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978-1-107-01852-5 - Kant's: Religion within the Boundaries of Mere Reason: A Critical Guide

Edited by Gordon E. Michalson

Excerpt

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Introduction

Gordon E. Michalson

Even by Kant's standards, *Religion within the Boundaries of Mere Reason* is a complex work, involving many layers in its depiction of issues central to his moral and religious thought.

Its complexity is reflected in the uncommonly wide range of reactions the work elicited in its own day, from the admonitions of the Prussian censor for supposedly impious tendencies to the fierce reaction of Goethe, who famously charged in a letter to Herder that Kant "had criminally smeared his philosopher's cloak . . . so that Christians too might yet be enticed to kiss its hem."¹ Insofar as one measure of a book's richness is the range of those it displeases, then *Religion* surely deserves its high standing as a key document of the late Enlightenment. Certainly the myriad interpretive problems the book generates remain with us to this day, and the aim of this "Critical Guide" is to offer clarification and guidance concerning some of the more prominent of these.²

Religion within the Boundaries of Mere Reason is composed of four parts, published as a whole in 1793, well after the appearance of Kant's best-known major writings. A year before, Kant had published the first part ("Concerning the Indwelling of the Evil Principle alongside the Good: or Of the Radical Evil in Human Nature") in the April issue of *Berlinische Monatsschrift*. Kant's submission of the first and, subsequently, second of these essays precipitated his difficulties with the Prussian authorities, who had become much more conservative following the enlightened era promoted by Frederick William I.³

¹ Quoted in Karl Barth, *Protestant Thought from Rousseau to Ritschl*, trans. Brian Cozens (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1969), p. 178.

² A helpful summary of different contemporary interpretive approaches to *Religion* is provided in Chris L. Firestone and Nathan Jacobs, *In Defense of Kant's Religion* (Bloomington and Indianapolis: Indiana University Press, 2008), Part I.

³ For background, see Allen W. Wood, "General Introduction," and George di Giovanni, "Translator's Introduction," in Immanuel Kant, *Religion and Rational Theology*, ed. and trans. Allen W. Wood and George di Giovanni (Cambridge University Press, 1996), pp. xi–xxiv and pp. 41–54. See also James J. DiCenso, *Kant's Religion within the Boundaries of Mere Reason: A Commentary* (Cambridge University Press, 2012), pp. 4–9.

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These difficulties indicate that *Religion* would appear at precisely the moment when the rational inquiry into religion and religious belief would inevitably be drawn into fresh controversy. Kant would insure a lively connection to such controversy with his opening remark that “on its own behalf morality in no way needs religion . . . but is rather self-sufficient by virtue of pure practical reason” (*R* 6:3).

Ostensibly, the title of his book is designed to promote what Kant himself calls a kind of “test” or “experiment” (*Versuch*) based on the simple depiction of two concentric circles. Against the background of widespread contemporary discussions of revealed and natural religion, Kant proposes that “revealed religion” be viewed as the larger or wider circle, with the “religion of reason” then viewed as a smaller circle within. In the examination of religion, the philosopher, “as purely a teacher of reason,” thus remains within the smaller circle and avoids appeal to the traits of revealed religion, such as scripture, history, and tradition. Yet because this “experiment” involves concentric circles – and not two circles external to one another – Kant has created the possibility of overlap or commonality between revealed religion and the religion of reason. And if, *as* philosopher, he were to discover such areas of overlap, “then we shall be able to say that between reason and Scripture there is, not only compatibility but also unity . . .” (*R* 6:12–13).

Obviously, this “experiment” is considerably more complicated than it may at first seem, and not only because of its apparent artificiality. Moreover, a telling feature of Kant’s seemingly straightforward explanation is that it appears in the “Preface” to the second edition of *Religion*. Second edition prefaces are notorious for the way they provide the author with the opportunity to dispel confusions or reply to criticisms generated by the first edition. In this instance, Kant is responding to reactions to “the title of this work (since doubts have been expressed . . . regarding the intentions hidden behind it)” (*R* 6:12). The long history of interpretive debate concerning the true aims of *Religion* amply suggests that Kant’s efforts to provide definitive orientation regarding the work’s content were hardly conclusive.

Kant does at least succeed in establishing that, in a general sense, his is a book about the rational inquiry into religion, including the broad issue of the relation between faith and reason. Since *Religion* was published eight years following the publication of the first edition of the *Groundwork of the Metaphysics of Morals*, and five years following the publication of the *Critique of Practical Reason*, it naturally frames the issue of faith and reason in terms defined by Kant’s moral theory and by the central role the ethical life, as opposed to belief systems, plays in Kant’s view of religion. Indeed,

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Religion is where Kant develops more fully his definition of religion as “the recognition of all our duties as divine commands” (*R* 6:153). Within this context, and with reinforcing implications conveyed by the book’s title, *Religion* creates the initial impression that it is a largely reductionist attempt simply to assimilate traditional Christian orthodoxy to the more austere terms of his rationally based ethical outlook, an apparent variation on the deism of Kant’s time. Certainly there are many features of the book that support this view. At the same time, however, Kant argues in *Religion* that the “revealed” or “historical” side of religion can be morally useful, and perhaps even “necessary,” as a symbolic or pictorial guide to moral improvement – a “vehicle,” as he puts it, for the advancement of moral ends (*R* 6:106, 115, 118, 123n). Consequently, there are significant textual obstacles to interpreting *Religion* simply as reductionist with respect to the historical side of Christianity.

Interpretive issues are made no easier by the fact that Kant’s text equivocates between obvious references to Christianity and references to “religion” in the more generic sense, implying a possible appeal to the historical side of all religious traditions. From this standpoint, Kant appears to be developing a theory of the historical evolution of historical faiths, with Christianity simply farther along the trajectory of a pure “moral” faith than other traditions. Indeed, this aspect of the book makes it a template for the perennially attractive idea that, beneath all their differences, the world’s religious traditions are linked by a deep commonality. In short, Kant provides here a framework for distinguishing the “accidental” or historically and culturally contingent features of a religious tradition from its deeper and “real” meaning. This deeper meaning could conceivably be shared by varied religious traditions, despite the stark differences across their historical and scriptural claims – which is to say, their empirical aspects.

Consequently, *Religion* not only extends Kant’s thinking about the relation between ethics and religion in his own thought, but also combines commentary on obviously Christian biblical and theological topics with commentary that could involve other religious traditions as well. Not surprisingly, then, the aims of the book have been perennially difficult to state in succinct terms.

As a gateway to these issues, Otfried Höffe’s “Holy scriptures within the boundaries of mere reason: Kant’s reflections” offers a broad view of the aims of *Religion* by situating Kant’s interpretive approach in the context of the Critical philosophy as a whole. This background clarifies the overall intentions behind the work while also offering insight into Kant’s specific views of Christianity and the historical or empirical aspects of faith. Höffe

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further connects *Religion* to Kant's *Conflict of the Faculties* in which, five years after the publication of *Religion*, he makes very explicit the difference between a philosophical and a theological interpretive undertaking. In so doing, Höffe argues, Kant sheds valuable light on the rational inquiry into scripture and the historical elements of religion more generally.

Curiously, a book seemingly devoted to exploring the potential of our rationality in fact opens with a sustained account of our deep failings. Kant's theory of "radical evil" is at once among the most vexing features of the entire work and the issue that especially aroused Goethe's ire. Unlike his many Enlightenment counterparts who drew upon an underlying Platonism to explain moral evil largely in terms of ignorance, Kant clearly lodges responsibility for moral evil in the free will. This feature of his view is challenging in and of itself, yet Kant compounds the difficulties considerably by insisting on "the universality of the evil at issue," to the point where it is so "entwined with humanity itself" that we can say that the human being is "evil *by nature*" (*R* 6:32, emphasis Kant's). The hint here of something like "natural necessity" would seem to be utterly incompatible with Kant's overall moral philosophy. Moreover, the latent association with something very much like the Christian doctrine of original sin – the heart of Goethe's objection to Kant's book – is of course at complete odds with Kant's thoroughgoing emphasis on human autonomy. The matter is made no less complex by Kant's appeal to "the multitude of woeful examples" we have "through experience" of the deep corruption of the human heart – as though Kant has suddenly invoked the notion of a "noumenal eye" that can "see" into the moral qualities of moral agents, in complete contradiction to his epistemology.

In "The evil in human nature," Allen W. Wood clarifies Kant's claims that evil is "universal," "innate," and "inextirpable" by human powers. Wood suggests that the discussion of radical evil as Kant's starting point may be no surprise at all, if we view *Religion* chiefly as an attempt to display the mutually reinforcing features of Christianity and rational morality to late eighteenth-century (largely Protestant) Christians. For such an audience, the acknowledgement of human sinfulness would be the altogether familiar opening of any work of Christian apologetics. Similarly, in contrast to thoroughgoing individualistic accounts of radical evil, Wood's account underscores the fact that Kant himself lodges the "propensity" to evil in our social condition, though without diluting the element of personal responsibility.

In "Radical evil and human freedom," Ingolf Dalferth lays out the main features of Kant's argument by relating the specifics of his account of human

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nature to his theory of moral agency. This theory is largely driven by the exercise of freedom in maxim-making, a capacity that distinguishes rational beings by their ability to prescribe incentives to themselves opposed to those given by nature. The terms by which moral evil becomes “radical” involve the free choice of an underlying supreme maxim that, as a general pattern, subordinates the incentive of duty to the incentive of self-love. While careful to show that being evil “by nature” is not the same thing as being evil by “natural necessity,” Dalferth locates the potentially compromising implications that nonetheless arise from this position for Kant’s own theory of freedom.

Due to his expanded notion of the moral “disposition” (*Gesinnung*) in his effort to define an evil that is “radical,” Kant implicitly deepens his own moral theory in ways that make *Religion* a crucial resource for the full understanding of his ethics. In “*Gesinnung*: responsibility, moral worth, and character,” Alison Hills examines in detail the supreme maxim accounting for our individual acts of maxim-making. She argues that, as the “subjective ground” of the adoption of individual maxims, the disposition implies a fuller and more explicit account than Kant had previously offered of characteristic or persistent tendencies within the moral agent. Most importantly, Hills shows how the free choice of an evil disposition accounts for an evil that is all-pervasive and thus “radical” while also remaining completely inexplicable. In other words, the expanded role in *Religion* of the moral disposition enhances our sense of the “unity” of moral agency in Kant while simultaneously deepening the ultimate mystery associated with any act of freedom. Among other things, her analysis sheds light on how we might conceive of a Kantian theory of moral “character” that is more than simply the sum total of discrete acts of maxim-making.

Kant’s specific way of framing the idea of radical evil as a corruption of the underlying “ground” of maxim-making exists side-by-side with the ongoing obligation to make ourselves good again. Kant thus puts in question the moral agent’s ability actually to meet the obligation to generate the needed moral revolution. As he puts it, “if a human being is corrupt in the very ground of his maxims, how can he possibly bring about this revolution by his own forces and become a good human being on his own?” (*R* 6:47). Kant’s follow-up to his own question involves challenging references to divine “cooperation” and even “grace” – an idea seemingly antithetical to his entire philosophical enterprise. It is in the context of these references to divine aid in the recovery from radical evil that Kant introduces the provocative – if epistemologically problematic – references to the idea of “hope.” *Religion* considerably extends and clarifies the third of the three

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questions reflecting the interests of reason that Kant originally introduced in the *Critique of Pure Reason* some twelve years earlier: “What can I know?” “What ought I to do?” and “What may I hope?” (A805/B833). Within *Religion*, hope assumes fresh importance as Kant tries to work out the terms for the regeneration of a moral agent compromised by an evil that is radical, going to the very “roots” of human nature.

In “Rational hope, possibility, and divine action,” Andrew Chignell reminds us that, against the background of Kant’s three questions, “hope” and not “belief” is the most central concern of Kant’s religious thought. By disentangling hope from belief, Chignell isolates a sort of “attitude” that, in turn, sheds light on a Kantian position toward religious doctrines and themes falling “outside” the limits of reason alone. Crucial here is the fact that the kind of hope at stake is “rational” hope – as opposed, say, to wishful thinking. Accordingly, Chignell explores in some depth the modal constraints structuring hope in the genuinely Kantian sense. This exploration, in turn, illuminates in fresh ways the content and epistemological status of the religious outlook, including the content of religious belief. Among other things, Chignell’s account underscores the rationality of hope for social progress embedded in Kant’s overall moral and religious thought, exemplified by the idea of the ethical community in *Religion*. In thus endeavoring to effect a reassessment of the balance between belief and hope in Kant, Chignell broadens the scope of a religion “within the bounds of mere reason” in surprising ways that go beyond more familiar readings of *Religion*.

Such surprises continue in “Kant on grace,” in which Leslie Stevenson points out that Kant creates a space for the discussion of grace by means of attaching a “General Remark” to the end of each of the four parts of *Religion*. Kant depicts the “General Remarks” as occasions to touch on the *parerga* to religion within the boundaries of pure reason; they do not belong within it yet border on it” (R 6:52). In effect, Kant devises a means of discussing matters falling on *both sides* of the “boundaries” announced in his title. Stevenson tracks the various ways Kant includes grace among these topics through explicit connection with a recovery from radical evil for which finite beings seem to lack sufficient powers. Without minimizing the difficulties Kant faces in doing so, Stevenson clarifies how Kant avoids subverting his own theory of autonomy through a series of epistemological limitations that allow references to grace but without establishing such references as knowledge claims.

Similarly, in “Kant, miracles, and *Religion*, Parts One and Two,” Karl Ameriks examines Kant’s treatment of miracles within the “General

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Remarks,” indicating how such an unexpected topic is in fact connected with the theme of religious hope for Kant. Ameriks shows how Kant draws on different ways of appealing to ideas that go beyond nature while simultaneously criticizing superstitious references to miracles in other parts of *Religion*. He argues that Kant’s ultimate aim is to replace references to “miracles” (*Wunder*) with references to something more like an attitude of proper “admiration” (*Bewunderung*) that accompanies the full commitment to respect for the moral law. Ameriks suggests that the move to *Bewunderung* clarifies the moral teleology at the heart of Kant’s view of authentic religion, a teleological aim that functions simultaneously as a Kantian theodicy.

In Kant’s day, the tensions between the universal claims of reason and the particularities of revelation, scripture, and tradition found their clearest expression in the figure of Jesus. While Kant never refers to Jesus by name in *Religion*, the reference to him is clear in what Kant offers as the “personified idea of the good principle” who, in his person, embodies the rational ideal of a thoroughly good disposition, which is simultaneously a moral disposition wholly “pleasing to God” (*R* 6:61). In short, Kant’s Christology resides in the claim that Jesus is the prototype of moral perfection, a prototype that is universally accessible through reason alone. In “Kant’s Jesus,” Manfred Kuehn illustrates the lively nature of Christological debates in Kant’s time, thus providing the historical background to Kant’s association of the historical figure of Jesus with this universal rational content. By locating Kant somewhere between Reimarus and Semler, Kuehn suggests that Kant is attempting something of a balancing act with respect to the tensions inherent in the Enlightenment debate about reason and revelation. The balance is struck in the fact that, by embodying a moral perfection that is in principle attainable by all rational beings, Kant’s Jesus remains central to a religion within the boundaries of mere reason, though without being essential to it. The truth Jesus embodies would still be true even if he had never lived.

Kant’s interest in Jesus is developed in *Religion* alongside an apparently growing emphasis on the association of moral agents with one another. Indeed, in *Religion*’s account of the ethical community (*gemeines Wesen*) we find what could be characterized as a refinement of Kant’s conception of a realm or kingdom of ends in the *Groundwork of the Metaphysics of Morals*. In contrast to the civic or political community, the ethical community is a setting in which moral agents act out of respect for the moral law rather than out of fear of legal repercussions or punishment. At times Kant speaks of this ethical community in association with provocative remarks about both

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the “visible” and the “invisible” church. At the very least, the ethical community signals a shift toward a more social rather than purely individual approach to the recovery from radical evil and the pursuit of our moral destiny. The theme of the ethical community is also connected in important ways with Kant’s arresting comment that “there is only *one* (true) *religion*; but there can be several kinds of *faith*” (R 6:107), a remark that appears to be an open invitation to a comparative approach to the world’s religions with a view to their common moral core.

In “Pluralism in the ethical community,” Nicholas Tampio reminds us that Kant’s own historical context was the Thirty Years War threatening the stability of all of Europe. Tampio argues that, along with Leibniz and Spinoza, Kant wants to establish a framework promoting the sort of ethical and religious pluralism that would enable Europe to avoid such threats in the future. By re-framing the issues in terms suggested by John Rawls’ account of justice, Tampio describes how Kant’s theory might mediate the vexed question of which religious groups could or could not be included in the ethical community. Tampio tests this aspect of his reformulation by drawing from recent work on the secular state emerging from the Muslim community.

In “Kant’s religious constructivism,” Pablo Muchnik deploys from a different vantage point the connections between religion and politics as a means of helping us understand the very term “religion” in Kant’s title. He indicates how Kant would resolve the “antinomy” created by the conflicting views of Richard Rorty and Nicholas Wolterstorff on the role of religion in politics. Muchnik thus exploits the interplay between public and private in contemporary thought as a means of clarifying the increasing role of shared undertakings and common pursuits in Kant’s ethics. Properly recognizing the social aspects of radical evil implies the need for a cooperative response, including cooperation between religion and politics. Kant’s *Religion* can thereby be viewed as the answer to the question, “What *kind* of religion can promote rational and emancipatory ends?” Muchnik argues that the answer embodied by Kant’s book is simultaneously Kant’s disclosure of a middle ground between superstitious appeals to a transcendent view of God and the denial of all claims presupposing God’s existence. In short, the proper “political” reading of *Religion* is also the proper “religious” reading.

We have seen multiple instances of how *Religion* provides a more sustained account of rational faith than Kant provides in the earlier ethical writings, including the *Groundwork* and the second *Critique*. In “What does his *Religion* contribute to Kant’s conception of practical reason?”, G. Felicitas Munzel argues that this more sustained account finally

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entails a deepening of Kant's overall theory of practical reason that carries us beyond a reading of it in its purely formal and objective sense. For Munzel, *Religion's* aggressive contextualizing of rational faith within a broader discussion of human nature clarifies practical reason's relation to *itself*, ultimately suggesting profound connections among judgments of "ought," "can," "hope," and "do." Munzel further argues that practical reason's relation to itself sheds significant light on the role of "conscience" in Kant's moral and religious thought. Obviously, a key implication of this argument is the importance of *Religion* for a full understanding of Kant's overall philosophical project.

Similarly, in "Culture and the limits of practical reason in Kant's *Religion*," Richard Velkley maintains that the very motif of "limits" or "boundaries" suggests the centrality of *Religion* to the entire Critical enterprise. He argues that "boundary-drawing" is for Kant the highest legislation of reason, exemplified by the way Kant's strictures on theoretical cognition dovetail with his account of the "interests" of practical reason. Kant's genius resides in his ability to enforce these strictures without undermining the possibility of reason's ends, a task accounting for the increasingly robust teleological element in Kant's later thought. Indeed, three years prior to the publication of *Religion*, the *Critique of Judgment* displays reason's interest in an ultimate unity between nature and culture, yielding a "moral whole" as the end of reason itself. In the face of the radical evil that is a threat to this moral whole, *Religion* reveals the crucial role of rational religion in sustaining reason's interest, thereby conveying in a fresh way Kant's famous claim that morality "inevitably leads to religion" (*R* 6:6).

Given the richness of Kant's *Religion*, this collection surely makes no claims to comprehensiveness in the topics it covers. Still, the essays in this volume highlight arresting interpretive issues raised by Kant's remarkable book in ways suggesting how this late work both fits into and amplifies his philosophy as a whole. To the extent that it opens up problem areas left unresolved within its pages, *Religion* is – at the very least – a telling indicator of the creativity and restless energy of Kant's efforts, even at such a late stage in his life.

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CHAPTER I

*Holy Scriptures within the boundaries
of mere reason: Kant's reflections*

Otfried Höffe

I Two Preliminary Remarks

The Enlightenment, as is well known, is not easily intimidated. Neither religions nor their authoritative scriptures – however holy they might be – can escape its critique. Once early Enlightenment writers and their predecessors, such as Bacon, Hobbes, and Spinoza, had exposed many religious notions as mere superstitions, at least four different types of critique came to be widely adopted. Voltaire aimed his slogan “Ecrasez l’infâme,” directly at the Church. According to David Hume’s treatise on religious psychology and sociology, *Natural History of Religion* (1757), some peoples have no religion at all, which is taken as evidence that religion is no anthropological constant. Hence, religion is said to have no foundation in human reason or in human emotions. According to d’Holbach such central religious dogmas as the existence of God and the immortality of the soul are no more than illusions (*Système de la nature*, 1770). Finally, although Rousseau’s position softens the Enlightenment’s otherwise mostly negative attack on religion, he nevertheless rejects any claim to truth by revealed religion and maintains that the only form of religion that is to be advocated is the natural religion. In the “Profession of Faith of a Savoyard Vicar” appearing in his educational novel, *Emile*, Rousseau develops his concept of natural religion as the voice of the heart.

With the high point – but also the turning point – of the Enlightenment with Kant, these four models are partially though quite incisively contrasted. Kant does not lay stress only on natural but also on revealed religion. To be sure, this is not the discussion taking place in his three Critiques, though the second one does take Christianity into account (*KpV* 5:23; 229ff.). Only *Religion within the Boundaries of Mere Reason* (= *Religion*) sets out to defend its subject matter, a defense in which it also attends explicitly to a holy scripture. The scripture in question is the Bible, though a Bible that has been stripped of all elements of Jewish theocracy. Kant takes up four theologoumena – that is, four basic principles – from this text which