Jon Stewart and The Daily Show: Humor, Ethics and Conversation in the Public Square

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JON STEWART AND THE DAILY SHOW:
HUMOR, ETHICS AND CONVERSATION IN THE PUBLIC SQUARE

by

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Jon Stewart, host of the Comedy Central television show *The Daily Show*, uses several techniques that are notable with regards to religious studies. Most notably, Stewart uses humor as a way to diffuse tension and reveal hidden or obfuscated truths about current events. He also uses jokes and observations about religion to comment on the news, while using the techniques of conversation (as described by Jeffrey Stout) and sympathy (as explained by Richard Rorty) to be an effective public journalist and activist. In this paper, I examine these aspects of Stewart’s show and demonstrate that, because of these techniques, Stewart is able to generate concrete results in the realms of religion and ethics.
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CHAPTER 1
INTRODUCTION AND THEORETICAL BACKGROUND

Before becoming the host of *The Daily Show* in 1999, Jon Stewart worked at an eclectic mixture of jobs; after his graduation from the College of William and Mary in 1980, Stewart worked as a bartender, for the New Jersey Department of Health, as a puppeteer, and finally, as a stand-up comedian. As a fledgling satirist, Stewart frequently drew on something he knew would get laughs from his audience: religion. Being Jewish, Stewart had an easy “in” for discussing religion; because he was open about being religious himself, his jokes about religion were automatically seen as friendly insider banter rather than the snarky observations of an outsider. In 1996, Stewart performed a stand-up show in Miami called “Unleavened,” in which his observations about religion brought down the house. After mocking the Pope's elaborate headwear, Stewart moved on to Easter, wondering aloud how celebrating the resurrection of Jesus came to include Easter eggs. “Did Jesus have some sort of a problem with eggs?” Stewart asked in mock puzzlement, then putting on his version of Jesus's voice, which is the same nasal voice he frequently uses on *The Daily Show* when he is imitating an elderly Jewish man: "Hey, by the way, when I come back, if I see any f***ing eggs... No, I'm serious, I'm allergic! I don't give a s***, just paint 'em and hide 'em, get 'em out of my sight!" After uproarious laughter from the audience, Stewart continues: “What is the significance of Jesus with eggs? I've actually been thinking about it. How many disciples did Jesus have? Twelve. How many eggs are in a carton? Coincidence? I don't think so!”

Stewart has since moved on from full-time standup, but his tongue-in-cheek approach to religion continues to inform his comedy; on *The Daily Show*, Stewart acknowledges the important place religion in the lives of many, while at the

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2 Ibid.
same time seizing opportunities to poke fun at religion whenever he can. In addition to being very funny, however, Stewart's comedy about religion has many layers. Beneath the lighthearted humor lies a serious commentary about the way we talk about religion in the public square, and, even more importantly, the results of talking about religion the way we do. Stewart is constantly pointing out instances where politicians over exaggerate, hype up, misconstrue and generally use religion as a tool to serve their own purposes rather than those of their constituents. In some instances, Stewart goes so far as to say that talking about religion in these ways constitutes ethical wrongdoing. While he is not so pointed in his commentary most of the time, it is obvious when watching his show that Stewart finds overblown rhetoric to be a huge barrier to fruitful conversation and meaningful action. Humor, Stewart's tool in deflating rhetoric, allows him to discuss serious matters in a lighthearted way, coming to insightful conclusions while not coming across as stiff and moralistic to his audience.

By using the technique of deflating rhetoric through humor, Jon Stewart is participating in what Jeffrey Stout calls “conversation.” By “conversation,” Stout means much more than simply talking; in his 2004 book *Democracy and Tradition*, Stout defines conversation as “an exchange of views in which the respective parties give 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.”³ In offering this definition, Stout is reacting to other possible ways of conceptualizing how citizens in a diverse America can come to consensus about issues which defy easy resolution; rather than insisting that citizens appeal to “premises held in common” when exchanging opinions, as does American philosopher John Rawls, Stout puts no restrictions on the types of reasons that can be put forth in the public square

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as long as the reasons are presented truthfully and respectfully.⁴ In *Richard Rorty: Critical Dialogues*, David Owen briefly summarizes Rawls' position on the correct way to conduct public conversations, saying: “Rawls's position is this: public reason, understood as the reason of the public directed to the good of the public and matters of fundamental justice, should be restricted to reasons which are, in principle, acceptable to all as free and equal members of the polity.”⁵ Religious reasoning is, therefore, usually excluded from public discussion because religious reasons are not “in principle, acceptable to all as free and equal members of the polity” unless the religious reason can be equated to (or disguised as) a secular reason. Rawls's position, of course, is only appealing to those who do not want to bring their religious beliefs into the public square; for many religious people, Rawls's belief that religion should stay out of public discussion is nothing short of hostile.

Beyond the methodological question of how different parties ought to talk about religion in the public square, i.e. in a Rawlsian manner or following Stout's method of conversation, an even more basic question lies in the background: Do religious discussions have a place in the public square at all? There is wide disagreement amongst scholars about this question. Richard Rorty is of the opinion that religious reasoning is almost always harmful, or at the least unhelpful, in public discussions about politics and ethics and ought to be kept out of public discussions altogether. In other words, religion needs to be “privatized.” Rorty voiced this opinion in his controversial essay "Religion as a Conversation-Stopper"; as the title suggests, in the essay Rorty says “the main reason religion needs to be privatized is that, in political

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Rorty wrote “Conversation-Stopper” in response to a 1999 book by Stephen Carter called *The Culture of Disbelief*, in which Carter argues that requiring religious believers to keep their religious beliefs out the public square is unfair. In response to Carter, Rorty looks to the "Jeffersonian compromise" in which religious expression is protected as long as it does not start to influence secular government. Rorty thinks that this arrangement is fair for all involved, as long as it is respected; the problem, says Rorty, is that religious people don't think the arrangement is fair at all. Ironically, Rorty takes a lot of criticism for his forceful opinion about religion in the public square, but he takes even more criticism for the way he presents his arguments, which often seem insensitive and purposefully short-sighted. Representing the religious side of the argument, Nicholas Wolterstoff, Emeritus professor of philosophical theology at Yale University, wrote a response to Rorty, “An Engagement with Rorty,” which appeared in the “Journal of Religious Ethics” in 2003. Wolterstoff approaches the problem from a different angle; while Rorty appears to think that a conversation ending is the worst possible outcome of that conversation, Wolterstoff asks, “What's so bad about reaching an impasse in political discussions?” Wolterstoff is surprised by how fully Rorty believes that religious reasoning shuts down conversation; he says, “Well, yes, for some people it does - though not, be it noted, for others. It wouldn't stop me! By the same token, a Darwinian pragmatist reason tossed into a discussion by religious people might well stop the conversation.” Wolterstoff calls Rorty on his inconsistent argument, and notes that he is pretty sure that Rorty is aware of what he is doing, though why he is being purposefully inconsistent he does not know. We have to assume

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8 Wolterstorff, 132.
that Rorty thinks religious reasoning is a menace to political and ethical discussion, but Darwinian pragmatist reasoning is not – it just feels that way to him, but he is not willing to acknowledge that religions reasoning feels right to religious people in exactly the same way as pragmatist reasoning feels right to him. At the end of his essay, Wolterstoff concludes that eventually, all conversations end, and when conversations reach an impasse in America, we resolve the problem – theoretically - by taking a vote. The only difference between Wolterstoff and Rorty on this point is that Rorty hopes that conversations can end in agreement rather than a vote that might make a significant portion of citizens unhappy, and Wolterstoff is not seeking “universal intersubjective agreement,” but simply to keep presenting reasons for beliefs as long as possible until the reasons are exhausted.9

Four years after he published "Conversation-Stopper," Rorty revisited the subject in "Religion in the Public Square: A Reconsideration," which appeared alongside Wolterstoff's essay in the Journal of Religious Ethics. In this essay, Rorty softens his inflexible opinion about the place of religion in the public square, agreeing with Jeffrey Stout that religion is not essentially a thorn in the side of democratic discussion. The fundamental problem, according to Rorty, is that while religious arguments do not necessarily stop conversations, it is difficult to keep a conversation going when an appeal to religious authority is offered with no other support. Thus, Rorty's problem with religious reasoning is not the reasoning itself, but the possibility that religious reasoning will be offered with no other support. Rorty says:

I would not consider myself to be seriously discussing politics with my fellow-citizens if I simply quoted passages from Mill at them, as opposed to using those passages to help me articulate my views. I cannot think of myself as engaged in such discussion if my opponent simply quotes the Bible, or a papal encyclical, at me... What should be discouraged is mere appeal to authority.10

9 Ibid, 130.
In these sentences Rorty is hoping to lend support to his belief that religious arguments should not be taken seriously unless they are accompanied by other, non-religious reasons, but instead this quote illustrates one of the reasons why religion will probably never be separate from public discussion of politics and ethics. While Rorty thinks (or at least says he thinks) that quoting John Stewart Mill with no other support does not constitute an appropriately supported position, a Christian who thinks that the Bible is the infallible word of God probably would not think that a reason stemming from the Bible needs any other support. Thus, Rorty's argument comes across as menacing to many religious believers, though it probably makes sense to Rorty's fellow liberal philosophers.

As we will see later on, both Rorty and Stewart are more focused on prominent voices in the conversation than those of the average person; an individual blogging about her personal religious convictions for being anti-gay, for example, is not at all the same as a presidential candidate opposing gay marriage by quoting the Bible. In his "Reconsideration," Rorty makes it clear that his quarrel with religious convictions is aimed mostly at ecclesiastical organizations, not individuals. Rorty is still opposed to religious reasoning being used in the public square in general, even though he is much more critical of people in power using such reasoning. In “Reconsideration,” Rorty also talks about the ethical component of religious reasoning, objecting to the way that people can hide behind religious reasoning in order to say things they otherwise would not say. He uses the example of using proof texts to oppose same-sex marriage, saying:

Here, I cannot help feeling that, though the law should not forbid someone from citing such texts in support of a political position, custom should forbid it. Citing such passages should be deemed not just in bad taste, but as heartlessly cruel, as reckless persecution, as incitement to violence. Religious people who claim a right to express their homophobia in public because it is a result to their religious convictions should, I think, be ashamed of themselves, and should be made to feel
Here Rorty shows that he supports the Jeffersonian compromise, but he makes it clear that the compromise does not give people the liberty to say anything they want as long as they cloak it in religious belief. He gives another, more specific example of what he means, saying:

People who quote Leviticus 18:22 with approval should be shunned and despised. Our attitude to them should be the same as that toward people who remark that, though of course Hitler was a bad thing, it cannot be denied that the Jews did kill Christ - or, to vary the example, people who urge that, although the lynch mobs went too far, it is a truly terrible thing for a white woman to have sex with a black man.  

Rorty uses these examples to demonstrate the tension between the fact that it is still acceptable to publicly oppose same-sex marriage as loudly as one wants, but it is no longer acceptable to oppose interracial marriage. Opposing interracial marriage would spell political disaster for a presidential candidate, but it is almost expected that candidates are religiously opposed to same-sex marriage. The part of the discussion that is missing in the public square, Rorty says, is an explanation of why certain Biblically-supported positions are no longer considered appropriate, why others still are. Rorty's suggestion that because of this, we remove all religious reasoning from political discussion is not very helpful, but he is very insightful in pointing out how easy it is to hide cruel speech behind a shield of religious belief. On The Daily Show, Jon Stewart manages to embody all of the arguments for and against religious reasoning in the public square; on the one hand, he frequently talks about religion on the air, and it is very useful to him as a comedian. He is also a religious person himself, and is on the whole very considerate of religious sensibilities. On the other hand, like Rorty, Stewart is extremely quick to pick up on times when he thinks politicians are using religion to bully others. I think that both Rorty and Wolterstöfl would be impressed with the way Stewart deals with religion in the public square.

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11 Rorty, “Reconsideration,” 143.
12 Ibid.
Stewart does not try to restrict the kinds of reasons that can be presented in the public square; instead, he uses humor to target politicians when they using religion to hurt those who cannot fight back, or are supporting weak arguments by offering religious reasons. By doing so, Jon Stewart participates vigorously in Stout's project of “conversation.” He realizes that as long as conversations about religion are based on rhetoric rather than fact, it will be extremely difficult for anyone to come to a consensus about any issues involving religion. Stout says that in order to discuss issues in a democracy, citizens need to expose their “premises” and “commitments” to the possibility of criticism; in addition to analyzing what politicians say about religion in the public square, Stewart also goes beneath what is said to figure out the unsaid reasons for the opinions the politicians present. When the politicians stubbornly withhold their premises and commitments, Stewart exposes them. As a result of Stewart's uncanny talent for exposing deception and purposeful obfuscation of the facts, The Daily Show becomes much more than a comedy show; Stewart's viewers are able to take the information that he distills from the murky waters of politics and use that information in their own democratic conversations.

On The Daily Show, Stewart's participation in democratic conversation rarely spills over from satirizing the news to making judgments about what is going on in the news; like Stout, Stewart is concerned with the results of overblown conversation in our public square, but he is usually content with letting his humor do the talking. Thus, the results of Stewart's humorous commentary are not always easy to pinpoint. In December of 2010, however, Stewart's position on his own role in the conversation shifted briefly but dramatically; in his coverage of the Zadroga Act, Stewart transformed from a satirist into an activist, showing America that concrete
action can result when humor is applied to Stout's method of conversation. Stewart's Zadroga show is also one instance where he was very critical of the religious reasons put forward for stalling the vote on the bill. When Jon Kyl claimed that working around Christmastime would show disrespect for Christianity, Stewart did not joke about Kyl's claim and then move on, as he would have on any ordinary show; instead, he returned to the excuse over and over, showing from every perspective how it was inadequate. After his show, Stewart was widely credited with being an important player in the Zadroga conversation, though he downplayed the impact his show had on passing the bill and then slid effortlessly back into his usual role as a satirist.

In this thesis, we will examine three aspects of Jon Stewart's participation in the democratic conversation about religion. In chapter one, we will look at Jon Stewart's Jewish roots and see that they firmly influenced his future comedy and the way he talks about religion. We will also look at a few skits from The Daily Show, which exemplify the consistently humorous yet respectful way Stewart deals with religion on his show. In chapter two, we will look at the way Stewart shifted his role from comedian to activist during his coverage of the Zadroga Act. This chapter will provide historical information about the Zadroga Act and describe Stewart's role in influencing the Senate's unanimous decision to vote yes on the bill. The last chapter will focus on figuring out why Stewart's coverage of the bill was so successful. To do this, we will look at Richard Rorty's essay “Human Rights, Rationality, and Sentimentality,” which proposes a method for groups to come to consensus on ethical issues other than by employing reason alone. Rorty calls his alternative “sympathy,” which uses

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13 In October of 2010, Stewart humor also resulted in concrete action, though the outcome of the action was much less clear. Stewart and Comedy Central colleague Stephen Colbert hosted the “Rally to Restore Sanity and/or Fear,” an event that took place on the National Mall in Washington, D.C. Attendance was estimated at 200,000. Though discussing the Rally is outside the scope of this thesis, it is an example of both the way that Stewart can translate his humor into action, and how strongly he feels that rhetoric is extremely harmful to the efficacy of public discussions.
compelling stories rather than appeals to “premises held in common” in order to convince people to treat each other ethically. Throughout the thesis, we will see that the common thread running through the chapters is action; when we inflate our conversations about religion, what happens? What happens when we deflate religious rhetoric, especially when we deflate rhetoric through humor? Can humorous treatment of religious issues help encourage ethically appropriate responses? The sensational rhetoric present in our public square is a major obstacle, and perhaps the major obstacle, to achieving our democratic goals, one of which is to include religious reasoning in the conversation while not letting religious beliefs stand apart as something which we cannot critique; to encourage the fruitful inclusion of all reasoning, Jon Stewart uses humor to participate in Jeffrey Stout’s conception of “conversation” and as a result, influences American politics and ethics in tangible ways.
CHAPTER 2

RELIGION ON THE DAILY SHOW

Jon Stewart and Judaism

For Jon Stewart, religion is more than just fodder for comedy; Stewart is Jewish, and frequently talks about his religion on The Daily Show. Though he pokes fun at Judaism, it is clear that being Jewish is a central part of his identity. In the November/December 2008 issue of Moment magazine\(^\text{14}\), Jeremy Gillick and Nonna Gorilovskaya investigate the roots of Jon Stewart's Jewish humor. They spend time reviewing Stewart's early life, which included a yeshiva kindergarten in Trenton, New Jersey and then local public school, where he encountered anti-Semitism from some of the other students. “I didn’t grow up in Warsaw, but it’s not like it wasn’t duly noted by my peers that’s who I was—there were some minor slurs,” Stewart related in a 2002 New Yorker interview.\(^\text{15}\) Stewart's upbringing also included a bar mitzvah at the Princeton Jewish Center, playing varsity soccer in high school, and continuing with the sport at the College of William and Mary. Receiving an honorary doctorate at William and Mary in 2003, Stewart remembered his college years, joking: “I came to William and Mary because as a Jewish person, I wanted to explore the rich tapestry of Judaica that is Southern Virginia.”\(^\text{16}\) By 1999, Stewart was the new host of The Daily Show on Comedy Central.

Stewart was an immediate success on The Daily Show. Gillick and Gorilovskaya write that The Daily Show “enjoys effusive critical and popular acclaim and has won 11 Emmy Awards. At 45, the once obscure Comedy Central comedian has become a media heavyweight.”

\(^\text{14}\) Moment Magazine was started in 1975 by Elie Wiesel and Leonard Fein, and according to its website is now the “largest independent Jewish magazine in North America.”


\(^\text{16}\) Ibid.
They also reference a 2007 Pew survey which found that “when Americans were asked … to name the journalist they most admired, Mr. Stewart, the fake news anchor, came in at No. 4, tied with the real news anchors Brian Williams and Tom Brokaw of NBC, Dan Rather of CBS and Anderson Cooper of CNN.”17 In August of 2008, The New York Times asked: “Is Jon Stewart the most trusted man in America?”18 Whether or not the answer to this question is 'yes,' Stewart is certainly well-respected as a comedian and as a journalist, and his high level of trust comes in part from demonstrating the occasions when other public figures are untrustworthy. In the following chapters, we will see that part of Stewart's method on The Daily Show includes unpacking the stories that the regular news stations provide, and showing the ways in which those stories are lacking or misleading. Gillick and Gorilovskaya conclude their article by praising Stewart, saying:

In the public square, Stewart may be the perfect Jewish ambassador for our times: smart but not arrogant, extremely funny but not mean—a valedictorian, most popular, best-looking and class clown all wrapped into one.19

The Moment article lauds Stewart equally for his talent as a professional comedian and for the way he represents Judaism. Stewart's combination of respect and irreverence towards religion is one reason why his religious humor is so successful. He does not mock religion in a mean-spirited manner, as noted above, but he does not let respect for religion hinder him from using it in his comedy.

In the years since the Moment Magazine article was published, Stewart has enjoyed great success on The Daily Show. He has also continued to make jokes about Judaism a part of the program; on March 2, 2011, Stewart reported on some breaking news from the Vatican. In part

18 Ibid.
of his soon-to-be-published book about the life of Jesus, the current Pope, Benedict XVI, states that the Jews should not be held responsible for killing Christ. According to an article in the Atlantic Wire, excerpts from the book have been released which “show that Benedict goes out of his way to emphasize that Christ was killed by a handful of individuals who happened to be Jewish and it's wrong to hold Jews collectively responsible for Christ's death.”

Stewart is animated as he reports the story to his audience: “So, Jews, congratulations!” he exclaims ironically. “We're off the hook for this one!”

Excitement quickly turns to seriousness as the implications of the Pope's statements dawn on him. “But if the Jews didn't kill Christ... you know what that means, don't you? The real killers are still out there,” he deadpans, and a graphic appears on the screen: an advertisement for “CSI: Nazareth.” This example is typical of the way Stewart uses humor to talk about religion; we can see that as a satirist, religion in general and Judaism in particular are comedic gold mines for Stewart. We will see more examples of the way Stewart treats religion below, and see how in the American discourse about religion, Stewart is a valuable participant who provides a perspective on religious conversation that is often lacking in the public square.

**Team Mohammad and Team Jesus**

In recent years, Americans' discomfort with Islam has been the subject of numerous comedic skits on *The Daily Show*; Stewart and his team take a decidedly no-nonsense approach to Islam, always with the intent of deflating rhetoric that only creates more tension. The summer of 2010 was filled with more public discussion than usual about the place of Islam in America, as Imam Feisal Abdul Rauf's plans to build a “mosque” near Ground Zero hit the news. Despite the

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21 Ibid.
fact that the proposed “mosque” is really an Islamic cultural center, and its proximity to Ground Zero is actually nothing new since mosques have existed in downtown New York City for decades, frenzied discussions about all aspects of the situation resulted in increasingly divisive language that did not encourage civil discussion at all. Jon Stewart seized this unfortunate situation as an opportunity for comedy, and used humor to demonstrate his perspective about religious rhetoric. The following examples from The Daily Show will illustrate the way Stewart uses humor as a conversational device that encourages tolerant conversation.

Representatives from Team Mohammad and Team Jesus are regular visitors on The Daily Show. Aasif Mandvi, member of Team Mohammad, and Wyatt Cenac, member of Team Jesus, belong to religions that are often portrayed as in conflict with each other, but somehow Mandvi and Cenac manage to get along. Wearing matching blue t-shirts with “Team Mohammad” and “Team Jesus” emblazoned on the fronts, the pair get along like old friends. A clip from the September 13, 2010 Daily Show, archived on the Daily Show website, is captioned: “If Team Jesus and Team Mohammed somehow incited a religious war, they could make the best of it.” The caption proves to be very apt, and the segment epitomizes Jon Stewart's consistent approach to religion on his show. In the clip, Stewart interviews Team Jesus and Team Mohammed about Terry Jones, a pastor from Florida who was very famous for a few months because he planned (and then changed his mind) to burn a Koran in protest of the planned “Ground Zero Mosque.” Team Mohammed and Team Jesus squabble about Jones until Stewart intercedes, telling them to tone down their rhetoric because it seems like they might create religious conflict. He pauses for a second, and then it dawns on him: “Wait a minute... are you trying to incite religious conflict?” he asks. The pair look evasive. “No, no...” replies Team Jesus, “although if it were to somehow

22 In March of 2011, Jones finally followed through and burned a Koran.
happen... I suppose we could make the best of it. You know, tear down the Dome of the Rock, and usher in the end times, when Jesus returns for the final judgment! You know, that sort of thing!” Team Mohammad looks equally pumped by this idea. “Yeah! Or maybe that would cause the twelfth Imam to appear, since he will only reveal himself when the world is embroiled in civil wars for no reason! Well? I don't see a reason, do you?”

At this point Stewart tries to inject a little reason into the conversation, noting the conflicting beliefs about the end times in Islam and Christianity. “You know... and I hesitate to bring this up... you're both hoping for an apocalyptic event, but you both can't be right,” he says. “What if the other guy's prophet comes back, and your's doesn't? What then?” The friends do not seem perturbed by Stewart's commonsense question; in fact, they react gleefully. “Well, at that point you just have to tip your cap at the other guy!” says Team Jesus. “Yep, well played! There's no shame in losing to the one true religion!” concurs Team Mohammad, who adds confidently: “Besides, we've got an understanding.” Stewart looks interested by this, and asks if the understanding is some sort of deal. Team Jesus replies, “More of a promise between Aasif and I. Whoever guessed right will help the other guy pull off a quickie conversion. Then we'll both go to heaven... together!” At this point Team Mohammad and Team Jesus high-five, and Stewart shakes his head in disbelief. The skit, by representing serious tensions between Islamic and Christian communities in a lighthearted manner, makes Stewart's opinion about religion obvious; he consistently reiterates through his humor his belief that mutual respect between members of different religions can (and should) be maintained, even when religious conflict is present. Stewart's humor also emphasizes his belief that people should be discerning about whether there is actual religious conflict present, or if the conflict is false, a result of rhetoric or

23 The Daily Show,” September 13, 2010.
intentional illusion. Unfortunately, Stewart's sentiment often makes sense to people in an abstract way, and is then abandoned when actual religious conflict occurs. Stewart's humor is effective in modeling an appropriate response to religious issues; his comedy goes to the heart of the problem by being honest about the nature of the issue, and then minimizing conflict rather than exacerbating it. Stewart does not make judgments about the rightness or wrongness of religious beliefs, and only criticizes the way people react to beliefs that are different from their own. The skit described above makes it clear that Team Mohammad and Team Jesus do not agree about the nature of the end times, yet they come to a mutual understanding (albeit an outrageous one) by acknowledging their differences while at the same time “making the best of it.”

In another of several skits relating to the “Ground Zero Mosque,” Wyatt Cenac does some in-depth investigation near the Ground Zero site. He discovers, to his horror, that there are a lot of Muslims already there. He misinterprets everything he sees to mean that Islam is taking over New York City, and deduces that the takeover is already starting with a profusion of delicious take-out carts in downtown New York City that are owned by Muslims. Cenac reports back to Stewart in the studio via live video feed; Stewart listens to his report and then says, “You do know, Wyatt, that nothing you uncovered is real, or a threat...” Cenac replies, “They might not be right now, but they will once this mosque is built!” Stewart then asks Cenac what he thinks is inside the unobtrusive, nondescript building behind him. “Masjit... is that a Jewish magic shop?” Cenac guesses, reading the sign on the door. Laughter from the audience. “It's not a magic shop... it's a mosque. It's a mosque,” Stewart tells him. Cenac is horrified. “That's a mosque? But we're four blocks from Ground Zero!” he howls. “Yes, that mosque is actually in the neighborhood I live in,” replies Stewart. “It's been there for 40 years. It actually predates the
World Trade Center.” A pause, and then: “Holy crap, Jon! Two mosques near Ground Zero? Now I get it! That's their plan! That's how they're gonna take over! They're gonna build mosques every two blocks until the city is completely covered!” cries Cenac. “Wyatt, I think... I think you're thinking of Starbucks,” says Stewart. This reasoning appears to calm Cenac down. “You're right, Jon,” he says. “Thank God those people got here first.”24 This example is another excellent demonstration of the way Stewart uses humor to diffuse tense conversations; by applying humor to what (he thinks) people are irrationally worried about, Stewart shows that there is not really so much to worry about after all. When he jokes about how Starbucks is taking over New York City rather than Muslims, Stewart implies that we should worry about the appearance of a new Starbucks as much as we should about the building of another mosque. By equating two very different situations, one that people find serious and one that they find innocuous, Stewart is able to bring down the level of hysteria in conversations that he thinks are harming the public discourse about religion.

Jon Stewart on Religion and Morality

As we can see from the examples above, religion is important for Jon Stewart in more than one sense. Though the skits on his show treat religion humorously, they have a slightly darker side; Stewart sees religion as something that can be divisive and even dangerous. In his own life, Judaism provides an important part of Stewart's personal and cultural background. Being part of the Jewish community gives Stewart liberty to poke fun at Judaism, but his audience knows he also values and respects his religion. Stewart is never judgmental or mean about religious beliefs. Given all of these viewpoints, we can see that Stewart does not think of

religion as either the biggest problem in society, or the cure for society's ills. Rather, he knows that any deeply held belief can be a double-edged sword, causing conflict when it comes into contact with someone else's deeply held belief, or, on the other hand, cementing connections between people who hold the same belief. With his humor, Stewart demonstrates his own belief that religion should not, and does not need to be, as divisive as it frequently is.

One reason religion is sometimes a cause of conflict is because religion is often thought to be a moral guide. When beliefs stemming from two different moral guides come into conflict, the result is not always a calm, respectful conversation. In a 2009 interview with Jim Wallis of Sojourners Magazine, Stewart reflects seriously on the connection between religion and morality. Wallis asks Stewart about his thought about Judaism: “When it comes to aspects of faith, you've said you're not particularly observant – you had a bacon cheese Croissan'wich during Passover this year,” he says. “What are the best and worst ways you've seen religion impact current events?”25 Stewart replies, “Religion makes sense to me. I have trouble with dogma more than I have trouble with religion.” He goes on to explain to Wallis what we have already deduced from his treatment of religion on The Daily Show: “I think the best thing religion does is to give people a sense of place, purpose, and compassion. My quibble with it is when it's described as the only way to have those things instilled.” As we see on his show, Stewart zeros in on the instances when religion is being used negatively, often as a way to provide justification for treating others badly. Part of this justification, of course, stems from believing that your point of view is morally correct, because your religion says it is. Jon Stewart does not approve of this way of thinking, since it automatically means that the viewpoint you are arguing against is not just less good or less useful, but is morally wrong. It is easier to fight viciously when you are

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convinced that the belief of your opponent is morally bankrupt. Stewart separates religion and morality from each other, saying that “you can be moral and not be religious, you can be compassionate, you can be empathetic - you can have all those wonderful qualities.”26 One of Stewart's most notable qualities on The Daily Show is his ability to listen to his guests; by separating morality from religion, Stewart is open to the possibility that any point of view can be a good one – or a bad one. We see this philosophy reflected in the way he does not shield any group from his humor. For example, though Stewart is more apt to disagree with Republican opinions, Stewart does not hesitate to skewer a Democratic statement if he thinks it will provoke a laugh from his audience.

Stewart continues reflecting on the downside of thinking that people can only be moral if they are religious. “Like anything else that's powerful - that is touching that deep into the epicenter of the human psyche and our fears - it can be misused,” he says of religion. “I'm probably much more responsive in a bad way to dogma and to extremism than to religion.”27 We often see this viewpoint in action on The Daily Show; Stewart makes fun of religious rhetoric, but he never makes fun of a person for being religious. By poking fun at religious rhetoric across the board, Stewart makes it clear that he does not discriminate based on a person's religion; he does not hold back, however, when he thinks religion is being misused in order to make moral judgments about others. Stewart reiterates this point when he tells Wallis:

When people say things like, "I found God and that helped me to stop drinking," I say, "Great! More power to you. Just know that some people stop drinking without it." It's when it gets into the realm of "This is the only way to salvation" - that's when I think, "Okay, now we're getting into a problem."28

Stewart is speaking personally here, but his beliefs translate to his actions on The Daily Show.

27 Ibid.
28 Ibid.
Whenever he is speaking to a guest with whom he disagrees, however vehemently, Stewart remains respectful and calm. John McCain, who has been the frequent object of Stewart's humor in the past, was also a frequent guest on *The Daily Show*. McCain and Stewart could not disagree more about most issues, but the two manage to “make the best of it,” much like Team Mohammad and Team Jesus.

Though Stewart always denies that he is doing anything other than satire on *The Daily Show*, the fact remains that Stewart is making a difference with his show. Though he claims that he is not a journalist, and even insisted in an interview with Rachel Maddow that *The Daily Show* is “not news anything,” Jon Stewart actually occupies a significant place in American news. There is some truth to Jon Stewart's contention that *The Daily Show* is not a serious news program; a Pew study reports that a high percentage of *Daily Show* viewers tune in for entertainment. According to the survey, “43% of the *Daily Show* audience say they mostly watch those programs for entertainment.” The flip side of this opinion, of course, is that the remaining 57% of viewers do not cite entertainment as their primary reason for watching.

The viewership of shows like *The Daily Show* and the *Glenn Beck Show* are different for other reasons as well. As the survey says, “ideology continues to be closely associated with people’s choice of certain news sources. Eight-in-ten Americans (80%) who regularly listen to Rush Limbaugh or watch Sean Hannity are conservative – roughly twice the national average of 36%.” The report continues, saying that “at the other end of the spectrum, the New York Times, Keith Olbermann, the Daily Show, the Colbert Report and Rachel Maddow have regular audiences that include nearly twice the proportion of liberals than in the public.” From this information, we can see that the audience of *The Daily Show* is fairly small and specific; most of

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30 Ibid.
Stewart's viewers are young liberals. From this information we would expect Stewart's influence to reach his audience alone, but this is not the case. Stewart goes so far as to deny being a journalist despite top-notch reporting, but the fact remains that his message reaches many more people than just his target audience. Stewart is so well-respected that extremely famous guests appear on The Daily Show on a regular basis. This shows us that when Stewart talks, people listen; discussions about religion topics are no exception. While his skits are never moralistic, they are outrageous enough that the underlying message is obvious: religious conversations can and should be respectful, and judging others based on their religious beliefs is the exact opposite of the type of conversation that will help ethics progress in America. In addition, Stewart makes it clear that simply holding religious beliefs is not a blanket excuse for expressing harmful opinions in the public square without regard for consequences. While he may not fit the traditional description of a journalist, we will see in the next chapter that the sort of journalism that Stewart is doing can be even more effective than traditional reporting.
CHAPTER 3

PRACTICAL EFFECTS OF JON STEWART’S DEMOCRATIC CONVERSATION

As shown in the first chapter, religion is a fundamental part of Jon Stewart's life. He draws on Judaism in both his personal life and in his professional career; personally, Judaism is a large part of his upbringing and culture, and professionally it is a source of comedy. His feelings about Judaism and religion in general are quite practical; that is, he respects the role that religion plays in people's lives until it is used to negatively impact others. Nearly all of the skits involving religion on The Daily Show reiterate that sentiment. The “CSI: Nazareth” bit emphasizes Stewart's incredulity that some Christians are still actively holding the Jews responsible for Christ's death, and that the subject is enough of a problem for some people that the Pope needs to address it in a book. All of the skits about the “Ground Zero Mosque” and Muslims in America seek to redefine the conversation about Islam from one tinged with hype-up hysteria into one of rationality and calm. All of these skits, however, are so humorous that though the underlying message is clear, it is still just that: underlying. Even not-so-subtle advocating for a certain point of view is quite different from outright instance that one position is right and the other is wrong. Humor goes a long way in soothing ruffled feathers, which is why Stewart is perceived as a satirist and a journalist, but not a moralist. One of the reasons The Daily Show is so successful is because Stewart is so skillful at balancing the different aspects of his show. Stewart does present his opinion about the rightness or wrongness of different positions, but his ethical opinions are usually balanced with information and humor. In the case of the Zadroga Act, however, Stewart's tone shifts dramatically and we witness him using his humor to actively press others into agreeing with his beliefs. As a result, concrete change occurs in the Senate, which in turn leads to concrete change in the lives of thousands of 9/11 First
Responders and their families. Stewart then slides smoothly back to his role of satirist, but leaves behind change: personal, ethical, and legal.

**Background**

The last *Daily Show* of the season aired on December 16, 2010, and the tone of the show was noticeably unusual from the start. Stewart devoted the entire half hour to discussing the James Zadroga 9/11 Health and Compensation Act, which at the time was under consideration in the Senate. The basic function of the Zadroga Act would be, if passed, to provide health care and monetary compensation to the First Responders who are now suffering serious health consequences from their involvement with the aftermath of the September 11th, 2001 attacks on the World Trade Center. Over the course of the past several months, Stewart regularly updated his viewers about the status of the Zadroga Act, which was facing serious opposition from Republicans in the Senate. It was obvious that the matter was close to Stewart's heart; so close, in fact, that on his December 16 show, Stewart made the rare move of stepping outside his self-imposed boundaries of satire into the realm of activism in a last-ditch effort to spur the Senate into ethical action. It is hard to judge what was more surprising about the episode; the dramatic difference between Stewart as a comedian and Stewart as an activist, or the swift action that resulted from him being an activist. Stewart's efforts paid off, and on December 22, 2010 the Senate unanimously voted to approve the bill, and Stewart was credited by journalists and politicians as being an integral force in influencing the vote. As we will see, Stewart's particular method of conversation, humor, turned out to be effective in creating more than just laughter.

After the show aired but before the unanimous Senate vote, the status of the bill was still unknown. In frustration, Margaret Carlson, columnist for the Bloomberg News, wrote a sarcastic
analysis of the Republican motives behind stalling the Zadroga Act and Stewart's role in the conversation. Her article emphasizes the point that voting to pass the Zadroga Act should have been a simple moral decision for the Republicans of the Senate (the Democrats were already prepared to pass the bill). “The principle is a simple one,” writes Carlson in outrage. “If you risked your life and lost your health in America’s hour of need, America will stand by you.”

Carlson writes that this principle was ignored as the Republicans in the American Congress did not stand by the 9/11 First Responders by supporting the Zadroga Act, though they frequently invoked 9/11 to get what they wanted in other situations. She continues, saying:

At the risk of understatement, 9/11 was long sacred to Republicans -- or so they said. It was used as justification for vast new law-enforcement powers, for cutting taxes in 2003 to stimulate the economy, for invading Iraq... For reasons that elude me, Senate Republicans decided to draw the line at sick 9/11 responders. And for too long those of us in the press lost track of the story in a welter of procedural moves Republicans threw up like Jersey barriers.

If Carlson is correct in her analysis, it is hard to believe that Senate Republicans, who seem able to invoke 9/11 in response to any situation (Carlson describe them as “the often-weepy”), would be so inexplicably opposed to taking action when faced with the option to help the First Responders, particularly because it was widely agreed that the services for First Responders would not be a strain on any budget. In his Zadroga Act episode, Jon Stewart makes it clear that one of the reasons he is so incensed by Republican inaction is that given their previous record, we would expect to see them pushing harder to pass this bill than any other. There are various theories about why the Republicans were so adamant in their opposition to the bill; Carlson summarizes them, hypothesizing that perhaps since the First Responders mainly came from New York state, the Republicans did not think helping them necessitated the response of the entire

32 Ibid.
U.S. Congress, or perhaps the Republicans were worried that an illegal immigrant would be among those helped if the bill were passed. Carlson soundly squashes these objections, especially the second one, saying: “Imagine the precedent that would set! Someone who got into this country illegally getting treatment for lung cancer contracted while trying to help injured Americans.” She concludes with a zinger: “Call it chemotherapy as moral hazard: the fear that more immigrants will sneak into our country for the chance to die for it.” Carlson's scornful tone makes it clear that she thinks these reasons are fabrications rather than acceptable opinions based on facts. If we step inside Jeffrey Stout's method of conversation for a moment, in which citizens in a democracy “reason with one another about the ethical issues that divide them,” we can see that Carlson would not accept the Republican reasons as sufficient to support their actions. Because she does not accept their reasons, she continues to push back and require from her conversational partners either more solid reasons or a change of opinion.

Despite all the valid reasons for supporting the bill (and the invalid reasons for not supporting the bill), and the tireless work of New York Senators Kirsten Gillibrand and Chuck Schumer, among others, it was not until pressure came from the media that there was real hope that the bill would pass. In the face of increasingly outlandish excuses for inaction, the media finally took notice. A serious challenger to the Republicans finally came in unlikely form: comedian Jon Stewart. Margaret Carlson concludes her article by saying: “It took “The Daily Show With Jon Stewart” to do what the rest of us failed to do.” By “the rest of us,” Carlson is presumably referring to journalists; by saying that she and her colleagues “failed,” she is saying that she believes that part of the work of a journalist is to work for ethical change, at least sometimes. As we examine Jon Stewart's reporting on the Zadroga Act on The Daily Show, we

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will see that he agrees with Carlson though he consistently says otherwise, as we heard in the Gross and Maddow interviews. Stewart is clearly trying to spur the Senate into ethical action on his December 16th show, and is abandoning, at least temporarily, his claim that he is not “doing anything” with his satire. He is also much more critical of religion than usual, again stepping out of his role as observer and commenter, and into the role of advocate.

**Jon Stewart's Treatment of the Zadroga Act**

The show begins with Stewart's usual banter, though he immediately launches into his topic rather than commenting generally on the news of the day. “Before we go, I want to talk one last time about something called the Zadroga Bill,” he says before going on to describe the situation, again; the Zadroga Act would provide health and financial benefits to 9/11 First Responders who are now suffering from cancer, heart disease and more, and it would be paid for by closing a corporate tax loophole. Growing more emphatic as he describes what he so obviously sees as a no-brainer decision, Stewart looks more and more aggrieved, and finally shouts: “It's a win, win, win, win... just (bleeping) do it!”34 His outrage stems from Republicans in the Senate, who, knowing that the bill would pass if it came to a vote, were filibustering so a vote would not happen. In addition to the reasons described above, the Republicans' main reason for this delay was that they said the Senate needed to vote on whether or not to extend the Bush era tax breaks to all Americans, including the very wealthy, before anything else could come up for a vote, thus implying very unsubtly that extending tax breaks to the wealthy was more important than voting on health care for First Responders. Then “the logjam broke,” as Stewart said sarcastically, when the Senate voted to extend the Bush era tax cuts to the wealthy, thus

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“freeing” up the Senate to pursue other business. Though this turn of events was theoretically a step in the right direction for the Zadroga Act, because the Republicans would then be willing to vote on it, in reality the fact that the Republicans would even insist upon passing the tax extensions first seemed to grate on Stewart more than anything else. “Yes!” Stewart exclaimed, after telling his audience that the tax breaks had gone through. “That is astoundingly good news for firefighters who make over $200,000 a year! Meanwhile, non-millionaire firefighters are still ***t out of luck.” Here, Stewart's humor makes the already ridiculous logic of the Republican Senators not only politically outrageous but morally indefensible. The viewer might not think much of the Senate deciding to extend tax cuts to the wealthy, since most viewers are not among the lucky 2% of Americans who earn enough to be affected by these tax extensions, but when Stewart emphasizes the point that the interests of the wealthy are quite clearly being chosen over the interests of 9/11 First Responders, suddenly the tax breaks take on a new, morally outrageous tone. Stewart's audience is laughing, but they understand what is really at stake in the conversations Stewart is describing.

Not only does Stewart point the finger at Senate Republicans for their inaction, he also lays blame on the media for failing to report adequately on the bill. Stewart notes that none of the major broadcast news stations had mentioned the Zadroga Bill in their reporting for two and a half months; picking on CBS, Stewart tells the audience about a recent CBS story about a new music release: “Although, to be fair,” he quips, “it's not every day that Beatles songs come to iTunes.”\(^\text{35}\) Back to seriousness, Stewart says: “This is an outrageous abdication of our responsibility to those who were the most heroic on 9/11! I hate to say it, but... this is a job for FOX News, the nation's leading source of 9/11 based outrage!” Stewart is even more upset with

\(^\text{35}\) On November 16, 2010, Apple announced that Beatles songs, previously unavailable on iTunes, would now be available for purchase.
FOX than ABC, NBC, and CBS for not reporting on the Zadroga Bill, because FOX is the station that is always talking about 9/11, but inexplicably chose to remain quiet when 9/11 legislation would possibly delay tax extensions for the super wealthy. Stewart says, “I know they [FOX news] have access to First Responders… Yet somehow they've been unable to find even one 9/11 First Responder to speak about the Zadroga bill.” He continues, “in fact, only FOX's Peter Johnson, Jr. seemed perturbed by it at all. And though he railed against the filibuster, he never mentioned that it was the Republicans holding up the bill.”36 Like Carlson, Stewart does not accept the Republican reasons for filibustering the Zadroga Act, and he does not approve of the way the media either ignores the story or reports on it incompletely.

The last straw for Stewart regarding the media was not FOX's self-serving inaction or the broadcast news stations' mysterious silence, but detailed coverage of the Zadroga Act from somewhere else entirely. Stewart is understandably incredulous, saying:

Yet there was one network that gave the 9/11 Responders story the full 22-minutes of intense coverage it deserved. But that network, unfortunately, was Al Jazeera. Our networks were scooped with a sympathetic Zadroga bill story by the same network that Osama bin Laden sends his mix tapes to! This is insane! I would like to see one of these Senators have the balls to explain why somehow getting a tax cut extension for the wealthy Americans is more important than suffering Ground Zero workers.37

The quote above epitomizes one of the greatest gifts Jon Stewart gives to his viewers, which is the opportunity to really understand what is going on in politics by reporting on what is not reported on the mainstream news stations. Did FOX News tell its viewers that Al Jazeera is sympathetic to the 9/11 First Responders? No, because FOX does everything in its power to conflate the 9/11 terrorist attacks with Islam. Did any of the network news stations make their viewers aware that the Zadroga bill was being held up by their Republicans Senators? The

37 Ibid.
reason for this is less clear, but it is very unfortunate because 9/11 is meaningful to most Americans; so meaningful, in fact, that had the story been reported more, public outrage might have forced the Senators to act much sooner than they did.

It would be nice to say that the Republican Senators had a change of heart and freely decided to vote on the Zadroga bill before the tax breaks for the wealthy were settled. Unfortunately, that is not what happened. It was only once the “logjam” broke and the tax extensions were agreed upon, Stewart's show aired, and the media took notice, that the Senate unanimously voted to pass the bill. How did this happen, when the Senate Republicans apparently had no problem putting the bill on the back burner until America's super wealthy were assured of tax breaks? One theory is that Stewart's coverage of the bill pushed the issue into such great prominence that it could no longer be ignored.

**We Can't Work This Week – We're Christians!**

As it turns out, religion played a large role in furthering animosity during the Zadroga Act negotiations, and Stewart was uncharacteristically quick to denounce the religious reasons which were involved in the conversation. Once the tax cuts were eventually extended, but before the final vote, the Republicans found another reason to delay making a decision: Christmas. Jon Kyl, Republican Senator from Arizona, offered the following reason for delaying the vote on the Zadroga Act until after New Year's Day:

> It is impossible to do all of the things the Senate Majority leader has laid out without doing – frankly, without disrespecting the institution, and without disrespecting one of the two holiest holidays for Christians.38

Kyl does not elaborate further on exactly why working at the Senate on the days *in between*

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holidays would disrespect both the institution of the Senate and Christmas. He also neglects to mention that Senators would probably not be expected to work on the actual religious holiday, Christmas Day, so his insistence that working during the week between Christmas and New Year's would be “disrespecting one of the two holiest holidays for Christians” seems less like a sincerely pious statement and more like a simple wish for time off. Harry Reid disagreed vigorously with Kyl about the religious implications of working around the Christmas holidays; a Seattle Times article from December 15, 2010 quotes Reid as saying: “As a Christian... no one has to remind me of the importance of Christmas for all of the Christian faith, all their families all across America.”

In an op-ed for the Christian Science Monitor on December 20, 2010, Greg Garrett writes that “when Jesus boils down his ethical teachings in the Gospels, it is consistently about caring for others.” Garrett goes on to describe numerous instances in the New Testament when Jesus “works” on the Sabbath, and connects the works of Jesus to the works of the Senate, saying that

> ...holding Christmas sacred is less important than holding sacred the values that underlie it. For Christians, love and care for others are the primary values, and so complaints about being forced to debate and vote on legislation over Christmas thus seem specious. Christmas does represent a season in which we elevate our desires for peace on earth and goodwill to humankind, but still, for better or worse, politics is the means by which nations seek those goals.

So, although Garrett acknowledges in his article that Christmas can be and often is a time for quiet reflection and contemplation for Christians, he firmly states that sometimes a holy day is also a time for action. This sentiment does not exclude action by the government, since “politics is the means by which nations seek those goals” as described above. He sides with Harry Reid in
believing that when moral obligations to our fellow humans crop up at the same time as the Sabbath (or Christmas), it is our responsibility to act to help our neighbors. Garrett concludes by describing the way in which, in the New Testament, “Jesus is represented as constantly at odds with religious leaders who argued for the absolute sanctity of God’s holy day. Holiness mattered to Jesus – but human life and dignity mattered more.”42

On The Daily Show, the First Responders joined Reid and Garrett in accusing Kyl of having a skewed sense of responsibility. Jon Stewart, after showing a clip of Kyl's controversial speech, let them respond. “You won't find a single New York City firefighter who considers it a sign of disrespect to work in a New York City firehouse on Christmas Eve or Christmas day,” one First Responder said. Another First Responder pointed out the sad truth about the first Christmas after 9/11: “It was an honor to work through Christmas on that... 9/11.”43 Like Harry Reid, the First Responders do not equate being Christian with needing to take a week off from work between Christmas and New Year's. They also agree with Carlson's assessment of the Republican reasons for not supporting the bill, as described above; they see all of the reasons presented as excuses for swift, ethical action. Even worse, the excuses do not make sense to the First Responders, Reid, Carlson, or Stewart. They are weak, and are being used as smoke screens for a real, underlying issue, one that the Republicans in the Senate refuse to discuss. As Stewart reveals in the skits about the “Ground Zero Mosque,” the reasons for objecting to the “mosque” are not real; they are merely thrown up to obfuscate the real issue, which is a clear problem of discrimination. Rather than say they are afraid of Muslims, or that they simply do not like Muslims, politicians make up all sorts of other reasons to discriminate against Muslims as a group. This is exactly what is going on in the Zadroga conversation; Stewart is there to say that

42 Ibid.
any conversation that is based on illegitimate assumptions is supremely unproductive, and, in the case of the Zadroga legislation, unethical.

In his fight to make the Zadroga Act move forward, Stewart found an ally, albeit a slightly unwilling one at times, in former Republican Governor of Arizona Mike Huckabee, who was also a guest on the December 16 show. Huckabee, who wrote a children's book called *Can't Wait For Christmas*, was immediately pounced on by Stewart, who began questioning him about the Christmas holiday. “You are a man of faith, a religious man, a Christian man... you are very familiar with the Christmas holiday and the ramifications of it,” said Stewart. “Are you not allowed to work between Christmas and New Year's?” The audience laughed at this, and so did Huckabee. “No; in fact, I think it's like the heavy-duty season for most Christians – they work a little harder,” Huckabee replied, and then quipped: “So it does not really, I think, bother me if the Senate and the House were to work a little extra – it'd make up for all the times when they're not working, which is the rest of the year!” This joke also gets appreciative laughter from the audience. Stewart then confronted Huckabee about the contrast between FOX News' coverage of 9/11-related stories in the past, and their almost complete lack of coverage of the Zadroga Act debates:

The thing that is difficult to watch is I see the 9/11 outrage machine FOX can generate if they want to. That mosque story... people were hearing that for months and months. They haven't ginned it up for this, and they should... This is a situation that is real, and the people who helped us out in that situation are really hurting. Why haven't they sent out that memo... and could you go over there and give them a little poke?44

Huckabee, who is a correspondent for FOX News, waffled a little bit in his response but agreed that the Senate Republicans ought to waste no time in passing the bill. It is a mark of how well Stewart is able to converse with those who hold different opinions from him that even Huckabee,

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a very conservative Republican, agrees with him on this issue. They talk to each other like friends, not ideological enemies. Stewart is able to generate consensus amongst opposing viewpoints in a thoughtful, respectful manner, which is something American politicians are rarely able to do. In the interview, Stewart does not provide any specific reasons for FOX's silence (and nor does Huckabee) but he does not need to say anything; his juxtaposition of the two situations makes it painfully clear that FOX News only uses 9/11 when it suits its purposes.

Stewart is also keenly aware that FOX News is not going to be swayed by anything less than celebrity; Stewart does not usually take advantage of his celebrity in order to make something happen, but he felt strongly enough about the Zadroga Act that he was willing to use all of his resources – humor, seriousness, celebrity – in order to finally convince the Senate to vote on the bill.

Results of Jon Stewart's Activism

Did Jon Stewart, host of a comedy show that only has a small, albeit loyal, audience, really effect ethical change in the case of the Zadroga Bill? Despite the fact that the purpose of The Daily Show is to satirize the news, and despite Stewart's insistence that he is not “doing anything” even when it seems like he is advocating for a cause, Stewart received a lot of praise for helping push the bill through. Michael Bloomberg, mayor of New York City, posted a thank-you note on his website when the Zadroga Act finally passed. Among those Bloomberg thanks are two he calls “great New Yorkers” - Rudy Giuliani and Jon Stewart. Kirsten Gillibrand, junior Senator from New York, appeared on The Daily Show on January 4, 2011, also bringing praise for Stewart. “I have to tell you Jon, your show made a difference,” she said. “I

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45 The full text of Bloomberg's remarks about the Zadroga Act can be found on his website: http://www.mikebloomberg.com/index.cfm?objectid=1004544C-C29C-7CA2-F5BC9DFF00F95104
know you're shy, I know you're modest, but it made a difference.” Stewart squirmed in the spotlight at this praise. The Huffington Post reports that, in response, Stewart chuckled, praised his staff, and noted that “the idea that something has to be on television to mean anything is what's so crazy,” Stewart said. “I feel like we drove by a burning car and the highway and went, uh, someone should call that in.”

Though he obviously wished to downplay his role in the situation, Stewart did much more on The Daily Show than simply point out the obvious; he used his popularity to choose a specific issue and bring it to the attention of a wider audience. Stewart's show may be watched by a relatively small percent of American television viewers, but the results of his December 16 episode make it clear that his show is significant enough to merit attention from the leaders of New York and also the United States Senate. In addition, Stewart's comments about Jon Kyl's so-called Christian beliefs show us that while Stewart usually restrains himself from deeming religious beliefs as right or wrong, in the case of the Zadroga Act, he was willing to say that Kyl's interpretation of the meaning of Christmas was simply wrong.

46 The Daily Show, January 4, 2011.
CHAPTER 4
ETHICS ON THE DAILY SHOW

In chapter one, we saw how Jon Stewart treats religion on *The Daily Show* with a mix of respect and irreverence, poking fun at religion while at the same time acknowledging the deep value it holds for religious people. In chapter two, we moved to a specific example of a complicated ethical situation, in which religion was used as a reason to support opposing sides of the argument. In the national conversation about the Zadroga Act, many people agreed that Jon Stewart's coverage of the issue made significant difference in nudging the bill towards acceptance. Part of the explanation for why Stewart was so successful in bringing attention to the bill is his celebrity status; he is very popular with his audience, and is well-respected amongst powerful individuals, who often appear on his show. Stewart's popularity cannot be the only explanation, however, for as loyal and animated as his audience is, it is relatively small compared to other news programs.\(^48\) Another piece of the puzzle lies in the way Stewart discussed the bill on *The Daily Show*. Richard Rorty, in a 1998 essay titled “Human Rights, Rationality, and Sentimentality,” calls this method “sympathy.”\(^49\) Rorty claims that sympathy, the act of making other people seem so similar to ourselves that we can feel as they might feel, is the reason people act ethically. Stewart employs this method very effectively on his December 16 show when he brings a group of First Responders to the stage to tell their heart-wrenching stories about 9/11 and its impact on their health. If Stewart had merely reported blandly on the story, the sympathy created by the show would have been much less. In this chapter, I will argue that combining his own brand of humor with Rorty's method of sympathy is the reason why

\(^{48}\) See a comparison of audience size between *The Daily Show* and other news programs in the Introduction.

Stewart was so successful in influencing the vote about the Zadroga Act.\textsuperscript{50}

One of the most perplexing aspects of the conversation surrounding the Zadroga Act is the lack of a position that is definitely right, and a position that is definitely wrong. For the viewer whose only exposure to the discussion came from the media, the entire situation was very confusing. Democratic and Republican politicians talked endlessly about budgets, taxes, medical issues and much more, and the web of information related to the Act grew larger every day. As Jon Stewart pointed out, the discussions were further complicated when each side said that the other side was trying to make unsupported positions seem acceptable; Jon Kyl's curious pronouncement that the Senate should not work between Christmas and New Year's is one example. The truly confounding aspect of the situation was that each side wholeheartedly supported and appreciated the First Responders. Despite their agreement, however, their responses to the bill were very different; the sort of action that each side wanted to see were not compatible at all. Richard Rorty addresses this problem in the beginning of his essay, as he discusses the flexibility of humankind. In moving away from questions about the fundamental nature of humans and instead working towards discussions about what humans can become, Rorty gives ethical discussions room to breathe. When one point of view is not entirely wrong, and another point of view is not entirely right, conversations of the type Jeffrey Stout wants to hear can occur. The giving and taking of ethical reasons for action do not have to devolve into shouting matches. Rorty thinks that his view of ethics is starting to become more widespread, saying:

\begin{quote}
We have come to see that the only lesson of either history or anthropology is our extraordinary malleability. We are coming to think of ourselves as the flexible,
\end{quote}

\textsuperscript{50} The other examples of the way Stewart treats religion that are provided in this thesis also demonstrate the way Stewart uses sympathy to great effect. The difference between those examples and the Zadroga Act example, however, is that there is no concrete way to measure the results of the skits about the Ground Zero Mosque, but the Zadroga Act is now part of the law. Stewart's use of sympathy is still present in his other skits, as well.
protean, self-shaping animal rather than as the rational animal or the cruel animal.51

On *The Daily Show*, Stewart models many of the characteristics of ethical conversation that Rorty values. As noted earlier, he is always very open minded when conversing with his guests. Even when he disagrees with some of their opinions, Stewart is quick to acknowledge the places where he agrees with them. In addition to being respectful, Stewart is fostering further conversation and making consensus a possibility. If he were to instantly condemn every viewpoint contrary to his own, he would have a very hard time finding guests like Mike Huckabee who would be willing to appear on the show. By talking to people with whom he (sometimes vehemently) disagrees, Stewart reveals that, like Rorty, he believes that humans are “flexible,” “protean,” and “self-shaping” rather than rigid and immovable. If Stewart did not believe that conversation between people who disagree can lead to any kind of mutual agreement, there would be no point in talking to guests like Huckabee. By conducting his show the way he does, Stewart is an example to his viewers of the kind of ethical conversation that is most productive.

In addition to sharing similar opinions about the malleability of human emotions and beliefs, Stewart and Rorty also agree that this malleability is valuable because it leads to people acting differently. When people earnestly converse with each other about ethical topics, they are implicitly acknowledging their belief in the possibility that they can change the opinions of their conversation partners. This occurs, according to Rorty, through the creation of sympathy. Rorty describes this concept, saying:

> By "sympathy" I mean the sort of reaction that the Athenians had more of after seeing Aeschylus' “The Persians” than before, the sort that white Americans had more of after reading *Uncle Tom's Cabin* than before, the sort that we have more

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51 *Truth and Progress*, 170.
of after watching TV programmes about genocide in Bosnia.\textsuperscript{52}

From this we can see that by “sympathy,” Rorty does not simply mean “feeling bad for someone.” Rorty’s sympathy goes deeper than that; the value of what he calls “sentimental education” is that it “sufficiently acquaints people of different kinds with one another so they are less tempted to think of those different from themselves as only quasi-human.”\textsuperscript{53} He goes on to say that “the goal of this manipulation of sentiment is to expand the reference of the terms “our kind of people” and “people like us.”\textsuperscript{54} Once the lines between “us” and “them” begin to blur, it becomes more difficult to treat someone else's mother badly because she reminds you of your own mother.

Thinking of others as “only quasi-human” is a major reason, according to Rorty, that people act cruelly towards those they feel are different from themselves. Rorty is an anti-foundationalist, meaning that he thinks moral philosophy is more useful when it strategizes about how to get people to treat each other better rather than searching for “morally relevant transcultural facts” on which to base a moral code.\textsuperscript{55} The gift of the foundationalists, says Rorty, is the dream of utopia; while philosophers like Kant and Aquinas gave us a society to strive towards, their insistence on a transcendental moral law distracts from the nitty-gritty work of getting people to behave better. Rorty thinks that telling sad stories creates more moral feeling amongst people than telling them that they need to adhere to a pure, rational moral law. \textit{The Daily Show} uses humor to create sympathy as well; the skits about Muslims in America, for example, show non-Muslim Americans acting so ridiculously and irrationally that the viewer cannot help but side with the non-ridiculous, rational Muslims. The intent of the skits is to make

\begin{footnotesize}
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\item Trut h and Progress, 180.
\item Ibid, 176.
\item Ibid.
\item Ibid.
\item Ibid, 171.
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fun of people's fears about Muslims as outrageously as possible, making the take-away point—that American fears about Muslims are being purposefully exacerbated by politicians and religious leaders—very obvious. Stewart does not sit in front of his audience and calmly explain to them how to reason their way to a balanced, rational position regarding Muslims, and if he did, it would not work. Instead, Stewart tells sad stories about the treatment of Muslims in America, and lets the stories get his message across. Stewart's twist on Rorty's method of “sentimental education” is to present the sad stories through humor.

On his December 16 episode, Jon Stewart presented the sad story of the Zadroga Act, but in contrast to the way he usually presents his stories, he did so with only a little humor. He also did not leave it up to his audience to draw their own conclusions from the material he presented. Instead, he grouped five First Responders at a table on the stage, and guided them as they told their story to the audience. During the interview, Stewart focused on exactly what would foster sympathy in his audience: the heroic actions of the First Responders, their desire to help stricken New York City families, the pain resulting from their illnesses, and their difficulties obtaining health care. Not only did his audience radiate sympathy, the media immediately took up the stories of the First Responders and broadcast it across television and the Internet. News of Stewart's show made it all the way to Washington, where he caught the attention of Congress. A week later, the bill passed with a unanimous vote from a previously sharply divided Senate. Cynics might point out that the Senate Republicans' change of heart was not the result of sympathy, since they had said all along that they could not vote on the Zadroga Act until the tax extensions were settled, which is what happened. Therefore, the vote could have happened simply because the Republicans' ducks were now in a row. We should not forget, however, that even once the tax extensions were approved, many Senators still wished to delay voting on the
First Responders bill. Jon Kyl, as discussed in the previous chapter, went to far as to invent religious reasons for not voting. While we might never know exactly what spurred the Republicans into action, the reactions of politicians like Gillibrand, Schumer, and Bloomberg to Stewart's show demonstrate that he did have an impact.

Rorty's theory of sympathy also applicable to another aspect of the Zadroga conversation, which regards the moral character of the people involved. Some might see the Republicans' use of 9/11 in the past, and the stark contrast the way they ignored it during this conversation, as morally reprehensible. Others might agree with the Republican reasoning which lead them to delay a vote, and others may just be confused. What is really going on is probably closer to a problem that Rorty identifies in his essay, which is that of boundaries between groups of people. In the beginning of this chapter, we saw how Rorty thinks that sympathetic education makes it increasingly difficult for some groups of people to identify other groups of people as “quasi-human.” Rorty notes that once people think of others as quasi-human, or even non-human, they do not feel that they have any moral obligation towards them as fellow-humans. This is the reason Rorty thinks that moral theories based on reason are bound to fail: it is impossible to convince people that they need to give other people basic human rights, if those people regard the others as non-human. The moral law simply will not apply, and no amount of reasoning will make a difference. Sympathy, on the other hand, does not rely on unchangeable rules of reason. Sympathy can also be modified to fit any situation; in his essay, Rorty notes that moral transgressions against others tend to be very large before we notice them. Since we are caught up in our own lives and the lives of those close to us, it is easy to notice when something cruel happens to those in our own group, but it might take us a long time to become aware of the hurts
of those farther away from us. Rorty puts this succinctly, saying:

Moral philosophy has systematically neglected the much more common case: the person whose treatment of a rather narrow range of featherless bipeds is morally impeccable, but who remains indifferent to the suffering of those outside this range, the ones he or she thinks of as pseudohumans.

We can see Rorty's theory in action in the case of the Zadroga Act. The filibustering Senators are not monsters; they are not killing women and children, torturing animals or perpetrating hate crimes. Their moral conduct in most regards is “impeccable,” but when it came to the First Responders, they just did not see the urgency of acting to help them. Does this mean that the Senators think of the First Responders as “pseudohumans”? No, but it does indicate some degree of separation between the two groups. In his essay, Rorty gives us a way to condemn the action (rather, inaction) of the Senators while not condemning the Senators themselves as morally corrupt. The First Responders might fall outside the action-worthy boundaries of some of the Republican senators, but according to Rorty, that just means they need more sentimental education. Rorty is not saying that thinking of others as pseudohumans is good or acceptable, but he does present a viewpoint about moral inadequacy that is hopeful, based on his belief in human malleability. Judging from the results of the December 16 Daily Show, Stewart gave the Senators some much-needed sentimental education.

In concluding his essay, Rorty reflects upon the role of people like Jon Stewart in the evolution of morality. Thinking practically about how his theory of moral growth can be most effective, he concludes that most of the moral progress in his system will come from the top-down, not from the bottom-up. Rorty muses about who will push forward morality based on sympathy rather than universal reason:

56 This is where journalists come in; we will get to this a bit later.
57 Truth and Progress, 124.
58 Republican stalling also indicates the presence of other factors, like political wrangling and possible budget concerns.
...We shall be relying on those who have the power to change things - people like the rich New England abolitionists, or rich bleeding hearts like Robert Owen and Friedrich Engels – rather than on something that has power over them. We shall have to accept the fact that the fate of the women of Bosnia depends on whether TV journalists manage to do for them what Harriet Beecher Stowe did for the black slaves, whether these journalists can make us, the audience back in the safe countries, feel that these women are more like us, more like real human beings, than we had realized.59

Rorty's thoughts here are both hopeful and cautious; he thinks that it is easier to convince people to act morally by appealing to sympathy rather than reason, but he is also practical enough to know that increasing sympathy depends bringing the sad stories to the audience in the first place. There is room to be upset at Rorty's assessment of the future of moral progress, as it is yet another place where the average person has a frustratingly small amount of power. He is not discounting small increases in sympathy, however, though he is counting on sympathy spreading on a wide scale in order to have much effect. Jon Stewart's actions on The Daily Show fall somewhere in between small and large; his audience is small, but passionate, intelligent and devoted. His audience also sometimes includes very powerful people. As a result of his December 16 show, the Zadroga Act is in place and is helping a relatively small number of people a great deal. By employing sympathy on The Daily Show, Stewart showed us how Rorty's practical approach to moral philosophy is a very effective method for encouraging ethical progress.

The Effectiveness of Humor as Aesthetic Practice

In contrast to the serious subject matter of “Human Rights, Rationality, and Sentimentality,” Rorty's tone in the essay is distinctly light-hearted. His easy, flowing writing style is a notable way in which Rorty distinguishes himself from his colleagues in philosophy

59 Truth and Progress, 181.
departments. In *Richard Rorty: Critical Dialogues*, David Owen observes that "the political writings of Richard Rorty eschew the rigorous tone of the academic philosopher for that of the light-minded critic who seeks to seduce the young, and josh his fellow citizens out of their commitment." He goes on to say that nobody in Rorty's audience thinks of him as a philosophical lightweight because of his conversational writing style; in fact, precisely the opposite is true even though Rorty “chooses to be a cartoonist rather than an architectural draughtsman.”

When Owen looks for the reasoning behind Rorty's choice of writing style, he finds that Rorty has already explained it. In “The Priority of Democracy to Philosophy,” written in 1991, Rorty describes the purpose of a philosophical tactic he calls "light-mindedness." Light-mindedness, as the name suggests, involves treating traditionally thorny and difficult subjects with a touch of levity. This tactic is not supposed to trivialize problems, but to help people think about the problems in new and different ways. Instead of thinking of humor as an inappropriate tool for encouraging ethical action, Rorty says that humor, or light-mindedness, is actually a very useful tool to forward one's moral purposes. He says:

If one's moral identity consists in being a citizen of a liberal polity, then to encourage light-mindedness may serve one's moral purposes. Moral commitment, after all, does not require taking seriously all the matters that are, for moral reasons, taken seriously by one's fellow citizens. It may require just the opposite. It may require trying to josh them out of the habit of taking those commitments so seriously. There may be serious reasons for so joshing them. More generally, we should not assume that the aesthetic is always the enemy of the moral. I should argue that in the recent history of liberal societies, the willingness to view matters aesthetically - to be content to indulge in what Schiller called “play” and to discard what Nietzsche called “the spirit of seriousness” - has been an important vehicle of moral progress.

As Rorty describes light-mindedness as a vehicle for moral progress, we can see that he is not a

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61 Ibid.

"cartoonist" in the popular sense of the word; rather, by choosing to treat “heavy” ethical topics as though they are light, Rorty is able to put those topics into a new perspective for his readers. “Joshing” them is sometimes more effective than speaking seriously.

Putting subjects and situations into new perspectives is one of the most fundamental aspects of aesthetics, says John Morreall, professor of religion at the College of William and Mary. In his article “Humor and Aesthetic Education,” Morreall explains that humor should be included under the umbrella term of “aesthetics” though it usually is not. He says, “Indeed, many people have been educated to think of laughter and humor as something frivolous which gets in the way of serious pursuits.” Morreall says that this attitude can be traced back to Plato, who felt that laughing was a reflection of a person's own ignorant or base nature. When you find a behavior humorous, you risk someday imitating the behavior yourself. Aristotle was also suspicious of humor, but Morreall tells us that “for Aristotle, laughter was valuable as a social corrective: By laughing at someone who is out of line, we can humiliate him so that he gets back into line.” Thinking of humor as second-class in terms of aesthetics, if it is included in aesthetics at all, has continued into the present. Morreall writes that “for most critics such work [funny or whimsical paintings] has little more aesthetic significance than expensive cartoons and can be viewed simply as art taking a break before returning to the serious business at hand.” Depending on the type of humor, laughter might be used to try and humiliate someone into “getting back in line,” as Aristotle says, or might simply be “art taking a break,” but to think of comedy as entirely frivolous will cause us to miss all of the more significant aspects of humor.

63 Professor Morreall has written numerous books about humor, including Taking Laughter Seriously (1983), The Philosophy of Laughter and Humor (1987), Comedy, Tragedy and Religion (1999) to name a few.
65 Morreall, 56.
66 Ibid, 57.
This attitude is illustrated in the relationship between traditional journalists and Jon Stewart; traditional journalists often view *The Daily Show* as second-class in terms of reporting because it labels itself as a comedy show. As a result, everyone was extremely surprised when Stewart devoted an entire episode to the Zadroga Act, and even more surprised at what resulted from his show. By putting a serious subject – health care for 9/11 First Responders – in an incongruous new context – a comedy show – Jon Stewart uses humor as an aesthetic tool in the way John Morreall describes. “In art one of the most common ways of praising someone's work is to say that he or she 'saw things in a new way,’” says Morreall; Stewart's show helped his audience see the issues at play in the Zadroga Act through new eyes by discussing the situation in both serious and light-minded ways. In their essays, Morreall and Rorty help us to see that the two approaches are not mutually exclusive.

In addition to helping people “see things in a new way,” Rorty believes that humor can be very helpful in encouraging ethical action. We cannot be sure of Stewart's philosophical groundings regarding ethics, but we know that Rorty is committed to encouraging a ethical culture in which no moral values are held so dearly as to be unchangeable; thus Rorty is a pragmatist rather than a foundationalist. By "joshing" his audience a little, Rorty hopes to push forward his pragmatic project: “Such philosophical superficiality and light-mindedness helps along the disenchantment of the world,” he says. “It helps make the world's inhabitants more pragmatic, more tolerant, more liberal, more receptive to the appeal of instrumental rationality.” Rorty believes that “joshing” accomplishes this by showing people the ways in which their “set in stone” moral values might be moved a bit here, and changed a bit there, resulting in philosophical flexibility. Rorty says that light-mindedness as an aesthetic practice

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67 Owen, 93.
that is not “the enemy of the moral,” and pushes us to think of light-mindedness as “an important vehicle of moral practice.” As David Owen points out in Critical Dialogues, however, the two do not necessarily fit together as well as Rorty believes. Rorty and Morreall argue convincingly that light-mindedness can be a big help in shedding new light on situations, but the process is not always smooth. Joshing, as Rorty calls it, can easily spill over into the realm of meanness, in which those “joshing” are actually humiliating or speaking cruelly to their conversational partners; Aristotle thought of humor in this way. Thus, the line between using a little humor to push people to reconsider their opinions, and making fun of their opinions, can be thin. “Joshing,” therefore, involves careful performance, even in writing, and Rorty is sometimes accused of failing at this performance. In calling religion a “conversation-stopper” and steadfastly insisting that religion belongs to the private rather than public realm, and even going so far as to say that religious organizations are harmful to the future of ethics, Rorty has bruised some feelings. In “An Engagement with Rorty,” Nicholas Wolterstof says frankly that Rorty's suggestion that Christians shape up and become “good compliant Darwinian pragmatists” feels “menacing.”68 Joshing may be an aesthetic experience, but it is not always necessarily a good aesthetic experience.

If we are not yet convinced of the effectiveness of humor as a tool for change, we only have to look at the reaction to Stewart's coverage of the Zadroga Act. Stewart says controversial things on The Daily Show every evening, but CNN, MSNBC, and the U.S. Senate do not discuss his remarks afterwards the way they did after his Zadroga show. It is hard to pinpoint exactly what about Stewart's show provoked the strong reactions that it did, but we shown the plausibility of our theory that a conversation which included sympathy presented through humor

68 Wolterstof, 138.
(as discourse and aesthetics both) changed the opinions of enough people to push the vote through. In “Humor and Aesthetic Education,” Morreall provides an example which can shed light on the Senate's abrupt change of heart. Humor, he says, has been perceived as dangerous throughout history. In Nazi Germany, humor was not usually tolerated. Morreall writes:

Hitler was so wary of the danger of humor to the Third Reich that he had special “joke courts” set up for, among other things, punishing people who named their dogs and horses Adolph. The freedom to look at things in different ways, especially in ways that made the government look wrong or funny, clearly had no place in the Third Reich.⁶⁹

We would be remiss if we did not acknowledge the truth behind Aristotle's observation that humor can be used to humiliate people into line. Evidenced by the way they stood by their decision to hold off on a vote about the Zadroga Act, it takes a lot to get the Republicans of the U.S. Senate into changing their minds, especially when the impetus is coming from a small television show on Comedy Central, but Jon Stewart's reporting certainly did cast the Republicans in a bad light. It is likely that, in addition to using humor aesthetically to put the Zadroga situation into a new light, Stewart also embarrassed the Republicans by uncovering their true, less than admirable reasons for stalling a vote. Whatever the exact combination of factors that led to the sudden about-face, Rorty, Owen and Morreall show us that Stewart's unique method of using humor to push for ethical action is very effective.

⁶⁹ Morreall, 60.
CHAPTER 4

CONCLUSION

In concluding an essay about the proper way to discuss religion in the public square, it would be very satisfying to say “Here is the answer! Just do such-and-such and everyone will be happy!” Unfortunately, given the many competing – and equally compelling – opinions on the subject, it does not seem like there is a proper way to talk about religion in the public square. Perhaps what we should do is try to reflect on the opinions we have analyzed and come up with some guidelines for a pretty good way to talk about religion in our public conversations. The first option, which Rawls and Rorty offer, is to simply stop talking about religion altogether when we are in public. This would solve the problem of religion being a problem in public discussions, but there are a few problems with this solution. First, as Wolterstofl points out, this option is only satisfactory to those people who do not wish to talk about their religious beliefs in public. It also assumes that it is possible for religious people to separate their religious beliefs from their other beliefs – that people can “privatize” their religion. The Rawls/Rorty solution also presumes that religious reasoning is inherently harmful to public discussion, and that liberal pragmatist reasoning is inherently helpful. Again Wolterstofl shoots down this opinion, pointing out the hypocrisy in insisting that your opponent keep his or her premises entirely private while you are free to use your own to support whatever you want to say.

Jeffrey Stout offers a different option, in which religious and secular beliefs can mingle together in the public square. He makes a very pragmatic observation, which Rorty does not, which is that no matter how strongly secular philosophers might wish that religious believers would keep their religious beliefs private, it simply is not going to happen. Trying to devise any guidelines for public conversation that require religious beliefs to stay at home, then, is basically
a waste of time. Stout envisions a public square in which all voices can participate; everyone is free to bring their biases and premises with them into the “conversation” as long as they clearly divulge them. For example, if Senator Jon Kyl were to participate in Stout's method of “conversation,” he would not have used Christmas as an excuse to stall a vote on the Zadroga Act. He would have divulged his premises and exposed his “commitments to the possibility of criticism.”

Conversations will eventually stop, as Wolterstoff observes, but if we use Stout's method of conversation they will either stop or continue based on honest discussion instead of dragging on in a bewildering mixture of rhetoric and veiled premises.

Since Wolterstoff shows us how it is hypocritical to force religious people to hide their religious beliefs in public discussion, and Stout shows us that such a thing is not going to happen anyway, it makes sense to focus our efforts on creating a public square which is welcoming of any kind of reasoning. Rorty makes the excellent point that if we choose this route, religious reasoning needs to abide by the same rules as secular reasoning; that is, discriminating against gays and lesbians because of a few sentences in the Bible is just as inappropriate as discriminating just because you do not like homosexuals for some non-religious reason. Both are unethical and, as Rorty says, the people who say such things should be shunned. Neither religious nor secular philosophical reasoning should be used as a shield for cruel speech.

In order for this strategy to work, we need to actively encourage people to reveal their real premises for saying the things that they say. Otherwise, any ethical progress we hope to make will be delayed and hampered by the time we have to spend unearthing what people really think. We may not like what others really think, but knowing their true premises at least gives us the chance to make decisions based on reality rather than rhetoric. As we saw in the chapters

70 Stout, 11.
about *The Daily Show*, Jon Stewart is one of the people who is actively engaged in revealing true premises. By using humor, Stewart softens his razor-sharp observations and usually comes across as funny and insightful rather than judgmental. In addition to being able to find inconsistencies and falsities in things that people say, Stewart is very good at illustrating these inconsistencies and falsities to his audience. He is so good at this work, in fact, that he catches the attention of very high-profile guests like presidents and world leaders. Rawls and Rorty would approve of the way Stewart encourages reasonable conversation (i.e. conversation that is not obscured with rhetoric) but they might be surprised at the way he incorporates religion into his show. Religion is neither set apart as too sacred to criticize, nor too irrational to respect; rather, Stewart does both. He uses humor to “josh” his audience into viewing current events involving religion in new ways. By treating religion the way that he does, Stewart models a *pretty good* way of encouraging all voices to participate in the public square. In addition, once in a blue moon Stewart also uses his considerable influence to directly intervene in the conversation. As the Senate's unanimous “yes” vote on the Zadroga Act demonstrates, the way in which Stewart applies his own particular type of humor to Jeffrey Stout's method of “conversation,” Richard Rorty's moral technique of “sympathy” and John Morreall's type of “aesthetic education” yields tangible results in the fight for continued ethical progress in our democracy. Perhaps, as Jim Wallis of *Sojourner's Magazine* says, Jon Stewart may be a prophet after all.  

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