

The Cambridge Companion to
KANT

Edited by Paul Guyer



13 Rational theology, moral faith, and religion

I. BACKGROUND

By the middle of the seventeenth century, Lutheran theology had become an ossified and sterile orthodoxy. It was challenged by two currents of thought that were to lead to the eighteenth-century German Enlightenment. The first was *Pietism*, founded by Philipp Jakob Spener (1635–1705). The Pietists regarded Christian faith not as a set of doctrinal propositions but a living relationship with God. They stressed above all the felt power of God's grace to transform the believer's life through a conversion of "born again" experience. Pietism was hostile to the intellectualization of Christianity. Like Lutheran orthodoxy it exalted scriptural authority above natural reason, but for Pietism the main purpose of reading scripture was inspiration and moral edification. The experience of spiritual rebirth must transform the believer's emotions and show itself in outward conduct. Within the universities, the Pietists favored cultivation of piety and morality in life rather than theoretical inquiry. In religious controversy, they urged that the aim should be to win over the heart of one's opponent rather than to gain intellectual victory. The social and political tendencies of Pietism were progressive, even radical. Pietism's Christian ethic was also egalitarian; its emphasis on the immediacy and intimacy of religious experience comported well with a belief in the priesthood of all believers. For Pietism, the visible church was less important than the church invisible, whose membership in principle includes the whole of humanity.

The other current that fed the Enlightenment was *rationalism*, deriving from the philosophy of Christian Wolff (1679–1754). Under the influence of Leibniz, Wolff combined traditional scholasticism

with the new science, producing a comprehensive philosophical system. In theology he argued that scriptural revelation was distinct from rational theology, but wholly consistent with it. Wolff's rational theology was founded on the cosmological argument that the contingent world must depend for its existence on a necessarily existent and supremely perfect being. The mid-eighteenth century also witnessed the beginning of critical biblical theology, under the influence of such men as J. A. Ernesti (1707–81) and J. D. Michaelis (1717–91). Under Wolff's influence, H. S. Reimarus (1694–1768) developed a system of rational religion (1754), a German counterpart of English deism, denying the need for supernatural revelation and founding religion on reason (and especially on rational morality). In 1778 Reimarus's so-called *Wolfenbüttel Fragments* were published posthumously by G. E. Lessing. These writings not only rejected all miracles and supernatural revelation, but also attacked the biblical histories as contradictory, fraudulent, and generally unreliable.

Pietism and rationalism were generally foes within the cultural life of eighteenth-century Germany. In 1723 (a year before Kant's birth), Pietists succeeded in persuading Prussian King Friedrich Wilhelm I to dismiss Wolff from his professorship at the prestigious University of Halle. Wolff taught at Marburg until 1740, when he was called back to Halle in triumph by the new king Friedrich II (Frederick the Great). Wolff's philosophy was the medium in which the German Enlightenment grew. Pietism also contributed to it, but the Counterenlightenment thought of Herder and Jacobi also display the lingering influence of Pietist thought and sensibility. Yet it was also possible for Kant's teacher Martin Knutzen (1713–51) to be both a Pietist and a Wolffian. Kant's thought displays the creative interaction between the two movements, but he became more a critic of both movements than an adherent of either.

Kant certainly had a strictly Pietistic education, both at home and in school. His philosophical views did not always please his religious mentors. The influence and financial support of Kant's family pastor F. A. Schultz enabled the poor harness-maker's son to enter the *Collegium Fredericianum*, Schultz's newly founded Pietist academy in Königsberg. In 1755 Schultz was reportedly disappointed when his former pupil put forward the nebular hypothesis, a purely naturalistic and nonpurposive explanation of the origin of the solar system.

In many matters, Kant's religious beliefs and practices were far from orthodox. Kant was personally opposed in principle to religious ceremonies. He regarded creeds as unconscionable impositions on our inner freedom of thought, almost inevitably productive of a hypocritical frame of mind. Ceremonial praise of the Deity (the "religion of ingratiating") was for him a despicable act of self-degradation. And he saw no possible good in activities whose superstitious aim is to conjure up divine aid for our projects, regarding petitionary prayer (the "wheedling of God") as especially objectionable in this respect (*Religion*, 6:194–200/182–187).¹ In 1775 Kant wrote to J. C. Lavater:

You ask for my opinion of your discussion of faith and prayer. Do you realize whom you are asking? A man who believes that, in the final moment, only the purest candor concerning our most hidden inner convictions can stand the test and who, like Job, takes it to be a sin to flatter God and make inner confessions, perhaps forced out by fear, that fail to agree with what we freely think. . . . By "moral faith" I mean the unconditional trust in divine aid, in achieving all the good that, even with our most sincere efforts, lies beyond our power. . . . No confession of faith, no appeal to holy names nor any observance of religious ceremonies can help – though the consoling hope is offered us that, if we do as much good as is in our power, trusting in the unknown and mysterious help of God, we shall (without meritorious "works" of any kind) partake of this divine supplement.

(10:176–9 / 79–82)

Later Kant served several times as rector of the University of Königsberg, but was always "indisposed" when his official participation in religious observances would have been required.²

Kant's religious views even provoked the hostility of the authorities. The philosopher welcomed Frederick the Great's tolerant (and anticlerical) treatment of religion within the Prussian state (*Enlightenment*, 8:36–37/55). After Frederick's death in 1786, however, he ran afoul of Friedrich Wilhelm II's quite different policies. The new monarch dismissed Kant's patron Baron Zedlitz from his position as culture minister, replacing him with J. C. Wöllner (whom Frederick the Great had called a "deceitful, scheming parson"). In 1788 Wöllner promulgated an edict instituting censorship of all publications regarding their religious content; two years later, he supplemented it with an order that all candidates in theology should be subjected to a rigorous examination to ensure the orthodoxy of their convictions, supplemented by a solemn oath. Kant was outraged by

these measures, and commented on them in a postscript to his 1791 essay on theodicy (*Theodicy*, 8:265–71).³

The censors did not refuse publication of either *Religion within the Limits of Reason Alone* (1793) or *The End of All Things* (1794). But on October 1, 1794 the king (at Wöllner's urging) wrote a reproving letter to Kant, commanding him to write no more on religious subjects. By this time, Kant's renown was such that he could have disregarded such an impudent and unenlightened command with impunity, as friends urged him to do. But (consistent with his own doctrine of absolute obedience to sovereign authority, even to its unjust commands) Kant regarded himself as bound to obey, and wrote the king a letter pledging himself to do so (*Conflict*, 7:7–11). Yet later (in a spirit more wily than submissive) he chose to interpret this as merely a personal promise to the monarch; immediately upon the latter's death in 1797, he again expressed himself on religious topics in *The Conflict of the Faculties*.⁴

II. RATIONAL THEOLOGY

Kant is famous for his criticisms (which Moses Mendelssohn called "world-crushing" (*Weltzermalmend*)) of the traditional proofs for God's existence. Less well known is the positive side of Kant's rational theology, his argument that the concept of God is natural to human reason, arising necessarily in the course of rational reflection on the concept of an individual thing in general.

In Kant's categories of quality (reality, negation, and limitation), "reality" is presented as admitting of degree, or intensive magnitude (A 143 / B 182; A 273 / B 329). Kant subscribes to the traditional scholastic-rationalist ontology according to which things have different degrees or amounts of reality or being. He also subscribes to the Leibnizian principle that each individual thing differs qualitatively from all others. Following Wolff and Alexander Gottlieb Baumgarten (1714–62), Kant presents this idea in terms of the "principle of thorough determination" (*principium omnimodae determinatio*): Any given thing is determined by one and only one member of every pair of contradictorily opposed predicates, and the complete individual concept of a given thing consists in the precise combination of realities and negations that determines it (A 571 / B 599).⁵ Kant holds that when we try to think the conditions for the complete determina-

tion of any individual thing, we are led inevitably to the concept of an "all of reality (*omnitudo realitatis*)" (A 575–6 / B 603–4), and thence to the idea of an individual possessing all realities, an *ens realissimum*. This is the "ideal of pure reason," the pure rational concept of a supremely perfect being, or God (A 568 / B 596).⁶

On the basis of Kant's argument, the idea of God is the ground of the concepts of all other things. In his 1763 essay *The Only Possible Basis of Proof for a Demonstration of God's Existence*, Kant used these considerations to argue that God is also "the ground of all possibility" and consequently a necessarily existent being (*Only Possible Basis*, 2:78–9).⁷ Although by 1781 he no longer endorses this proof of God's existence, it continues to influence his thinking about rational theology. In the *Critique of Pure Reason* he denies that his 1763 proof justifies a "dogmatic conclusion" that God exists, but he continues to hold that the existence of God as "the substratum of all possibility" is a "subjectively necessary hypothesis" for our reason (A 581–2 / B 609–10).

Kant's conception of God belongs squarely in the scholastic-rationalist tradition. God is the supremely perfect being, extramundane, immutable, timelessly eternal. He is also living, knowing, and willing: omniscient, omnipotent, supremely holy, just, and beneficent. Kant draws a distinction between God's "ontological" predicates, which can be derived from the pure categories, and his "cosmological" or "anthropological" predicates, based on empirical features of the world (especially features of ourselves). Kant defines "deism" as the view that admits only an "ontotheology" or "transcendental theology." For the deist, God is "a blindly working eternal nature as the root of all things" (a single supremely perfect necessarily existent supramundane substance, immutable, impassible, all-sufficient, omnipresent, timelessly eternal), but not a living, knowing, or willing being (*Lectures*, 28:1002/30, 1032–45/62–79). A "theist" is someone who has also a "natural theology," regarding God as a rational and a moral being on the basis of predicates drawn from finite things (especially from our own mental life) (*Lectures*, 28:1046–60/81–99). Regarding such predicates, Kant adopts a theory of analogy. When we ascribe knowledge or volition to God, we cannot mean that he has any property similar to our knowledge and will, but only a supremely perfect analogue, with which we can

never be directly acquainted (*Prolegomena*, 4:356–63/105–10; *Lectures*, 28:1023/54).

Kant's discussion of the traditional theistic proofs is based on the view that God is an *ens logice originarium*, whose necessary existence is naturally thought to follow from its status as the root of all possibility. Kant considers proofs for God's existence only as proofs for the existence of a supremely perfect being or *ens realissimum*, and he thinks that a truly adequate proof of the existence of such a being would have to be *a priori*. Kant divides all theistic proofs into three general types:

1. *Ontological* proofs, which argue for the necessary existence of a supremely perfect being from its concept alone.
2. *Cosmological* proofs, which argue for the necessary existence of a supremely perfect being from the contingent existence of a world in general.
3. *Physicotheological* proofs, which argue for the existence of a supremely perfect being from the contingent constitution of the world (e.g., from the teleological arrangements found in it).

Kant argues that a physicotheological proof cannot establish the existence of a supremely perfect being unless it rests covertly on a cosmological proof; and that a cosmological proof cannot establish that a perfect being necessarily exists unless an ontological proof is also sound. In both cases, Kant alleges that the presupposition is involved in inferring the existence of a supremely perfect being (from a necessary being in the case of the cosmological argument, and from a wise world-designer in the case of the physicotheological).⁸ His strategy is therefore to show that no ontological proof for God's existence can be given, and thus to defeat the other two proofs as well, by a kind of domino effect. One consequence of this strategy is that Kant in effect mounts no criticism at all of the inference from contingent to necessary existence or the inference from purposiveness in the world to a wise designer. Another consequence is that Kant's entire critique of traditional theistic proofs is made to rest on his critique of the ontological argument, without which Kant's entire critique of rational theology would fall to the ground. (In his 1763 essay, however, Kant had presented independent criticisms of the cosmological and physi-

cotheological proofs. Though he does not repeat them in the *Critique*, he probably did not intend to repudiate them either.)

Kant's critique of the ontological proof may be summed up in the slogan: "Existence is not a real predicate," that is, "it is not anything that could be added to the concept of a thing" (A 599 / B 626). This does not mean that it is a phony predicate, and of course it does not mean that propositions of the form "X exists" add nothing to our information about X. Kant wants to draw a distinction between (1) propositions that "determine" a subject-concept by predicating "realities" or perfections that do not belong to it, and (2) propositions that only "posit" an object corresponding to the subject-concept, without predicating of it anything that might be part of the contents of any concept. "X exists" is a proposition of this latter sort. "When we say 'God is' or 'There is a God', we attach no new predicate to the concept of God, but only posit the subject itself with all its predicates" (A 599 / B 627).

Kant's thesis about existence and predication is famous and influential, but Kant has remarkably little to say in its defense, and its truth is anything but self-evident. The uncontroversial claim is that to say "X exists" is to say that there is some object to which the concept of X corresponds. The point that really needs to be established, however, is that "is" or "exists" is not *also* a reality or perfection, which might belong to the nature of something or be contained in its concept. If this point follows from the uncontroversial claim, Kant never shows us how.

There is a somewhat analogous problem with emotivist meta-ethical theories, which hold that "X is good" predicates no property of X but only expresses the speaker's "commendation" or "approval" of it. There too, it is plausible that "good" normally expresses some sort of commendation or approval of the things to which it is applied. But what really needs to be argued is that "good" cannot *also* refer to natural properties of good things (presumably, the properties making them naturally worth commending). Suppose a philosopher claimed "heavy" is not a real predicate by arguing that the assertion "X is heavy" serves the unique semantic function of "gravitizing" X, or that "blue" is not a real predicate because it merely "azurates" the subject. Emotivists and defenders of Kant's thesis about existence and predication need to show that "commend-

ing" and "positing" do not function in their contentions as "gravitizing" and "azurating" do in these.⁹

III. THE MORAL ARGUMENTS

"I had to do away with knowledge," Kant famously declares, "in order to make room for faith" (B xxx). Kant defines "knowledge" (*Wissen*) as the "holding" (*Fürwahrhalten*) of a proposition that is "sufficient" both "objectively" and "subjectively," whereas "faith" or "belief" (*Glaube*) is "sufficient" only "subjectively," not "objectively" (A 822 / B 850). But faith as much as knowledge is justified by reasons that are "valid for everyone"; in this respect, it is distinguished from mere "opinion" (*Meinung*), which is "insufficient" subjectively as well as objectively (A 820 / B 848).¹⁰

Kant maintains that we can be rationally justified in holding a proposition not only by theoretical ("objective") evidence, but also by practical ("subjective") considerations. He tries to present such considerations in the so-called moral argument for belief in God. Kant thinks I can act rationally in pursuit of an end only as long as I believe that the end is possible of attainment through the actions I take toward it. This means that if I do not believe I can achieve an end *E* by taking action *A*, then I cannot rationally do *A* with *E* as my end; further, it means that if I do not think any course of action on my part has any possibility of reaching *E*, then it cannot be rational for me to make *E* my end at all.

Now suppose there is an end that as a rational agent I am morally bound to set myself. In that case, I can neither rationally abandon this end nor rationally pursue it without believing that it is possible of attainment through the actions I take toward it. Under these circumstances, I have good reason, independently of any theoretical evidence, for holding the belief that my moral end is possible of attainment, and for holding any other belief to which this belief commits me.

Kant's ethical theory does identify such a morally obligatory end, which Kant calls the "highest good" (*Practical Reason*, 5:110–113). Setting this end is bound up with having a morally good disposition and with reason's tendency, in practice as well as theory, to form the idea of an unconditioned totality (A 310 / B367; *Practical Reason*,

5:108). The highest good has two components: the "moral good," virtue of character, and the "natural good," happiness or "well-being" (*Wohl*). The two components are heterogenous; neither's value is substitutable for that of the other. But they do not have equal moral weight; the value of the natural good is conditional upon the moral good. In other words, a person's happiness is valuable to morality, but the value is conditional upon the person's virtue, or worthiness to be happy (*Groundwork*, 4:393; *Practical Reason*, 5:61/110–11). Hence from a slightly different standpoint, the two components of the highest good can be represented as

1. Perfect virtue
2. Happiness proportional to virtue

To pursue the first component is to strive for moral perfection, in the first instance one's own (*Morals*, 6:385), but also the virtue of others, especially through the voluntary moral community that Kant calls a "church" (*Religion*, 6:98, see Sections V and VI of this essay). Pursuit of the second component involves the pursuit of human happiness, others' as well as one's own, to the extent that the pursuit is consistent with moral duty. The pursuit of both components of the highest good involves a rational commitment to believe them possible of attainment. Each thus gives rise to a belief, rationally justified independently of theoretical evidence, in the conditions of this possibility.

Kant maintains that our pursuit of virtue always begins from a state of moral imperfection or, as he puts it in his later writings, a condition of "radical evil," a propensity to choose contrary to the moral law (*Religion*, 6:28–9/23–4). Kant thus argues that our pursuit of moral perfection must consist in an endless progress from bad to better. This, he thinks, gives us a practical ground for belief in an everlasting life after the present one, in which this progress may be carried on. Practical considerations thus lead to faith in immortality of the soul (*Practical Reason*, 5:121–4).¹¹

Pursuit of the second component of the highest good is, in effect, beneficence limited by justice. Happiness in accordance with moral desert involves not merely a contingent relation between the two, but a causal connection (*Practical Reason*, 5:111). We ourselves, of course, cannot search the inward heart of moral agents, and do not know the true moral desert of anyone, not even our own (*Ground-*

work, 4:407). But Kant thinks it is plain to us that the possibility of the second component of the highest good depends on the existence of a Providence, which does know each one's desert and ultimately apportions happiness in accordance with it. In other words, the possibility of the second component depends on the existence of an omniscient, omnipotent, just, and benevolent being. Hence pursuit of the highest good rationally justifies belief in a God (*Practical Reason*, 5:124-32).¹²

In the *Religion*, Kant suggests a further object of moral faith, or at least an additional approach to the same objects. The human will must aim at moral perfection, and at a happiness that accords with desert. But, Kant contends, it always begins from a radical propensity to evil, so that its progress is always from bad to better. As moral beings we must seek moral justification, but we begin from a state of evil, the guilt of which we cannot wipe out (*Religion*, 6:72/66). Thus we can conceive the possibility of our moral end only by supposing that if we do all we can, our moral deficiency will be supplemented by a "righteousness not our own" (*Religion*, 6:66/60). Justification requires faith in a divine grace, through which moral perfection can be attained (*Religion*, 6:75-6/70).¹³

IV. MORAL FAITH

Kant is emphatic that morality does not rest on religion, but the other way around: Religious faith is founded on morality. Kant contrasts "moral theology," which bases the concept of God on moral reason, with "theological morality," which superstitiously bases moral conceptions on religious ones (*Lectures*, 28:1001/31). The aim of Kant's moral arguments is to show how morality, which is fundamentally independent of religious belief, nevertheless leads to religion (*Religion*, 6:3-6/3-6). His plain intent is that the moral arguments should serve as a kind of substitute for the theoretical proofs rejected by his theoretical critique; only what they are supposed to justify is a warm and living religious faith, as distinct from dead, abstract theoretical knowledge.

Even if the moral arguments are successful, it is unclear how far they can fulfill this intention. Just because they are not theoretical arguments, they do not provide reasons that directly produce belief in God or immortality. What they show is that morally disposed people

are involved in a kind of practical irrationality unless they believe in a future life and a providential and gracious Deity. In other words, Kant's arguments do not show that there is a God and a future life, but only that belief in God and a future life would be very desirable for a moral agent to have, since it would rescue such an agent from a practical paradox. In this respect, Kant's moral arguments are rather like Pascal's wager, which tries to show not that Christianity is true, but that Christian belief would be advantageous to have. Pascal rightly notes that such an argument cannot directly produce belief, but rather gives us reasons to take certain steps (taking holy water, having masses said, acting as if we believe) that are designed to produce belief in us.¹⁴ Kant regards such self-manipulative attitudes as hypocritical and degrading, but he also speaks of moral faith as "belief arising from a need of reason" (*Practical Reason*, 5:141), without saying how reason is capable of satisfying the need. When he describes moral faith as arising from a "voluntary decision of the judgment" (*Practical Reason*, 5:144), Kant seems to suggest that he thinks (what is clearly false) that we have the ability to believe in God and immortality just by deciding to.

Kant often uses the term "belief" or "faith" (*Glaube*) to describe the results of the moral arguments, but he sometimes uses other terms, which may carry weaker implications. His technical term for the result of the moral arguments is "postulate," which he equates with a "practically necessary hypothesis" (*Practical Reason*, 5:11–12). Sometimes Kant speaks of the practical postulates as "assumptions" or "presuppositions" (*Orientation*, 8:146); and he sometimes qualifies moral faith by calling it a "belief for practical purposes" (*Theory and Practice*, 8:279/65). Perhaps such usages indicate Kant's awareness that his practical arguments do not actually yield belief, and involve the (at least tacit) suggestion that they attain to something slightly weaker. If "postulating," "assuming," and "presupposing" are intended to fall short of believing, then "postulating" that God exists or "believing for practical purposes that God exists" may be equivalent (for instance) to hoping that God exists, or just "acting as if" you believe God exists.

Kant is mistaken, however, if he supposes that this would solve his problem. It would be wrong to think that in pursuing an end by means of an action we could do with something less than *belief* that

the end is possible of attainment through the action. Granted their premises, Kant's arguments do show that we have a rational need for such beliefs; that need cannot be satisfied merely by hoping or "acting as if." The problem is rather that practical arguments by themselves cannot produce the belief whose indispensability they demonstrate. Such belief requires either theoretical evidence, which Kant regards as unavailable, or else nonrational motivating factors, which Kant wishes to eschew. Kant never entirely faced up to the difficulty for moral faith posed by this dilemma.

Occasionally Kant weakens his conclusion in a different and more defensible way. He suggests that the moral arguments do not necessarily show that we must believe in God and a future life, but are minimally compatible with belief only in their *possibility*. The "minimum of theology," he says, is not that God exists, but only that God is possible (*Religion*, 6:153-4/142; *Lectures*, 28:998/27). Clearly Kant thinks that faith in the actual existence of God harmonizes better with a moral disposition than this agnosticism, but apparently an agnostic can satisfy the minimum demands flowing from the moral arguments. Part of Kant's motivation here is plainly to encourage a tolerant attitude toward people with heterodox beliefs. Kant is emphatic that we cannot have a *duty* to hold any belief; he applies this specifically to the objects of moral faith (*Practical Reason*, 5:149-50). But it is probably no accident that the "minimum of theology" coincides with what Kant thinks can be justified theoretically. For he thinks that we can prove theoretically neither that there is a God nor that there is not. Apparently Kant does not want to find moral fault with anyone whose religious beliefs fall within the range of opinion that is compatible with the theoretical evidence.

Perhaps this minimum may also harmonize with what the moral arguments themselves succeed in proving. For if God's existence is both necessary and sufficient for the actuality of the highest good, then belief in the possibility of the highest good would seem equivalent to the belief that God is possible. Devoted pursuit of one's final moral end might be better served by a confidence that the highest good will at last be attained, but the bare minimum reason requires is belief that it is possible of attainment. Hence Kant thinks morality is compatible with a hopeful agnosticism about God's existence, even though something stronger than this would be preferable.

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V. RELIGION

Kant defines "religion" as "the cognition of all duties as divine commands" (*Religion*, 6:153 / 142). This definition is in need of commentary on at least three counts.

1. Kant understands religion as a matter not of theoretical cognition but of moral disposition (*Practical Reason*, 5:129, *Judgment*, 5:481, *Conflict*, 7:36, *Lectures*, 28:998, 1078/27, 122). Hence the definition must be understood in the sense that religion is "the moral disposition to observe all duties as [God's] commands" (*Religion*, 6:105/96).

2. Kant is emphatic that in order for there to be religion, there need not be any special duties to God; religion requires no duties beyond those we owe to human beings (*Religion*, 6:154 n./142 n.; *Lectures*, 28:1101/143).

3. Kant denies that any theoretical cognition of God's existence is required for religion. This is natural enough, because he denies that any such cognition is available to us (*Religion*, 6:153-4 n./142 n.). In fact, for religion it is not even necessary to believe in God's existence. "[For religion] no assertoric knowledge (even of God's existence) is required; . . . but only a *problematic* assumption (hypothesis) as regards speculation about the supreme cause of things." The "assertoric faith" needed for religion "needs merely *the idea of God* . . . only the *minimum* cognition (it is possible that there is a God) has to be subjectively sufficient" (*Religion*, 6:153-4/142).

Religion requires that (a) I have duties, (b) I have a concept of God, and (c) I am capable of regarding my duties as something God wills me to do. I can have religion in this sense even if I am an agnostic, so long as my awareness of duty is enlivened with the thought that if there is a God, then my duties are God's commands. (XL)

But why should we think of our duties as commanded by God? Kant's rejection of theological morality makes clear that this way of thinking has no legitimate role to play either in our knowledge of our duties or in motivating us to do our duty (*Religion*, 6:3/3). Kant claims that thinking of duties in this way has something to do with our pursuit of the highest good: "[Our duties] must be regarded as commands of the supreme being because we can hope for the highest good . . . only from a morally perfect . . . will; and

therefore we can hope to attain it only through harmony with this will" (*Practical Reason*, 5:129). Because our concept of God's will is supposed to be derived from our concept of morality, we must think of our duties as harmonizing with God's will. But why think of them as divine *commands*?

The answer to this question depends on the fact that Kant regards our pursuit of the highest good as a collective or social enterprise:

The highest good cannot be achieved merely by the exertions of the single individual toward his own moral perfection, but instead requires a union of such individuals into a whole working toward the same end – a system of well-disposed human beings, in which and through whose unity alone the highest moral good can come to pass. (*Religion*, 6:97–8/89)

Our moral vocation is a social one, which must be pursued through membership in a *community*:

[A moral community] is attainable, insofar as human beings can work toward it, only through the establishment and spread of a society in accordance with and for the sake of the laws of virtue, a society whose task and duty it is rationally to impress these laws in all their scope upon the entire human race. (*Religion*, 6:94/86)

This moral or ethical community must not be confused with a political community, based on coercive laws and aiming at external justice. A community aiming at the moral improvement of its members must be voluntary, and coercive laws will not serve its ends. But it must regard the universally valid moral law as a public law: "All single individuals must be subject to a public legislation and all the laws that bind them must be capable of being regarded as the commands of a common legislator" (*Religion*, 6:98/90). In an external or political community, the people itself is to be regarded as the legislator. But Kant maintains that no group of people could regard itself as legislating universally for all rational beings (*Religion*, 6:96/88). The legislator for a moral community must be someone whose will is in harmony with all moral duties, and someone who "knows the heart" so as to judge each individual's inner disposition. "But this is the concept of God as moral ruler of the world. Hence a moral community can be thought of only as a people under divine commands, i.e., a *people of God, under laws of virtue*" (*Religion*, 6:99/91).

In other words, Kantian morality is communitarian, not individu-

alistic. Religion has a place in human life for him because the moral life is not a purely private matter, in which each of us must merely do our own duty, look after our own inner virtue, and leave others to do the same. Each of us has the vocation of furthering the moral good of others, and each stands in need of the aid of others for our own moral progress. Though membership in a moral community must be noncoercive, each individual has a moral duty to join with others in such a community. Kant describes this as a "duty *sui generis*" because it is not a duty of one individual to others, nor even a duty to oneself, but a duty "of the human race toward itself" to fulfill its common vocation to progress as a species (*Religion*, 6:96–7/88–9). In this way, Kant's philosophy of religion has to be viewed as part of his social philosophy, and his philosophy of history.¹⁵

VI. THE CHURCH

Kant maintains that it is not possible to decide through experience whether the human race's history shows it to be improving morally, getting worse, or vacillating endlessly between good and evil. But he thinks we can look at this question in light of our vocation to better ourselves (both individually and collectively), and try to form conjectures about the way in which nature or providence might contrive the progress of the human species (*Universal History*, 8:29–31/23–6).

In his 1784 essay *Idea for a Universal History with a Cosmopolitan Purpose*, Kant proposes that the chief goal that nature has set for the human race is the fashioning of a "universal civil society" to protect people's rightful freedom and develop their natural capacities (8:22/16). Nature's means to this end is the human trait of "unsociable sociability," the human passion to "achieve rank among one's fellows, whom he cannot *suffer* but also cannot *leave alone*" (8:21/15). This passion drives people together into societies, where each seeks dominion over others, and all abuse what freedom they have in a struggle to subjugate others. This struggle leads to the founding of states, in which a supreme authority achieves mastery over the lawless wills of its subjects, forcing them to obey a universal law that confines each within its rightful sphere (8:23/17). The problem with this, of course, is that there is nothing to confine the authority itself, which tends to abuse the rights of everyone. Hence in the political realm the human race's remaining task is to establish a

constitution where the powers of the state are administered justly. Kant believes this task cannot be completed until states establish a lawful international order, regulating their relations with one another. He also thinks we can discern some definite tendencies in history for this to happen (8:24-6/18-21).

Nearly a decade later in the *Religion*, Kant attempts an analogous historical conjecture as regards the purely ethical society, the "people of God" striving under noncoercive laws to perfect the moral disposition of the human race. As political states are the empirical ectype of a realm of external justice, so the empirical form of the universal ethical community is found in the churches of the various empirical religious faiths (*Religion*, 6:100/91). In the same way that political states have often strayed far from their rational end of establishing external justice, so churches and ecclesiastical faiths have also regularly fallen short of their task. Their chief failing is that in their supposed attempts to please God they have often encouraged not morally good conduct, but rather (morally indifferent) statutory observances or (immoral and degrading) acts of praise and worship, whose ignoble aim is to win special (and undeserved) divine favor through flattery or bribery. Instead of cultivating a disposition to moral freedom, they have promoted cult and prayer, based on the superstitious belief in miracles, fanatical pretensions to supersensible experiences of the divine, or fetishistic attempts to produce supernatural occurrences through ritual acts (*Religion*, 6:53/48; 6:86/81; 6:106/97; 6:174/162; 6:177-8/165-6). Worst of all, they have subjected the conscience of individuals to a hierarchy of priests, enslaving the soul that it is their proper function to liberate (*Religion*, 6:134 n./124 n.; 6:175-80/163-8; 6:185-90/173-8; *Enlightenment*, 8:35-42/54-60).

The historical function of the state is to preserve justice, so that human freedom may flourish and human capacities develop. Analogously, the historical function of the church is to begin the work of organizing a universal ethical community. Thus the function of ecclesiastical faith is to serve as the "vehicle" for pure rational religion; yet ecclesiastical faith is also the "shell" in which rational religion is encased, and from which it is humanity's historical task to free it (*Religion*, 6:121/112; 6:135 n./126 n.). It is not Kant's view that this must involve the abolition of ecclesiastical faith, but only the appreciation of which aspects of it are superfluous: "Not that

[the shell] should cease (for perhaps it will always be useful and necessary as a vehicle) but only that it be able to cease" (*Religion*, 6:135 n./126 n.).

The plain intent here is that people should eventually abolish the hierarchical constitution of churches, which puts humanity in spiritual tutelage to a class of priests, who usurp the authority of individuals over their own belief and conscience. The vocation of every adult human being, Kant maintains, is to think for oneself (*Enlightenment*, 8:36/54). When your thinking is subject to the guidance or direction of others, as the thought of children is subject to their parents, then you are in a condition of *Unmündigkeit* ("tutelage" – "immaturity" or "minority"). The greatest human indignity occurs when adult human beings are in such a condition. Religion is not the only form taken by such tutelage, but Kant regards it as the "most pernicious and degrading" form (8:41/59). He defines "enlightenment" as "release from self-incurred tutelage" (8:36/54). Your tutelage is self-incurred if it is due not to the immaturity or incapacity of your faculties, but to your lack of courage and resolve in thinking for yourself. But even those who are in a state of self-incurred tutelage may not be wholly to blame for their condition. Kant describes how ecclesiastical faiths devise highly effective means of filling people with "pious terror" and playing on their propensity to a "servile faith in divine worship (*gottesdienstlich Frohnglauben*)." Such devices undermine people's confidence in their capacities, causing them to feel fear and guilt at their own honest doubts and common sense, preventing them from ever acquiring a faith free of servility and hypocrisy (*Religion*, 6:133 n./124 n.).

Perhaps there was a time when people were on the whole benefited by the paternal guidance of priests, and could do no better than to follow the revealed statutes of a church, handed down by tradition and ascribed to the supernatural authority of divine revelation. But Kant is persuaded that such times are now definitely past. "The leading strings of holy tradition, with its appendages of statutes and observances, which did good service in its time, gradually become dispensable, and finally become shackles when humanity reaches its adolescence" (*Religion*, 6:121/112). He sees the highest vocation of his age as that of putting an end to religious tutelage. Thus he describes his age (cautiously) not as an enlightened age but (optimistically) as an age of enlightenment, in which progressive forces will

inevitably liberate people from religious tutelage if only the secular authority safeguards freedom of thought and expression and refuses to "support the ecclesiastical despotism of some tyrants in his state over his other subjects" (*Enlightenment*, 8:40/58).

[At the end of this process] the demeaning distinction between *laity* and *clergy* ceases, and equality arises from true freedom; but there is no anarchy, because each obeys the (nonstatutory) law which he prescribes to himself, and which he at the same time must regard as the will of the world ruler, revealed through reason, combining all invisibly under a common government in one state, already prepared for and inadequately represented by the visible church. (*Religion*, 6:122/112)

Kant thus looks forward eventually to a time "when the form of a church itself is dissolved, the viceroy on earth steps into the same class as the human being raised to a citizen of heaven, and so God will be all in all" (*Religion*, 6:135/126).

VII. REASON AND REVELATION

In Kant's view, what unites people in a true religious community is not a common cult or creed, but a common devotion to the moral improvement of humanity. Religion, the disposition to observe all duties as divine commands, can therefore exhibit itself in a wide variety of personal faiths. Kant attempts to provide a rational (practical) defense of belief in immortality and in divine providence and grace. But we have seen that he thinks genuine religion is compatible even with an agnostic position on these matters. On the other hand, Kant does not rule out the beliefs of traditional, revealed ecclesiastical faith, so long as they are presented in a spirit that is compatible with a genuine moral religion of reason. The point that matters most to him here is that acceptance of doctrines depending on revelation rather than reason should not be regarded as morally required for true religion (*Religion*, 6:153-5/142-3). This is crucial, because true religion aspires to be a universal ethical community embracing all humanity, and this is something no revealed faith can pretend to be.

Pure [rational religious faith] alone can found a universal church, because it is a faith of unassisted reason, which may be communicated with conviction to everyone; but a historical faith, insofar as it is grounded merely on

facts, can extend its influence no further than the news of it, in respect of time and circumstances, can acquire the capacity to make themselves worthy of belief. (*Religion*, 6:102–3/94)

From this passage, it looks as if Kant is arguing that revealed faith cannot be universal because its empirical tidings are bound to be more accessible to people closer to their source than to those more distant from it. That would not be a good argument, since even a morality founded on pure reason must develop through history, and its substance and spirit are also inevitably available more to some than to others.

We understand Kant's argument better if we focus on the point that the issue is not empirical availability, but rational credibility: the capacity of teachings not merely to be disseminated, but to "make themselves *worthy* of belief." Empirical and historical reports have the capacity to do this when the evidence for them is strong enough, even if many people do not have access to them (*Orientation*, 8:141). The problem with supernatural revelation is that because the idea of God is an idea of reason, to which no experience can ever correspond, it follows that no empirical evidence can ever justify the conclusion that some empirical event is a special divine revelation (*Orientation*, 8:142). Consequently, no revealed faith "can ever be universally communicated so as to produce conviction"; so when a church founds itself on supernatural revelation, it "renounces the most important mark of truth, namely a rightful claim to universality" (*Religion*, 6:109/100; cf. *Conflict*, 7:49–50).

Kant does *not* deny that we have supernatural revelation. Such a denial, he thinks, would be just as presumptuous as the claim to know that some particular experience is of special divine origin. Both equally transcend our cognitive capacities (*Religion*, 6:155/143). The point is rather that it is impossible for anyone ever to authenticate any particular putative revelation: "If God actually spoke to a human being, the latter could never *know* that it was God who spoke to him. It is absolutely impossible for a human being to grasp the infinite through the senses, so as to distinguish him from sensible beings and be *acquainted* with him" (*Conflict*, 7:63).

Historically, however, Kant thinks that such (necessarily ungrounded) claims to divine revelation are just as necessary to the

foundation of religion as ambition and violence are to the founding of states. It is a "special weakness of human nature" that a church can never be originally founded solely on the religion of unassisted reason but always requires "ecclesiastical faith" based on a putative revelation (*Religion*, 6:103/94). This means that rational religion must not simply assert that there can be no justified claims to empirical divine revelation but needs to take a more positive attitude toward such claims.

Our reason itself, Kant says, counts as an "inner revelation" insofar as it can provide us with a pure rational concept of God and tell us which things a good God would require of us. This "inner revelation" should serve as a touchstone by which all claims to empirical revelation should be measured and interpreted (*Lectures*, 28:1118/60). For although we can never know whether any experience is a divine revelation, we can know of various doctrinal claims whether they are such that a wise and good God *might* have revealed them. In this way, it can correct the concept of God found in the popular cults, which is all too often nothing but "a terrifying picture of fantasy, and a superstitious object of ceremonial adoration and hypocritical high praise" (*Lectures*, 28:1119/161; cf. *Religion*, 6:168-9/156-7). Reason must also serve as the interpreter of traditional revealed doctrines and scriptures, because only it can guarantee that their sense is consistent with the claim that they might have been divinely revealed. Kant is very candid about what this entails:

If [a scripture] flatly contradicts morality, then it cannot be from God (for example, if a father were ordered to kill his son, who is, as far as he knows, perfectly innocent. (*Religion*, 6:87/82)

Frequently in reference to the text (the revelation) [reason's] interpretation may appear to us forced, it may often really be so; and yet it must be preferred to the literal interpretation if the text can possibly support it.

(*Religion*, 6:110/100-1)

VIII. KANT AS A RELIGIOUS THINKER

Kant was a man of scientific temperament, concerned with the intellectual development and moral progress of humanity. He was deeply skeptical of popular religious culture, severely disapproving of the

traditional activities of prayer and religious ceremonies, and downright hostile to ecclesiastical authority. He had no patience at all for the mystical or the miraculous.

It may sound paradoxical to claim that such a person was also a deeply religious thinker. But this is nevertheless true, and it is a symptom of the degeneration of religion in our century, and more generally of its decline in human life since the eighteenth century, that we should find it paradoxical. As a man of the German Enlightenment, Kant regarded the concerns of science and morality as *of course* also religious concerns. In Kant's milieu, there was no warfare between science and religion, only a conflict between two kinds of religious sensibility: the enlightened religious sensibility, which seeks to reconcile religion with scientific reason, and various forms of contrary sensibility, which mistrust reason, and set religion against it because they prefer either revealed tradition, or mystical experience, or enthusiastic emotionalism.

In our day, unfortunately, the former kind of religious sensibility is all too rare, while the latter is still very much alive and well. It often claims for itself the entire sphere of religion, at the same time advertising itself as the only attitude that properly acknowledges the limits of human reason. But keeping Kant in mind will help to expose the vanity of its pretensions. No thinker ever placed greater emphasis on reason's boundaries than Kant; at the same time, none has ever been bolder in asserting its unqualified title to govern our lives. As Kant sees very clearly, the fact that reason is limited does not entail that there is any other authority or source of insight that might overrule it. This means that although religion is not originally an affair of reason, there can be no true religion at all unless there is also a religion of reason, and the religion of reason must serve as the core, and also the touchstone, of any other kind.

Equally far from Kant's position is the secularist view that treats religion with contempt, and regards it as nothing but a relic of the past or a deplorable refuge for the ignorant and superstitious. Organized religion for Kant is as essential to human destiny as organized political life, and the role of reason in both spheres is equally vital.

Every state arises out of violence in behalf of unjust ambition, none is ever founded on reason alone. But because justice is the only office of the state and the sole source of its legitimacy, practical reason becomes its sole measure, and the development of the state

toward the rational idea of justice is the sole human vocation with regard to political life. Analogously, every religious tradition begins in revealed authority, hierarchy, and superstition, but the only legitimate office of religion is to found an ethical community according to universal laws of reason. Thus the human vocation with regard to religion is nothing but the interpretation and development of tradition toward a universal religion of reason. For Kant, a church that clings to religious experience, emotion, or revelation without regard to reason has no more legitimacy than a state whose coercive power is used without regard for human rights. On the other hand, Kant thinks the human race can no more expect to fulfill its collective moral vocation apart from organized religion than it can expect to achieve justice through anarchy.¹⁶

NOTES

- 1 All translations from Kant's writings are my own. Standard English translations will normally be cited. In those cases where the *Akademie* edition pagination is not given in the English translation, English pagination will be cited too (English pagination following German pagination, separated by a slash (/)). The following translations are cited:

Critique of Judgment. Trans. Werner Pluhar. Indianapolis: Hackett, 1987.
Critique of Practical Reason. Trans. Lewis White Beck. Indianapolis: Bobbs-Merrill, 1956.

Immanuel Kant's Critique of Pure Reason. Trans. Norman Kemp Smith. New York: St. Martin's, 1965. Cited by A and B edition page numbers.
The Doctrine of Virtue. Trans. Mary J. Gregor. New York: Harper & Row, 1964.

"An Answer to the Question: What Is Enlightenment?" Trans. H. B. Nisbet, in H. Reiss, *Kant's Political Writings*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1970.

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Kant's Philosophical Correspondence 1759–1799. Trans. Arnulf Zweig. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1967.

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"On the Common Saying: 'This May Be True In Theory, But It Does Not Apply in Practice'." Trans. H. B. Nisbet, in H. Reiss, *Kant's Political Writings*.

- 2 See Karl Vorländer, *Kants Leben* (1911) (Hamburg: Felix Meiner, 1986), p. 130.
- 3 See Ernst Cassirer, *Kant's Life and Thought*, trans. James Haden (New Haven, Conn.: Yale University Press, 1981), p. 376–9.
- 4 See Lewis White Beck, *Early German Philosophy* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1969), pp. 434–6.
- 5 "The complex of all determinations compossible in a being is its *thorough determination*. Hence a being is either determined thoroughly, or determined less than this. The former is a particular (an individual), the latter is a universal" (Baumgarten, *Metaphysica* (1739) (Halle: Olms, 1963) §148). "The thorough determination inhering in actual beings is their principle of individuation or thisness (*haecceitas*)" (Wolff, *Gesammelte Werke* (Halle: Olms, 1962), 2:3:187–9).
- 6 Kant's argument for this claim is quite complex. I have discussed it in detail in my book *Kant's Rational Theology* (Ithaca, N.Y.: Cornell University Press, 1978), pp. 25–63.
- 7 For a discussion of this proof, see *ibid.*, pp. 64–79.
- 8 *Ibid.*, pp. 96–100.
- 9 The analogy between Kant's thesis and emotivism was suggested to me by Nicholas Sturgeon. For further discussion of Kant's thesis about existence and predication, and his critique of the ontological proof, see *ibid.*, pp. 100–23.
- 10 See my book *Kant's Moral Religion* (Ithaca, N.Y.: Cornell University Press, 1970), pp. 13–17.
- 11 *Ibid.*, pp. 105–24.
- 12 *Ibid.*, pp. 124–45.
- 13 *Ibid.*, ch. 6, esp. pp. 226–48.
- 14 Pascal, *Pensées* (New York: Scribners, 1958), p. 68.
- 15 See *Kant's Moral Religion*, ch. 5, esp. pp. 187–200.
- 16 I am grateful for comments by Frederick C. Beiser on a draft of this essay.