“In Defense of Prejudice” by Jonathan Rauch: Questions for Discussion and Writing

1. What is the purpose of the examples given in the first paragraph?
2. For what reasons does Rauch argue that prejudice will always exist in human society?
3. What is intellectual pluralism, and how is prejudice useful in a society characterized by intellectual pluralism? Why is allowing prejudices to exist preferable to stamping them out?
4. According to Rauch, how is science often thought to function, and how does it actually function?
5. How has disagreement within societies usually been dealt with in human history?
6. According to Rauch, what kind of person in society is responsible for progress?
7. In one sense, it could be said that “modern anti-racist and anti-sexist and anti-homophobic campaigners” were the inspiration for this essay. In what way are they similar to “totalists” such as those in the Church who sought out heretics or “McCarthyites” who sought out Communists?
8. Why does Rauch say, “Here one imagines gangs of racist words swinging chains and smashing heads in back alleys” (second-to-last paragraph on page 3)?
9. What conclusions have Rauch’s “purists” come to about how to deal with prejudice in American society? What examples does he give of some extreme manifestations of this approach?
10. In what way is combating prejudice “like a cat chasing flies” (second paragraph on page 5)?
11. What inherent contradiction is there in the drive to stamp out prejudice (bottom of page 5)? What practical and legal problems arise in this campaign? What effects of hate-speech laws and speech codes seem contrary to their original spirit?
12. What is the ultimate outcome of the pursuit of prejudice (page 6)?
13. What facts about Rauch’s background make him a convincing spokesperson “in defense of prejudice”? Why does he include the story about overhearing a group of kids making a joke about homosexuals?
14. What does Rauch see as the best way to deal with violence caused by prejudice, and how does the campaign to eliminate prejudice make it more difficult to achieve this goal?