Consensus Theory and Religious Belief

JEFFERY L. BINEHAM

David Tukey’s 1988 article in *The Journal of Communication and Religion* addresses the relationship between spirituality and Robert L. Scott’s conception of “intersubjectivist” rhetoric.¹ That a scholar would investigate an aspect of the intersubjectivist position, or what here shall be called consensus theory, is not surprising. Scholarly debate over issues of epistemic rhetoric has involved matters of science, social knowledge, ethics, psychology, and philosophy. Tukey’s effort, however, is important because concerns associated with religion, theology, and the spiritual have remained largely unexplored in the epistemic rhetoric literature. Though rhetoricians have demonstrated interest in religious discourse, they have not addressed the rhetorical impact on and dimensions of religious belief and spirituality.

Tukey’s essay begins to address some of those impacts and dimensions. His claim is that the intersubjectivist position reduces spiritual experience to a social construct and denies altogether the possibility of a divine reality (5–6). On the one hand, views of epistemic rhetoric which allow the existence of an objective, independent reality do not pose extensive problems for those who wish to make meaningful statements about God.² Within such a view, one may hold to the absolute presence of a supreme being. When one embraces consensus theory, however, the existence of some “reality” independent of human values and meanings is questioned.³ Statements about God’s nature and how we may “know” God thus become problematic, as Tukey accurately indicates.

Briefly stated, consensus theory asserts that people simultaneously perceive and interpret any sensation, so that the interpretation is a major component in what is experienced, or known, as reality. To interpret is to experience sensations according to a particular set of meanings. Meanings are created rhetorically and are regarded as “true” when accepted by consensus within any particular community. Different communities may validate different meanings and create different realities. A person’s reality, then, is a combination of sensations and the socially shared meanings by which one knows the sensations.⁴

Consensus theory seemingly creates a “theological” problem in that it reduces God to a verbal construct. To believe in God, or to make statements about God, presumes the existence of something or someone who operates at a level beyond that of human symbol systems. Even if we can know about God only in terms of our

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JEFFERY L. BINEHAM is Assistant Professor of Speech Communication at St. Cloud State University in St. Cloud, MN 56301. An earlier version of the section of the paper entitled “An Intersubjectivist View of Spirituality” was presented at the Speech Communication Association Convention, Chicago, IL, 1984. An earlier version of the section entitled “Consensus Theology: A Theology for the Social Gospel” was presented at the Speech Communication Association Convention, New Orleans, LA, 1988.
symbol systems, most who choose to “believe” assume that God is more than that which we can or do know. A distinction is assumed between ontology and epistemology. But consensus theory explicitly denies such a distinction. This philosophical clash between religious belief and consensus theory makes them difficult to reconcile. Peter L. Berger suggests that the temptation is to relinquish religious belief in favor of a contemporary theory of knowledge.

The modern situation, with its closely related aspects of pluralism and secularization; pressures the religious thinker. . . to soft pedal if not to abandon altogether the supernatural elements of his tradition. 5

The important question addressed in this paper is whether such abandonment is necessary; whether one can embrace belief in God and consensus theory without being inconsistent.

This paper seeks to contribute to this new concern for the relationship between epistemic rhetoric and religious belief by examining the extent to which consensus theory can account for religious beliefs and spiritual experiences, and by exploring the sense in which consensus theory may provide a useful construct within which to understand the rhetorical dimensions of these beliefs and experiences. These areas of examination seem worthy, first, because of the historical and personal importance of religious questions; and second, because of the possibility of advancing our understanding of epistemic rhetoric. Concerns for knowledge, reality, and truth are thus central both to rhetorical theory and to intelligent discussion of religious belief and commitment.

The paper proceeds in three sections, Section one analyzes and critiques Tukey's contention that consensus theory cannot account for the spiritual dimensions of experience. Section two develops the sense in which consensus theory can account for spiritual/religious experiences and beliefs. Section three discusses Rauschenbusch's social gospel as an example of a theology consistent with the consensus theory of rhetoric. Fourth and finally, a discussion of the implications of the essay will be presented.

TUKEY'S SPIRITUAL CRITIQUE OF INTERSUBJECTIVIST RHETORIC

Tukey’s basic contention is that the intersubjectivist or consensus theory position “precludes a divine locus of salvation” and “has denied altogether the divine milieu” (5). “The spiritual,” states Tukey (5), “is at most given a social role.” For the purpose of this study, the “role” of the spiritual is not as important as the rhetorical dimensions of religious beliefs and spiritual experiences. Spiritual experiences are, for the consensus theorist, grounded in social life, but this social grounding neither precludes a divine locus of salvation nor denies the divine milieu. Tukey bases his conclusions about consensus theory and religious belief on three main points, each of which deserves examination and invites critique.

First, Tukey assumes that to ground reality in language, as consensus theory does, is to suggest that human action is “fundamentally and inexorably bounded” by a particular set of socio-linguistic categories (3). For Tukey this contention leads consensus theory to the position that social categories and linguistic conventions limit “the manifestation of the sacred, the holy, the Divine Will, the Tao, or Enlightenment,” and that these “structures and concepts generally serve to mask the divine reality” (5, emphasis added). Tukey thus saddles consensus theorists with
a decidedly negative view of linguistic influences on human thought and reality. Language is seen primarily for its tendency to close off perceptual options and to reify one particular view. In direct contrast to Tukey’s view, however, consensus theorists are more apt to consider the ways in which language opens experiences and perceptions to people. Gadamer states, for example, that while language does indeed order our worlds for us, “the possibility of going beyond our conventions and beyond all those experiences that are schematized in advance, opens up before us once we find ourselves, in our conversation with others, faced with opposed thinkers, with new critical problems, with new experiences.” Though our language does preclude some religious beliefs and spiritual experiences, it also (and more positively) makes possible those beliefs and experiences to which we may and do assent.

Tukey relatedly asserts that for consensus theory language is a deterministic influence. He cites Scott to argue that for consensus theorists language “governs” rather than influences human options (2, 4). But language can be viewed as fully influential without adhering to a deterministic position. Language exhibits “tendencies” rather than determinations, and those tendencies both limit and make possible a range of interpretations. But no single interpretation is determined; no one avenue of religious belief or spiritual experience is necessitated, as Tukey insists. A particular language may prefer a particular range of beliefs and experiences, but even then other possibilities exist and may be embraced or encouraged. While our language may privilege a range of interpretations, it also contains possibilities for various ranges of interpretations.

A second point of analysis and critique involves Tukey’s reduction of spirituality to idiosyncratic experiences. In his eagerness to refute the notion that language and rhetoric render a social influence on all human action, thought, and belief, Tukey asserts that one’s sense of rhetoric “can be forever idiosyncratic” (2), that one’s stance toward reality “can be utterly idiosyncratic” (3), and that consequently, “the divine enters the human realm through individuals (rather than directly through collectives or communities) via unmediated perception and human-divine interpenetration” (5, emphasis added). Though consensus theorists themselves are accused frequently of solipsism, they tend to emphasize the social nature of “idiosyncratic” experiences.

Wayne Booth states this view most succinctly when he asserts that the self is a “field of selves.” Booth writes that “even when thinking privately, ‘I’ can never escape the other selves which I have taken in to make ‘myself,’ and my thoughts will thus always be a dialogue.” The self is presumed to be a social product because even one’s innermost “idiosyncratic” experiences always are influenced by the community which has created the individual personality. In consensus theory the individual is socially shaped.

Booth finds a precedent for this concept, interestingly, in the Judeo-Christian tradition of medieval, early Renaissance, and Enlightenment philosophy.

When men thought of themselves as children of God, made in God’s image, created to enact a sacred drama of choice between salvation and damnation, their selves were in no sense self-subsistent; they could in no way be considered “alone,” because they were not essentially unique. Soul spoke to soul through shared channels. If “I” chase to believe what “you” argued, I would not do so in total isolation or total freedom. . . 

Booth thus utilizes an example of religious thought to illustrate a “steady awareness that total autonomy is inconceivable.” Indeed, even when one examines those
mystical religions in which an emphasis on the idiosyncratic might be expected, such as Buddhism, Stoicism, or the varieties of Christian mysticism, one finds societies and communities which serve in part to define what it means to be mystical and to guide people toward mystical experiences. The early Quakers, for example, practiced what Elbert Russell called a “social mysticism.”

The mysticism of Friends was a social mysticism. . . . [Quakers] recognized that in all departments of human nature, knowing is a social process. This is particularly true of spiritual knowledge. While Quakerism often sounds like pure individualism, the existence of the Society of Friends indicates their faith that the highest knowledge of divine things is a social product.13

Contrary to Tukey’s position, then, the historical evidence indicates that the occurrence of an entirely idiosyncratic mystical experience is highly unlikely.

A third and final area in which Tukey’s argument may be analyzed and critiqued is his equation of the social with the secular. Tukey states that a “crucial point” in Robert L. Scott’s article “On Not Defining Rhetoric” occurs when Scott limits “the human condition” to “the secular (thesocial)” (3). To equate the secular with the social, however, is to disregard the numerous religious societies which have existed apart from secular institutions and authorities. More reasonably, the church is a social community which renders rhetorical influence on its members and, in so doing, makes particular religious beliefs and spiritual experiences real for those members. Unless one wants to ground spirituality entirely within the individual mind— in which case each person’s religion would live and die with that person—the social-secular connection does not hold.

Tukey’s positions on these three points are stimulating and interesting, but also problematic. They lead him to reject “intersubjectivity” or “consensus theory” as a rhetorical theory which denies the possibility of spiritual experience. In contrast to that view, the foregoing critique suggests that the consensus theory of rhetoric can account for religious beliefs and spiritual experiences. The sense in which one can embrace both consensus theory and a belief in an infinite God is explored in the next discussion.

AN INTERSUBJECTIVIST VIEW OF SPIRITUALITY

Tukey’s problematic contention that consensus theory denies “the divine milieu” can be examined best by assessing the extent to which consensus theory can account for that divine order. Steps in that assessment include, first, examination of the social nature of religious belief and spiritual experience; second, the argument that such beliefs and experiences are grounded in communication and consensus; and finally, an exploration of the sense in which the consensus theorist can posit that God is “real”.

Religious Belief and Spiritual Experience

Peter Berger suggests three options for modern religious thought. The deductive option would reestablish the authority of an a priori religious tradition which would be seen to exist independently of social or cultural context.14 Religious truths and experiences would be judged according to this tradition. The reductive option would reinterpret tradition in terms of modern thought. Contemporary criteria of rationality would become authoritative, “given an objective status,” and utilized to
validate “religious reflection.” These first two of the three options are inconsistent with consensus theory in that they posit absolute and objective criteria of meaning.

The inductive option, however, grounds religious affirmations in “one’s own experience . . . and the experience embodied in a particular range of traditions.” This mode of thought refuses to invoke any a priori authority, but recognizes both the validity and personal nature of experience, and the social influence of a religious tradition on that experience. Traditionally, theology has sought to capture God’s absolute nature and, says William James, has been disdainful of truth that is “merely possible or probable.” The inductive option recognizes that, for humans, God’s nature is contingent upon those who interpret it. Any experience, religious or otherwise, cannot exist independently of the people who experience. Because different communities may know different experiences and embrace different traditions, there may be multiple conceptions of God. This view endorses openmindedness, but “frustrates the deep religious hunger for certainty” that has characterized theological thought.

Though consensus theorists recognize the place of experience in knowledge creation, they consistently have emphasized physical experience or physical sensation. The Sophists, from whom consensus theory stems, sought to explain reality “through readily observable elements like earth and water.” Brummett states that “reality is in every particular a blend of the physical and the meaningful,” and Kelso is skeptical about whether any “true reality [can] be found outside the everyday phenomenal world.” Such skepticism is understandable, for certainly the physical is the most evident and comprehensive source of sensations. Few would say, however, that it is the only source of sensation. Indeed many describe physical sensations as indistinct when compared to “spiritual” or “mystical” sensations. James states that sensations or experiences of a mystical reality “are as convincing to those who have them as any direct sensible experience can be.” A. Boyce Gibson asserts similarly that religious sensations “are just as much part of experience, and just as far from being vacuous, as any sense-impression.” Consensus theory should recognize the validity of experiences other than the physical. It thereby makes room within its domain for those who see it as a reasonable and accurate theory of knowledge, but also those who wish to acknowledge a supernatural element in existence.

To this point, the focus has been on the importance of “religious” experiences and sensations. Though consensus theorists stress meaning as central to the creation of knowledge and reality, one cannot disregard the importance of sensation to the process. While “sensation alone is meaningless,” there can be no meaning, no knowledge, without sensation. And though “we can’t get away from the symbolic,” neither can we get away from sensation. Still, what is important is that rhetoric creates reality by shaping sensations into the forms by which they are known. This rhetorical influence upon religious experience is examined next.

Rhetorical Influence and Religious Experience

According to Friedrich Schleiermacher, If there is religion at all, it must be social, for that is the nature of man, and it is quite peculiarly the nature of religion. Schleiermacher’s conclusion is central to consensus theory’s explanation of religious belief. Other scholars affirm his conclusion.

David E. Klemm notes that the dominant “metaphor of God” in twentieth century theology is “God as the breaking-in of ‘otherness’ to human existence.” If
God is totally other, then what breaks into human experience is not God in fact or totality, but “the appearance, symbol, or manifestation of God,” or God as “word or language.”28 This dominant metaphor thus presents God “as a sign to be interpreted and not as a self-sufficient object or an absolute synthesis.”29 Thus, for humans, God exists as an interpretation. And as modern hermeneutics has shown, interpretation always proceeds from a historical and symbolic context.

The socially created meanings which make up human nature and shape reality necessarily must impinge upon religious experience and communication about religious experience. This communication is what saves religion from solipsism. In his important and relevant discussion, Schleiermacher asserts that the more deeply one is moved spiritually, the stronger the social impulse is to “express and communicate” what one has experienced.30 People desire to validate personal experiences by confirming them with others and thus sharing meaning with respect to a given phenomenon.

Religion, then, is a shared experience made possible by language and communication.31 As such, it is a human projection. But, as Berger states, “this very communication is motivated by an experience in which a metahuman reality is injected into human life.”32 Because it is perceived and apprehended through a symbolically created net of meanings, experience is not literal or objective, but contingent. Only reductionists, however, would say that spiritual experience and/or God is nothing but a linguistic creation. At some point an “experience,” a “phenomenon,” “something” “breaks into” human experience which people have agreed to interpret as supernatural. The necessary and immediate symbolization of the experience introduces it into an organon of symbolic meanings that have a specific history and social location.33 For humans, neither God nor religious belief can exist independent of that historical and social context.

Within historical and social contexts are embodied consensually validated myths and traditions that provide meanings for religious experiences. Such myths and traditions are a necessary part of religion, for they provide the grounds by which a community judges what it means to be moved spiritually. And James notes that religious experience, in a corresponding fashion, “spontaneously and inevitably engenders myths, superstitions, dogmas, creeds, and metaphysical theologies” which help to orient people to their personal encounters with God.34 These traditions serve three important functions. First, they mediate religious experiences to those who have not participated in them. Second, traditions institutionalize religious experiences for the entire religious community.35 And, third, traditions provide a storehouse of meanings through which subsequent religious experiences can be interpreted.

Of primary importance here is the creation of communities which confirm and preserve religious experience, and thus sustain the reality of religion itself. Berger states this concept succinctly:

The reality of the Christian world depends upon the presence of social structures within which this reality is taken for granted and within which successive generations of individuals are socialized in such a way that this world will be real to them.*

One cannot embrace any reality alone. To live in a world where “God is real” requires affiliation with a community that agrees to that particular claim. The community confirms the reality of God; in turn, the community is confirmed by the traditions which sustain it. Religious experience thus “becomes an institutionalized
fact within normal social life [and] its plausibility is sustained by the same processes that keep plausible any other experience.” Consensus theory postulates that the process for maintaining plausibility is intersubjective, or consensual, agreement. Theologians Gibson and Schleiermacher can be read to argue that this also is the case in matters of religious experience.

For Gibson, the issue “is not whether religion is based on witness or not, but whose witness is to count.” The criterion he suggests is “intersubjectivity plus imputation.” Those witnesses which are to be recognized as “true” are those with which the religious community is persuaded to agree. This sense of consensual agreement influences both what is judged to be true or false and the statements one might make in describing a religious experience. Schleiermacher makes clear that even in religious experience, it is impossible to be disassociated from those who combine rhetorically to create the self.

If [one] unveils a hidden wonder, or links with prophetic assurance the future to the present, or by new examples confirms old truths, or if his fiery imagination enchants him in visions into another part of the world and into another order of things, the trained sense of the congregation accompanies him throughout.

The social—i.e., rhetorical—dimensions of religious experiences and conceptions of God cannot be shaken. The meanings attributed to God are shared meanings, in consensus theory’s terms, for shared meanings are the only meanings available. These shared meanings are what Schleiermacher calls “the trained sense of the congregation.” Such meanings are created, sustained, and changed through daily communication and through traditions, myths, dogmas, and the like. To remove social considerations from a theory of religion would be to remove the source of the meanings which one attributes to the sacred; it would be to cut the heart from religion. Religion’s significance, at base, is in what it means to those who embrace and experience it.

**Faith and the Knowledge of God**

The analysis and argument thus far has highlighted the empirical—though not objective—existence of religious experience; and the eminently social nature of the meanings through which such experiences are known as reality. Religious experience being an experience of something, a something which may be called God, the ontological question concerning the sense in which God is “real” can now be addressed.

Scholars generally accept that God’s existence cannot be logically proven through argument or any other means. Consensus theory, as noted earlier, avoids entertaining the notion that God, or anything, exists independently of human values and meanings. Consensus theory, however, will allow for God’s existence on the basis of intersubjective agreement. Such a position is contrary to most conceptions of God because it makes the supernatural dependent on the natural, the infinite subject to the finite, the creator a creation. This section discusses the sense in which one can maintain that a supernatural, infinite God exists, and still remain consistent with consensus theory.

Consensus theory is concerned with human knowing. It postulates how knowledge is created by humans and what is real for humans. As Brinton states, “the notion of reality” is reserved for the given as it is known [by humans], the flux ‘clothed’ so to speak. . . . [O]nly the flux clothed is to count as reality [because] we
can never have access to it in its nakedness.”

Though the naked flux is inaccessible and is seen as irrelevant to what humans can and do know, the concept of a naked flux, the idea of an infinite God, is not necessarily irrelevant within a reality that one is persuaded to be true. One might believe that the flux exists in its nakedness, and still recognize that in order for it to be humanly real, it must, to borrow Scott’s language, “enter into the contingencies of time and place [and human symbol systems] and will not give rise to products which are certain.”

The element of faith which makes possible such belief is emphasized by consensus theorists and religious thinkers alike. Kelso notes that humans must have some sense of an independent reality. “Only faith,” he writes, “can ‘counterbalance’ the infinite relativism toward which one’s reason would invariably lead.” Berger states that “religious affirmations always entail faith.” Theologian Edwyn Bevan emphasizes that there is a “fundamental act of faith in all religion [that is] unprovable by any argument not circular.” Colin Brown, a philosopher/theologian, asserts on at least two occasions that to understand religious experience entails commitments based primarily on faith. And finally, William James views faith as “the sense of life by virtue of which man does not destroy himself, but lives on.” The element of faith is significant because it provides a means whereby one can unite belief in an infinite God with consensus theory. Faith is tied to human knowledge in that it is induced rhetorically. People are persuaded to have faith in or about something and that faith is validated when more and more people are seen to agree with it. At the same time, faith can justify belief in a God who is beyond human reality. It points to, or hopes for, a God who transcends symbol systems. This perspective on faith distinguishes between what exists for humans, and belief in a realm that exists beyond humans. If God is to exist for humans, they must be persuaded that God is real. God’s existence in and of Himself, however, is beyond the domain of human knowledge and can be described as independent from any consensual validation. Such a description, nevertheless, always would be made by one who is convinced of God’s existence through the processes postulated by consensus theory.

Essential to this view’s coherence is the idea that God is literally beyond the confines of human knowledge. Any attempt to grasp God’s meaning (s) therefore, must be riddled with uncertainty. Though knowledge of God may be said to arise out of an encounter with God, it “does not lay claim to be an absolute knowledge. It is not a claim to know God as he is in himself.” This claim cannot be made because knowledge of God always consists of meanings created rhetorically by humans.

**CONSENSUS THEOLOGY: A THEOLOGY FOR THE SOCIAL GOSPEL**

Though the position articulated above certainly departs from traditional explanations of God, religious belief, and spiritual experience, it is consistent with some twentieth century theologies. Contemporary concern for hermeneutics as a theological method certainly points to similarities between consensus theory and modern theology. Robert Farrar Capon’s *Hunting the Divine Fox* and Sallie McFague’s *Metaphorical Theology* are two examples of recent theological works whose basic premises are consistent with a consensus theory of rhetoric. The text which will be examined as illustrative of positions relevant to this essay, however, is Walter Rauschenbusch’s *A Theology for the Social Gospel*. This text illustrates the point developed in section two of this paper: that a theology consistent with consensus
theory need not deny “the divine milieu,” and can account for the various dimensions of religious experience.

Rauschenbusch’s theology generally is considered to be one of the most significant intellectual efforts associated with the Social Gospel Movement in the United States. Rauschenbusch’s effort is significant because it posits a theology premised on philosophical assumptions which contradict those of traditional Protestant thought. Rauschenbusch makes his purpose clear early in his book: “If theology stops growing or is unable to adjust itself to its modern environment and to meet its present tasks, it will die” (1). His work is important, he says, “only if the needs of a new epoch are seeking expression in it” (2). His goal is to make Christian theology relevant to all of life. To do this he challenges the dominant notions about how we acquire religious knowledge, and examines the status of that knowledge. Two important themes in Theology will be analyzed: 1) a shift from the individual to the social as the focus of theology and the grounds for knowledge; and 2) a shift from the absolute to the relative status of knowledge. These emphases, important in their own way, also are consistent with the basic tenets of consensus theory and the discussion being developed here.

Theology can be divided into four sections: Section one (chapters 1–3) provides a justification for the concept of a social gospel; section two reconceptualizes the two central terms of Protestant theology, sin (chapters 4–9) and salvation (chapters 10–12); section three (chapters 13–14) identifies the “kingdom of God” as an organizing principle for the social gospel; and, finally, section four (chapters 15–19) reinterprets several central theological concepts. The previously isolated themes will be developed as they pertain to each of these sections.

From the Individual to the Social

Section one of Theology establishes that the gospel traditionally has been read as a treatise on the individual. That reading has provided a recognition of personal sinfulness, but it “has not given us an adequate understanding of the sinfulness of the social order”(5). The individualistic interpretation stems from the intellectual bases of Protestantism and Capitalism, but for Rauschenbusch this interpretation is neither temporally nor logically prior to the social gospel. He argues that the social gospel is “the oldest gospel of all,” and that it can be traced to Christ and “the first generation of disciples” who hoped for a “Christian social order on earth” (24). Further, the social gospel logically circumscribes the more popular theology of the individual. It is able to account for individual salvation, while a personal theology, according to Rauschenbusch, is unable to account for social salvation.

In section two Rauschenbusch begins to explain how the concepts of sin and salvation can be understood from a social perspective. A most important strategy is his decision to define sin as selfishness (47), a term which connotes the essence of individualism. This conception of sin stands against the predominant theology of individual salvation by making an emphasis on social concerns the criterion for sanctification. To be social is to be holy. To be selfish, indeed even to concern oneself with the salvation of one’s soul, is to be unholy.

This sociality is not temporally bound. Rauschenbusch clearly communicates that social solidarity binds people both in and over time. Original sin, therefore, is perpetuated not simply in its individual manifestations, but in its social manifestations as well. Social structures transmit systemic evil from generation to generation
just as surely, and perhaps with more devastating results, as individuals transmit
deciet from person to person.

This concept of sin has obvious implications for a corresponding concept of
salvation. Salvation becomes “the voluntary socializing of the soul” (99), marked by
endeavor for the common good. Personal concern for one’s soul, as noted above,
becomes a sign of selfishness, so that individual salvation is not predicated upon
some self motivated salvific act, but upon “membership in a community which has
salvation” (126). Rauschenbusch’s theological focus clearly is on the social.

While this particular focus is not surprising, Rauschenbusch articulates a
position which is both more surprising and more radical than the theological focus
on the social: the epistemological focus on the social. Rauschenbusch’s theology
replaces an egocentric concern for salvation with a collective concern for salvation.
But his epistemology replaces a theistic grounding for knowledge with the collective
grounding for knowledge. No longer is God the arbiter of truth and knowledge; one’s
social group now takes that position. A religious society, then, has spiritual authority
over its members (61). One’s values and beliefs, one’s sense of moral practice, even
one’s conception of sin and salvation must be recognized as social products.

In section three of *Theology* Rauschenbusch identifies the “Kingdom of God”
as an organizing principle for the social gospel. In one particularly important
passage he writes the following:

The Kingdom of God... is the continuous revelation of the power, the righteousness, and the
love of God. The establishment of a community of righteousness in mankind is just as much a
saving act of God as the salvation of an individual from his natural selfishness and moral
inability. The Kingdom of God... is absolutely necessary to establish that organic union
between religion and morality, between theology and ethics, which is one of the characteris-
tics of the Christian religion (139-140).

Rauschenbusch’s notion of the Kingdom of God provides an important frame-
work for his epistemology of the social gospel. Though he recognizes the social as
primary in matters of knowledge, Rauschenbusch also posits the Kingdom of God as
a binding social standard that judges matters of ethics, morality, and other types of
theological knowledge. He writes that the Kingdom “is always both present and future” (140-141), and that it embodies the criteria by which the institutions,
activities, worship, and theology of the church can be tested (143). In science and
other scholarly pursuits, the “community of scholars” provides the bases by which
claims of knowledge and truth are judged. In Rauschenbusch’s social gospel the
ongoing tradition embodied in the Kingdom of God serves this function.

The concept of the kingdom of God functions in another significant fashion. As
discussed, Rauschenbusch’s *Theology* has developed a focus on the social, rather
than on the individual, as traditional theologies have done. But to remain compel-
ing, Rauschenbusch cannot dismiss the individual; the individual must be ac-
counted for somehow. The concept of the “Kingdom of God” resolves the tension
between the social and individual emphases by subsuming the individual within the
social. The Kingdom of God serves as an ultimate concept within which both the
individual and the social can coexist; it provides a hierarchy wherein the individual is
seen in relation to the “task of saving the social order” (137).

The idea that religious or theological knowledge is a social construct is most
thoroughly articulated in the book’s final section. Here Rauschenbusch argues that
our most fundamental theological concepts arise from a socio-cultural context and
cannot be understood apart from that context. He makes the social primary in matters of religious knowledge. Rauschenbusch writes, for example, that the “conception of God held by a social group is a social product” (167); that a theology of inspiration must look beyond the inspired person “to the social group which produced him, to the spiritual predecessors who inspired him, and to the audience which moved him because he hoped to move it” (190); and “that every theory of atonement necessarily used terms and analogies taken from the social life of that age, and that the spirit and problems of contemporary life are always silent factors in the construction of theory” (243). These statements emphasize the social as the source of knowledge and the basis for experience and inspiration. The theology of the social gospel is based on the premise that any theology is as much a product of the historical conditions within which it arose as it is a reflection of some absolute truth about God.

From the Absolute to the Relative

The second theme in Rauschenbusch’s book is related closely to, and indeed even emerges from, the first. That theme is the shift from the absolute to the relative. Insofar as societies and social norms are ever changing, knowledge must be seen as relative. Still it is helpful to note how Rauschenbusch develops this theme, for it stands in marked contrast to the traditional Christian ideal of an absolute and immutable Truth.

Rauschenbusch addresses this profound contrast in the first section of *Theology*. He notes that the authority of the Church always has rested “in large part on the stability of its doctrine” (12) and that even “to grant the possibility of the need of change means a loss of assurance and certitude” (10). Nevertheless, he states that if “we seek to keep Christian doctrine unchanged, we shall ensure its abandonment” (7). In an effort to save Christian theology, then, Rauschenbusch relativizes the gospel.

Several pertinent examples of this relativization can be cited. Fundamental to his view, for instance, is the notion that sin must be defined within a social context and is therefore a relative concept. Thus Rauschenbusch argues that different classes of sin exist and that sin is a variable factor in human life. But perhaps his most telling break from tradition concerns the meaning and means of salvation. “The form which the process of redemption takes in a given personality,” he states, “will be determined by the historical and social spiritual environment of the man” (97). The very process by which one reaches God is an uncertainty; it is variable, relative, and thus subject to negotiation and change.

This relativistic stance lifts the concept of faith to a place of primary importance. Faith no longer refers to confident assent to the testimony of the past, but becomes a hopeful expectancy with regard to future salvific events. Faith becomes “an energetic act of the will” (102). Perhaps this corresponds to James’ will to believe, or the will to assent to probabilities of which one is convinced, rather than to certainties of which one is assured. Faith connotes a mystery, an uncertainty about results, and Rauschenbusch’s social gospel rests on this concept of faith.

In conclusion, an important and summary issue relates to the kind of world in which Rauschenbusch proposes that we live. A *Theology for the Social Gospel* is a theology grounded in the post-modern world. It has moved from a static universe based on a mechanistic model to a universe that consists primarily of process and change. Within this world Rauschenbusch proposes an ethical system based on the
Kingdom of God and understood in terms of the Kingdom’s teleology. Though on its face the proposition is contradictory, Rauschenbusch does locate this teleology within a relative and processual world.

Rauschenbusch verifies particularly well this conclusion when he writes that an “eschatology . . . which is expressed in terms of historic development has no final consummation. Its consummations are always the basis for further development” (227). When Rauschenbusch writes of teleology, he writes not of a final principle or event, but of teleological moments. He writes not of solutions that are eternally binding, but of resolutions that are temporary.

The world Rauschenbusch describes obviously requires ethical action based on something other than certainty. That action in this world stems from conviction, from belief in the probable. Rauschenbusch discourages dogmatic adherence to a creed in favor of belief in propositions of which we are, for the moment, persuaded.

CONCLUSION: CONSENSUS THEOLOGY

The analyses and critiques in this paper support the idea that the consensus theory of epistemic rhetoric can account for religious beliefs and spiritual experiences. Contrary to Tukey’s position, consensus theory does not deny the “divine milieu,” but in fact provides a helpful framework by which to explain the rhetorical dimensions of spiritual experience. The examination of Walter Rauschenbusch’s A Theology for the Social Gospel demonstrates the possibility of a theology consistent with consensus theory.

Consensus theory does posit an epistemological and ontological system which contradicts that of traditional Western religious thought. While the comfortable proposition of an absolute and immutable divine reality is called into question, the importance of faith and the place of rhetorical influence in the affirmation of that faith are reaffirmed. A consensus theology would recognize that whatever religious beliefs and spiritual experiences one embraces, they are, like other types of beliefs and experiences, the products of rhetorical influence. The paper argues, in essence, that no inherent contradiction exists between consensus theory and religious belief.

But the paper also suggests several implications for the study of communication. One implication concerns how a philosophy which features communication, as consensus theory does, can serve as a “rhetoric of inquiry” in theological studies. Scholors from a variety of disciplines have begun to recognize the rhetorical dimensions of their work. Theologians are among those who now explore “how reason is rhetorical and how recognizing that fact should alter research.” Capon, for example, states that “the very first word in theology has to be not about God, but about the way we ourselves use words.” This position coincides with the one developed in this paper, and it certainly places communication at the center of theological study. This paper demonstrates how a communication-based philosophy can also contain a theology, and it lays groundwork for scholars interested in development of a rhetoric of theology.

A second implication concerns the place of “faith” in conceptions of epistemic rhetoric. This paper suggests not only that the rhetorical dimensions of faith are important and need to be explored, but also that faith as a concept is central both to religious belief and consensus theory. A deeper understanding of persuasive processes might be engendered through further examination of “faith” as a communication phenomenon. Faith considered as a willingness to act upon knowledge that we have only in the broadest outline, or as a willingness to accept metaphor in place of
literal knowledge, can illumine the concept as a rhetorical component of public decision-making.

If rhetoric creates reality in the manner posited by consensus theory, then at least two very practical concerns must follow. One is a concern for the types of institutions which control the images, traditions, and terms by which religious belief and experience are rendered meaningful. While I have argued in this paper that varieties of beliefs and experiences are possible, dominant meanings and traditions do exist and serve to close off avenues of understanding which threaten them. The perspective offered here should direct attention toward the ways in which dominant institutions create a hegemony of belief by sanctioning certain experiences and censuring others.

A second practical concern is with the elimination of certainty from religious belief. The prospect of certainty is comforting, but when certainty prevails people often forsake the possibility of persuasion, and begin to sanction by righteousness dehumanizing actions intended to implement the truth. From the Crusades to the Inquisition to Hitler’s Germany, history is full of examples whereby the certain have impoverished and destroyed the “unrighteous.” The position defended in this paper avoids the dangers of certainty by describing even religious knowledge as a probable and changeable product of language, tradition, and rhetorical communication, rather than a matter of objective and immutable reality.

In sum, this paper suggests a framework from which to study how specific instances of religious rhetoric create realities. Much work has been done to show how rhetoric creates scientific and political “truths.” This paper argues that rhetoric functions in a similar fashion among religious communities, and suggests that communication scholars can illumine the ways in which religious beliefs and experiences are affirmed. Beyond that, the paper positions communication scholars to comment more incisively about rhetoric’s role in those public affairs which concern religious faith. Goldzwig’s work on “public theology” begins to account for the influence of religious discourse directed to mass audiences in an effort to affect public policy.56 But while Goldzwig examines rhetoric for its instrumental effects, this paper suggests that religious communication has an important constitutive function. John Lyne argues that this constitutive function deserves more attention because “it helps explain why the study of discourse is important independent of whether it can be demonstrated to have ‘caused’ events. . . . Rhetoric, seen in this light, exceeds the merely instrumental and serves to constitute parts of our world.”57 The position advocated in this paper provides rationale for a communication-based philosophy that can account both for religious arguments proffered in the public arena and, perhaps more importantly, for the existence of God as embraced within human communities. By its demonstration of consensus theory’s ability to account for religious beliefs and experiences, the paper further substantiates the utility of consensus theory itself. For consensus theory best explains the constitutive function of religious language.

NOTES


Brummett 28.

Brummett states that consensus theory denies the “existence of a dichotomy between what humanity knows and what there is to know,” 28. Kenneth Burke suggests that all theological statements and, indeed, the concept of God’s very existence result from the nature of human symbol systems. See The Rhetoric of Religion (1961; reprint; Berkeley: University of California Press, 1970) especially 273–316.


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Booth 126.

Booth 126.

Booth 126.


Booth 56.

Booth 57.

Booth 58, emphasis added. Traditions are defined as “bodies of evidence concerning religious experience and the insights deriving from experience.”


Brummett 58.


James 73.

A. Boyce Gibson, Theism and Empiricism (New York Schocken Books, 1979) 49.

Brummett, “Postmodern Rhetoric” 28.

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Klemm 280.

Klemm 279.

Schleiermacher 148.

David A. McGregor emphasizes that when within a religious context, shared experience “is not a value which the individual can create for himself, he is dependent on society for it.” “The Social and the Individual in Religion” in Miles H. Kramkine, ed., The Process of Religion (1933; reprint; Freeport, NY: Books for Libraries Press, 1972) 144.

Berger 48; emphasis in original.

Berger 47. The consensus theorist would point out the impossibility of distinguishing experience from symbolic influence. Indeed, the sentence might well read “The necessary and immediate experience of the symbolization...” rather than “The necessary and immediate symbolization of the experience. . . .”

James 339.

These first two functions of tradition are discussed by Berger 43.


Berger, The Heretical Imperative 44.

Gibson 54.
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Gibson. 55.
Schleiermacher 151-152 emphasis added.
Klemm 281.
Scott, “Rhetoric as Epistemic” 14.
Kelso 26–27
Berger, The Heretical Imperative 128.
James 1.
Paul Tillich has argued for just such a case, though using different terms. Tillich, says Colin Brown, asserts that to presume God to be a “thing” or “a being” is to make him finite. If God is infinite he is “beyond things and beings.” Brown 194. Klemm makes a similar argument, 282.
Brown 253.
Nelson, Megill, and McCloskey ix. This text provides a good overview of what has come to be called the “rhetoric of inquiry.”
Capon 7.