invited to speak at Bob Jones University, and he taught one semester at Catholic University. He got involved with a sweet Italian man, Gianni Vattimo, and wrote a book with him called *The Future of Religion*. Columbia University Press published the translation in 2005. Of course, as the kind of child who's spending his spare time checking out all of the churches in his neighborhood, he was not unfamiliar with Catholicism. He went to the Methodist Sunday School, for a while. And religion was very much a part of the literary culture of the West.

He had a contrarian streak. I read the talk that he was going down to Bob Jones University to deliver. I remember asking,

"Rorty, you know, these are people who take religion quite seriously. Why are you taking this tone in exactly this context?" And he said, "If they wanted somebody to be nice about it, they wouldn't have invited me."

So I suspect that, apart from his own various encounters in his professional life, my raising the kids Mormon was probably his longest, ongoing exposure. Of course, that has to include my Mormon family, of whom he was very fond. My angelic Mormon mother spent four months a year with us from the time our kids were born. She'd come out to Princeton or Virginia or Australia or Germany, two months in the spring and two months in the autumn. And for quite a few years, we'd come out to Mountain View in the summers and hang around my brother's house. That was Richard's biggest exposure to institutionalized religion, and he got it in a very benign form. . . . (Chuckles). With one exception, nobody ever came up to him and said, "God wants you to do this."

Princeton was the high point in his encounter with my religion. We had some very, very, excellent home teachers there—very devout, intellectually lively, and interesting people. One of our home teachers, Scott Abbott, was writing his dissertation on German intellectual history. [See Scott Abbott's personal essay, which follows.] He and Richard were both interested in his topic, so the two had an intellectual relationship independent of the home teacher context in which they explored things of common interest.

Cranney: Did he view the LDS system as intellectually coherent in all its parts?

Mary Rorty: The kind of thing that we were just talking about, in terms of what, theologically, has made Mormons "a peculiar people," as we say with pride—this was all fairly intellectually coherent. I don't know how much Thomas Aquinas you've read?

Cranney: Just what I've picked up in an introductory course.

Mary Rorty: If you've spent your life wrestling with issues of a triune God or transubstantiation, you know the Mormons are a lot more intellectually coherent, frankly, than much of Christianity during its two-thousand-year history. There's something very admirable in that, something that Richard was very able to observe with a kind of distant amusement. Any institution gives you problems of hierarchy, gives you power differentials, gives you politics, gives you schisms—and I'm probably more inclined than

Richard to say you can't have one without the other; but all I can say about Richard's view is that there are aspects of many religions, any religion, all religions, that speak to human aspirations, that further them, that provide a context for them, and he could approve of that aspect of them. You know, for somebody like Rorty, for whom the important thing was language, language, language, you don't know what you think unless you can say it. Words are the tools of thought. You can get some words from religion in which to express what you understand and what you desire; and if you could have had that without the institutionalization, he would have been very pleased.

The other extreme of things—religion without intellectual content—is going to be what we call these days "spirituality." Did Richard have any interest in spirituality? If he had skepticism about institutionalized religion, did he think that spirituality might be an alternative route into the same territory? Many children of atheist parents describe themselves as spiritual but not religious. But in practice, that just means that you don't have a language to talk about it. You don't have a ritual to either interpret or react against. As far as Richard was concerned, that was just touchy-feelie crap. He had no interest in that.

Cranney: Did he have any particular reaction to, say, the September Six? What did he think about academic freedom with LDS intellectuals? Did he have any responses for that as far as you can remember?

Mary Rorty: Unless I brought an incident to his attention, he was not particularly informed about such crackdowns or other times when Mormonism hit the news. He had heard me talk about the early work of Michael Quinn, and we had his *Early Mormonism and the Magic World View* (Salt Lake City: Signature Books, 1987), but I don't know if Richard had read it. I was somewhat familiar with Sonia Johnson's work and her excommunication over her support of the Equal Rights Amendment in 1979. One of our good feminist friends was excommunicated *in absentia* from her Santa Cruz Ward in about 1982, and notified of the fact by mail. Richard and I both viewed these acts as signs that the Church was gradually retreating from what I had always described to him as its positive attitude toward education and intellectualism.

That academic freedom is very important for any academic in-

stitution is obvious; and Brigham Young University, where my brother, his wife, and his two children were educated, was a very obvious place for us to keep an eye on. We knew people who became faculty members there from our time in Princeton and from contacts elsewhere. Some academic freedom issues there hit the *AAUP Bulletin* when tenure was at stake. Richard was a lifelong member of the AAUP. So we worried when we saw things like that. But some intellectuals for whom he had a great deal of respect seemed to be able to get along okay at BYU. He spoke at the Y once or twice. Mark Wrathall, a Heidegger scholar, was at the Y at one point and organized an academic conference up at Sundance for which Rorty was the keynote speaker. So he had no reason to think of the Y as necessarily a hostile intellectual environment.

He had a wide acquaintance at other denominational academic institutions that he could compare with the Y in terms of their support of academic freedom. He had taught at Catholic University for a quarter, for instance, and had a very good Jesuit friend at Notre Dame, Ernan McMullin, with whom he had done some collaborative work. So he was aware of possible conflict between religious doctrine and intellectual content, and he had various standards of comparison to see how well my denomination handled that issue in its academic flagship. We didn't always excel. But he thought of it as a really good university, nonetheless; you can get a good education there, if you are careful.

Cranney: Did Richard have any particular perspective on the sociological side of Mormonism?

Mary Rorty: Any religion is a number of things. It's a theological vehicle, it's a social institution, it's a cultural artifact, it's a recipient of and transmitter of culture, it's a generator of culture, and it's a focus of belief. And Richard had different attitudes toward Mormonism depending on which aspect you consider. As a focus of belief, he had no interest in it at all—as I've already mentioned, because he wasn't, by temperament, a believer in religion. On the whole, he thought belief or faith was a pretty frail source of intellectual content.

He thought that Mormonism had an interesting, arcane, and novel history. He thought that it had a great deal of sociological genius. He really admired the way the Church was put together

and, indeed, in the way it still operates. He thought of it as one that kept a less sharp division between the hierarchy and the members than practically any church he knew; he was very impressed with the extent to which it is in fact run by lay people; and the more that it is run by those lay people and is in fact responsive to the membership, the more he approved of it. The more hierarchical it gets, with recommendations coming down through the hierarchy as to how you should vote or what your attitude should be toward things like gay marriage, the less he was in favor of it and the more it impinged on the things that made him skeptical of religion in general.

As a theological vehicle, he found Mormonism complex and interesting, and he was rather positive about it. And as an instance of the long tradition associated in the West around religion, he thought that it was a very young religion, devoid of many of the virtues as well as free of some of the vices of older traditions—like Catholicism, for instance—that had a long history and had accrued more, had assimilated more cultural baggage, had incorporated a wider range of the arts, had more rituals. As a young religion, Mormonism is fairly spare. As a generator of culture, he was fairly impressed by it. He thought that it was a very vital and, again sociologically speaking, a very—what's the word?—a very contagious religion.

Cranney: I have a quotation from *Philosophy and Social Hope*: "Christ did not return. Those who claim that he will do so, and that it would be prudent to become a member of a particular sect or denomination in order to prepare for his coming, are rightfully viewed with suspicion."[2] So, taking this statement as a transition, did he view LDS proselytizing efforts as arrogant?

Mary Rorty: Sociologically he saw them as extremely effective. But I'm not saying that he thought it was proper to proselytize. His suspicion of people who said that Christ was about to return is that he really drew a line between what was knowable and what was not knowable. You can't know that Christ is going to return, although you can believe it. So if you're an epistemologist, which he was, you have very clear notions and canons of justification of belief; and according to those canons, you cannot "know" that Christ is about to return, although you may believe it.

Cranney: Okay, so on this question; it's just a matter of certitude . . .

Mary Rorty: Yes and no. It's not just a matter of how psychologically certain you are of it. It's a question of the basis of that certainty, on what it is that your conviction rests. What is knowable in this way or that? What are the criteria by which you can say a claim is or is not justified? What counts as rational *grounds* for certainty?

Cranney: So it's not necessarily that he thinks that we should view with suspicion the people who believe that it's going to come. It's the ones who say, "It's imminent. We need to change things—to prepare—because I know this."

Mary Rorty: Yes. "I know this, and you ought to believe me when I say it." It sounds silly to say that he would view more kindly somebody who said, "I believe that Christ is coming tomorrow" than somebody who says, "I know that He's coming tomorrow." But that kind of thing does matter. More important, probably, for him is the whole business of proselytizing on the basis of fears or hopes that have nothing to do with improving the human condition. That's a distraction from what you *can* do. For what purpose should I believe what you say about Christ's coming tomorrow? Who profits, in power or money, if I do?

Cranney: So it's not just what he would consider the unsavory epistemological assumption of knowing . . .

Mary Rorty: Well, that's certainly a part of it, but, no. Proselytizing—I would say that he was probably not in favor of proselytizing as a component of a religion. I think that someone's religious belief is probably not something that he'd consider anyone else's business.

I wonder what he would have said if I had told him that Kevin was going to go on a mission. Would he have forbidden it? No. What he might have said is, "If you want to send him on a mission you can." (And I could have done that; my mother had established missionary funds for all of her grandkids.) So, Kevin would have had the ability to go on a mission without requiring his father's support, and that was completely consistent with the independence that Richard was willing to maintain about religion. But I suspect he would have tried to argue for a service mission, instead of a proselytizing one, if that's an option for nineteen-year-olds. I

know he greatly admired my mother's eighteen months as a health missionary in El Paso.

Cranney: So, maybe institutionally he had some misgivings, but it seems from what you've told me that Richard would seem to be okay with a mission if that was Kevin's personal choice.

Mary Rorty: Yeah, I don't know. It didn't come up with Jay, our oldest kid from his first marriage. Jay's mother is Jewish, and Jay was eleven or twelve when Richard and I married. But I don't think that there was ever any question about whether she wanted to raise Jay Jewish or not. It just didn't come up. But I'm not sure how Richard felt about that.

Cranney: So, from Richard's perspective, you mentioned earlier that he thought the quickest way to truth was in a democratically elected society where there's freedom of expression and where information is free flowing. So, he did believe in truth, but he believed that it was entirely historically contingent and that there was no way of looking at it and gauging it from outside the system. Correct?

Mary Rorty: I want to qualify that description with Richard's notion of historicity, of progress, as well. There are facts in the world, right? So consider our knowledge about heliocentrism versus geocentrism. The confirmed fact is that the earth does go around the sun, and not vice versa, and that is true. Unqualifiedly true. And we have a greater approximation of "truth" in some aspects of culture—math, or science, whatever—than we might have had before, at an earlier stage of human history. There's no doubt that, according to the best analytic philosophy canons of what it means to say that something is red, there is no doubt on earth that the sentence, "This is red," is true of some objects.

Cranney: So in what ways is he not a relativist?

Mary Rorty: We know that the sun doesn't revolve around the earth. We know that if you stick your hand in the fire it will burn. We know that if you make certain decisions about how you behave, there will be certain consequences. We know that. I'm moving away from chemistry into various behavioral, increasingly psychologically complicated things, but we know things on that level.

Cranney: But in terms of morality?

Mary Rorty: In terms of morality, I know that if I punch Joe in the face, he's going to punch me back. I know that.

Cranney: Is that morality or psychology?

Mary Rorty: Well, or is it politics? I know that if I bomb a village, the people there aren't going to like me. Or at least, I should know that, if I'm rational.

Cranney: I mentioned the possibility earlier that there are some lingering foundationalist tendencies. If I harm a child, that's wrong. So how do you think that Richard would justify holding these perspectives on truth, saying this or that is wrong. In one of his books he mentions what he would say to a Nazi commandant, for example. So, how does he justify . . .

Mary Rorty: What are you asking for when you speak of "foundations"? What is there other than how you react in situations that demand choosing? Is there a sense of right and wrong other than the following: This is what I choose, and I accept the consequences—to others, and to the kind of person my action makes me? How much beyond that do you have to go?

I think that Rorty might argue that what "true" means when you talk about matters of possible fact has to do with how any given claim fits into the context of associated factual claims. And what you might have in mind if you say something like "harming a child is wrong" is a different kind of claim. It might be something more like Luther's: "Here I stand, and I can do no other." Or something like: "A person who could do that is not a person with whom I wish to identify myself, not a person who acts according to my notion of how people should aspire to act . . . " If you want a "foundation" for that kind of claim, what are you asking for? Isn't there a difference between a fact and a choice? If not, what's a doctrine of free will worth? Is a "foundation" something that you look for that will remove from you the necessity of actually choosing—that will remove from you the onus of your responsibility for your choices?

On the subject of belief: I think you know Pascal's wager?

Cranney: Yes. He asks: Why would you not believe in God? "What harm will befall you in taking this side? You will be faithful, honest, humble, grateful, generous, a sincere friend, truthful. Certainly you will not have those poisonous pleasures, glory and luxury; but will you not have others? I will tell you that you will thereby gain in this life, and that, at each step you take on this road, you will see so great certainty of gain, so much nothingness

in what you risk, that you will at last recognize that you have wagered for something certain and infinite, for which you have given nothing."[3] The quick-and-dirty version is: "Since we can't *know* whether God exists—should we believe in Him, or not? If He exists, He will reward us for our belief; and if He does not exist, we lose nothing for having believed." Where Pascal (in my version) and Rorty (in my version) disagree is in the relation between belief and responsibility: Pascal evidently (as seen by your more extensive quote) thinks that belief is essential for right action. Rorty thinks it is neither necessary nor (alas!) sufficient.

Mary Rorty: Right. What's Rorty's wager?

Cranney: You should just be nice, because . . .

Mary Rorty: Rorty's wager is: "If there is a God and if He is good, He will not judge me on the basis of whether I believed in Him or not. He will judge me on the basis of my life, my choices, my decisions, and the responsibility that I've accepted for them. And if He does not, I don't regret not having believed in Him."

Cranney: Doesn't that still presuppose a moral system?

Mary Rorty: Yes, it does, but when you inextricably attach your moral system to God's will or God's word, to anything that transcends your choices and your responsibility for them, your humanity, then free will is unnecessary. But how *does* one become worthy of the celestial kingdom? As a minimum: by becoming a grown-up. And that means taking responsibility for choices. Maybe it doesn't *presuppose* a moral system. Maybe it *is* a moral system.

Cranney: But is that not what you're basing your moral system on then? As opposed to our individual circumstances?

Mary Rorty: What makes us human is our ability to remember the past (which we all don't necessarily do), and to anticipate the future, and to determine our behavior, our choices, on the basis of our imagination, our capacity to anticipate the future and what we want it to be, and our ability to choose between alternatives on how to deal with our circumstances. That's what makes us human. That's the basis of morality. Choices. Responsibility. Consequences. Accepting, thinking about it, choosing, taking responsibility for the results. Is it essential, à la Kant, to make a logical deduction about whether lying is self-contradictory or not? Is the claim that God tells you not to lie any better? No. Morality is so extraordinarily, centrally, based in human consciousness and agency, our

ability to act in the world, that any other foundation is pretty irrelevant.

Cranney: So, a large part of Richard's system was based in what distinguishes us as humans? And then he worked off that?

Mary Rorty: [Nods]

Cranney: I think that's about it. Do you have any other salient points that you think I possibly missed?

Mary Rorty: Well, I could tell you some funny stories. When my kids were in high school in rural Virginia, the bishop, a very well-intended man, but not very sophisticated, asked me if I would teach seminary. I thought that was an absolutely fabulous idea. As I told you, I'm a theology freak, right? I have lots of books; I minored in religion. So that would make it very interesting for me to teach Old Testament, New Testament, or Church history. It would have been an absolute hoot. "Yes!" I said. "Great," said the bishop. "I'll come talk to your husband." "What?" "I'll come talk to your husband." I said, "Wait, you don't want to do that. I'm the Mormon. You want me to do something for the Church, and this is a calling I would enjoy a great deal, I'll be glad to do it, so what's the problem?" He said "I'm sorry, but we need to have your husband's permission." I said, "Okay, come talk to him, but you'll be sorry."

So this sweet man gets in a suit, and he comes out and sits at my dining room table, asks me to leave the room, and then asks Richard if he would be willing to have me accept this calling. Richard looked at him in amazement and said, "You mean I can say no?" And the poor bishop said "Yes."

"NO!" Richard hollered, with a maniacal gleam in his eye. I hadn't asked him if I could do it, or given him the option of saying no, and none of the more sophisticated bishops that we had been dealing with earlier had made that kind of mistake. But he figured that if they were going to be fool enough to ask him whether he wanted me to get up at 6:00 every morning and teach seminary, he'd tell them what he thought. That seems to me absolutely hilarious and very typical of his attitude toward me and our church. Was he a feminist? Well, he sure as hell wasn't a patriarch.

Cranney: So was that because he resented the fact that the bishop felt that he had to get his permission?

Mary Rorty: Right. He felt that it was offensive to me—that the bishop would have to ask him whether I could do something. He

was quite offended on my behalf. I wasn't offended particularly. I just thought it was a bit short-sighted of the bishop, if he really wanted me to do it, and I told him so; but Richard was very offended.

Another family story—it's actually Patricia's story. When we were in Berlin, the only people who spoke English were the Mormons in the ward. Patricia was about ten or eleven and had a period of intense religious fervor. She decided at some point that she was going to try to convert her father. Something similar had happened with my mother when she got back from her mission. I had probably been married five years by then, but it was long enough that Mother had gotten acquainted with Richard's radical views. She wrote and asked how I would feel about her trying to convert him. I asked him how he would feel about it, and he said, "She's welcome to try." I ended up writing her a letter that said the best method of trying to convert him would be by example—to be who she was—which she did. He loved her dearly and admired her a great deal. Probably his respect for her determined whatever amount of respect he had for the Church. But he never converted.

[At this point, the interview moved to a restaurant where Patricia Rorty joined us.]

Cranney: We talked earlier about how Richard had a complicated relationship with religion—how in some respects he really recognized the good that it did, but that he had a decided anticlericalism where the institution was concerned. What do you think he thought of the institution of Mormonism?

Patricia Rorty: I don't know. All that I can really think about is Prop 22 and Prop 8. I don't know how he felt about the institution before that. Maybe there's a larger arc to those implications.

Mary Rorty: Insofar as I'm a casual, inside/outside observer of the Church, it seems to me that it has become more conservative and more politicized in the last fifteen years. It was thirty-five or forty years ago that Richard first met the Church in my own sweet person, and he was less conscious than I of that kind of retrenchment, but he did become aware of it, especially when it erupted into the public sphere. I've been aware that the media is much more alert to the Church's involvement in political issues in the

past few years, so it's more likely to get publicity when it takes a political stand, even if it calls it a "moral" issue.

Patricia Rorty: I think that Richard was pretty clear that the Church did great things for his kids and he was for it in that context; but in terms of his relationship with the institution and whether it promoted or prevented cruelty, I think that it failed to meet his test. In his writings, he talks about the importance of tolerance, of not discriminating against gays and lesbians, and I think he would have seen the Church as going wonky somewhere on that issue.

Mary Rorty: He was fine in terms of 10 percent to charity. He thought the Mormon rule of tithing was fine, and he tried very hard to approximate that in terms of his own contributions to Oxfam, Amnesty International, the ACLU, César Chávez and the United Farm Workers. He thought that was extremely important. I don't know—is it any different to contribute 10 percent to César Chávez than it is to contribute 10 percent to the Mormon Church? Both of them are special constituencies.

Patricia Rorty: Sure, and if they both give it to the people who need it, there's no difference. Everybody operates on identity politics.

Cranney: Patricia, it seems to me that in Richard's writings he's very adamant that we should be involved in working against injustice. He's very ardent about taking that position, but there are elements of that position that are antagonistic toward organized religion. So what was the interplay between anticlericalism and the fact that you have an LDS mother?

Patricia Rorty: He's not a pulpit thumper, right? He's not the guy who says, "It's my way or the highway" in his personal life. My mother's Mormonism was just fine with him, and so was ours.

Cranney: Your mother said I should ask you about your attempt to convert Richard to Mormonism when the family was living in Germany.

Patricia Rorty (laughing): I was the pulpit thumper then. Eleven years old, trying to convince him of the rightness of The Way, wearing my little CTR ring in Berlin, praying all the time, and reading the Book of Mormon really ostentatiously in the middle of the room. And I feel that he tolerated whatever Bible-thumping I was doing.

Mary Rorty: Did you have conversations about that with him?

Patricia Rorty: I remember throwing away all the alcohol in the house once we got back to the States.

Cranney to Mary Rorty: With your permission?

Patricia Rorty (laughing): Oh, heavens, no. What I remember is that he tolerated my antagonism, rather than generating any antagonism of his own toward the Church.

Cranney: So he modeled tolerance for you?

Patricia Rorty: Absolutely. I think that the Church was good for him, in a way, because it made structure and systems for his kids. I can't speak for Kevin, but it was very helpful for me that wards are basically the same in every country in the world, and that the buildings look the same, and that there's basketball every Wednesday no matter what language we're speaking. So I don't think that Dad had any sort of ideological position about the Church not being good. The Church is good.

Cranney: I asked your mother if Richard ever read the Doctrine and Covenants and the Pearl of Great Price. Do you know?

Patricia Rorty: I presume so. How could he not read it? You can't bring a topic to his hand and then expect him to ignore it. He wasn't ignorant on any point to my knowledge. If he heard about it, he'd find out about it. I'm sure that he was familiar with the text.

Mary Rorty: I asked him at one point how much of Mormonism Harold Bloom got right in his book on American religions.[4] Bloom takes Baptists and Mormons as his case studies. It's a really smart book, and explains a lot about why an American pragmatist would appreciate some things about Mormonism. And I got a fairly sophisticated and detailed answer: He's good on this, he's not good on that . . . Richard probably wouldn't do anything like a textual comparison of the creation accounts in Genesis with the Pearl of Great Price, though. It didn't interest him that much.

Patricia Rorty: I never had a discussion with him about the specific content in the Doctrine and Covenants or the Pearl of Great Price; but I have to say that the only way he *wouldn't* have read them was if he took some sort of obstinate, reactionary position—which he never took about books. Ever. Any book. Ever. He'd read anything to find out what's going on. So I think you're

safe in saying that he read them, but I have no idea what they meant to him.

Mary Rorty: He knew very well where Christ was supposed to have spent those few days when he was in the tomb.

Patricia Rorty: Remind me. Was it Missouri?

Mary Rorty: Now, woman, am I going to have to send you off to a Gospel Doctrine class? (laughing) When I talk about these things, the role of religion for him was secondary. What was primary was whether a religion served the poor and defended the downtrodden. He admired a religion when it expressed a social gospel or liberation theology.

Patricia Rorty: Religion is a tool, like philosophy or literature.

Mary Rorty: That's an explanation about why it's so easy, when you talk about him and religion, to separate out questions of faith and to separate the religion from the institution, and to separate clericalism from the theology. He didn't appraise it as a monolithic whole. He appraised it as it acted in the service of the things that he valued most. Does that sound fair?

Patricia Rorty: Yeah. It was really good when it was really good to his kids, and then it started hurting his kids' feelings when political stuff started coming up, and then it was bad.

Cranney: It seems as if, with his Christian ancestor Walter Rauschenbusch, founder of the Social Gospel, that his own position could have been a trans-generational attempt to secularize Christian values.

Patricia Rorty: I don't know about that.

Cranney: Okay, your grandfather's a Baptist theologian, your parents are Trotskyites, and you're a secular theologian. Did you ever get that sense that—

Mary Rorty: —they were progressing away from God—

Cranney: —while still retaining the core elements of Christianity?

Patricia Rorty: Maybe I'm a black and white extremist, but I think that what he had perfected was the skill of swinging away from your parents.

Mary Rorty: Action-reaction, with him as the synthesis?

Patricia Rorty: More Hegel than not.

Mary Rorty: My impression of Winifred (his mother) was that she was reacting against Walter (his grandfather), so Richard was

like, "To hell with both your churchy and your anti-churchy reactions," and he went off into a different corner. I think his understanding of religion was neither belief nor denial but a kind of indifference. No, I don't *think* that. I *know* that, for myself . . . Do you know Dan Savage?

Cranney: No.

Patricia Rorty: Dan Savage writes a newspaper column. He is a gay man with a husband and an adopted child, and he talks about when Cheney's daughter came out as a lesbian. He said, in essence, "Maybe some of you people on the Cheney side of this country think that we gays are rejoicing. We gays are not rejoicing. We have a child, and the terror for me and my husband is that our child will become a reactionary, radical, pulpit-pounding, Christian rightist who does terrible things, from our perspective." The concluding line of this article is: "The only thing that you can count on for sure, no matter what you vote or how you live, is that your kids will break your heart." I love that article.

So, I think that Dad's belief, his hope, was that he would protect us from becoming reactionary fundamentalist Christians by being exposed to, inoculated by, a fairly benign church experience. We did have a positive church experience. We left it, but we left it with some good memories. I'd say that we avoided the swing back. We didn't react by taking a position in opposition to whatever Dad's position was. We had a kind of dad/mom split, so we could take a position against this, then take a position against that, and we can come to a middle ground. But I do think that kids will break your heart.

Cranney: Did you get any secular influence from your father?

Patricia Rorty: Do you remember when Salman Rushdie's *Satanic Verses* came out?

Mary Rorty: Yeah . . .

Patricia Rorty: So, I was reading something in *Newsweek* and said something like, "Well, he was asking for it." Oh, my word, was Dad ever mad at me! He just snapped, "No, he wasn't!" So I knew what I did was wrong in terms of taking a fundamentalist position. But you know, Dad wasn't a pundit, not a guy who explained a lot, or talked endlessly about his "views."

Mary Rorty: Which is so crazy, when you think about it, be-

cause there was nothing that he ever thought that he didn't write down and publish. How can we say that he's not a pundit?

Patricia Rorty: I used to sidle up to him and say, "Daddy, why don't you tell me everything you think and feel?" And he'd say, "I wrote it down." But he wasn't going to tell me anything. It was written down. There wasn't any preaching in our relationship.

Mary Rorty: He certainly wrote, and wanted people to read it, and that's why he wrote it; so it's not that he lacked conviction. No, and it's not that he had "secret doctrines" that he was unwilling to share. But he would not have—I don't know. Would he have fought with me for the souls of our children? I don't know.

Patricia Rorty: That's a losing proposition!

Notes

1. Mark Twain, *Roughing It* (1872; rpt., New York: Holt, Rinehart and Winston, 1961 printing), 83.

2. Richard Rorty, *Philosophy and Social Hope* (New York: Penguin, 2000), 201.

3. Blaise Pascal, *Pensées*, note 233, http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Pascal%27s_wager (accessed January 14, 2010).

4. Harold Bloom, *The American Religion: The Emergence of the Post-Christian Nation* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1993).