CHAPTER I

Introduction: on religion, ethics, and the political in Kant

GENERAL THEMES OF THE INQUIRY

In Kant's writings, the topic of religion occupies a strategic space at the confluence of epistemology, ethics, and politics. Inquiries into the validity of religious truth claims and the possible meanings of religious writings and images form a vital part of Kant's ethical and political project. This project focuses on advancing human autonomy, both individually and in terms of political concerns with shared worldviews, laws, and rights. In its mature form, this line of inquiry begins with the *Critique of Pure Reason*, is further developed in Kant's ethical writings and the *Critique of the Power of Judgment*, and reaches fruition in *Religion within the Boundaries of Mere Reason*. This body of work constructs an intricate framework for understanding religion not only in relation to epistemological issues, but as relevant to both ethical and political considerations. It shows that religion, as both personal and cultural, is profoundly connected with the ethical and political possibilities of human beings. The structure of this investigation is wider than any of Kant's specific inquiries. It addresses both individual ethical reflection and possible ameliorations of social and political conditions that have an effect upon our ethical development.

A study of Kant's critical writings shows that his general position on the status of religious doctrines remains consistent throughout this extensive body of work. *The Critique of Pure Reason* is not simply an inquiry into the conditions of human knowledge, explicating the organizing concepts of the understanding in relation with input from sense intuitions. In fact, this epistemological model, groundbreaking as it is, also forms something of a prelude to a critique of all speculative systems of thought. Metaphysical and theological systems, operating without the benefit of empirically verifiable sensory input, are shown to be incapable of providing knowledge of any kind. These systems overstep the bounds of human understanding, and their various doctrinal claims concerning truth and

1

reality cannot compete directly with the verifiable findings of the phys-
ical sciences, or with the publicly tested methods of social and humanistic
studies. Kant systematically challenges the possibility of attaining objecti-
fied knowledge of supersensible realities, and in light of these interroga-
tions he comes to be seen, in Moses Mendelssohn's well-known phrase, as
the "all-crushing" critic of metaphysics.[1] Even in the first *Critique*, how-
ever, Kant repeatedly argues that the rational ideas formulated in meta-
physics and theology can serve as regulative principles offering rules for
thought. In this mode, they still offer no knowledge of reality, but they
can provide conceptual and procedural guidelines, most especially for
practical reasoning in establishing criteria for ethical and political ameli-
oration. In rejecting supersensible knowledge claims, Kant also opens the
way to reinterpreting the objects of speculative theology as representa-
tions of regulative principles with potential ethical-political significance.

There are substantial discussions of rational theology as a subset of gen-
eral metaphysics in the first *Critique*. These analyses address traditional
proofs for the existence of God, as well as theological doctrines concerning
the origins of the cosmos and the possibility of an immortal soul. These
inquiries into theology are not merely a by-product of Kant's epistemol-
ogy; they are quite central to his endeavors to define and advance human
autonomy. This is because the perpetuation of metaphysical-theological
constructions insusceptible to public testing constitutes a form of intellec-
tual heteronomy that works against our capacity to cultivate open, crit-
ical thinking across a variety of domains (e.g., knowledge, ethics, and
social institutions). Heteronomy appears not only when physical coercion
is used in the political sphere to control a populace, but also and more
insidiously whenever claims to truth and authority are made that refuse
to be subjected to sharable criteria of assessment and open public discus-
sion. In the first *Critique*, heteronomy is engaged in terms of the thought-
systems of traditional metaphysics and rational theology. Religious
phenomena such as scriptures and traditions that can implement heteron-
omous worldviews do not receive much direct attention. However, while
some of Kant's shorter writings from the same period (such as the essay
"What Is Enlightenment?") show a greater concern with the direct ethical
and political import of religion in its social manifestations, it is only with
Religion within the Boundaries of Mere Reason that a more detailed analysis

---

[1] See Manfred Kuehn, *Kant: A Biography* (Cambridge University Press, 2001), p.251; I will discuss
Kant's refutation of traditional metaphysical and theological arguments in some detail over the
next two chapters.

of religious traditions is formulated. These later analyses engage doctrines of theology, but also institutionalized public forms such as churches and the patterns of authority governing these associations, as well as the textual resources of scriptures such as narrative, parable, and personification. As inclusive in this way, the rubric of *religion* is wider than that of theology per se, and contains the latter as a subset. In Kant's treatment, none of these religious phenomena are analyzed on their own terms (i.e., as possessing supernatural authorization unquestionable by mere reason). They are rather studied as historically formed developments intertwined with social and political life in its various manifestations. Most importantly, Kant addresses the political influence of these traditions by analyzing how they shape the identities and worldviews of their communities. These inquiries engage a set of phenomena that, in some form, is endemic to virtually all cultures throughout history. Moreover, despite enormous social and cultural changes in the past two centuries, including the rise of apparently secular societies, the massive proliferation of technologies, and the increasing influence of multi-national corporations, religion in some variety remains directly and indirectly influential in most parts of the world. Even for many who are not explicitly religious in a traditional sense, the worldviews and thought-patterns established through centuries of cultural formation often retain an influence in addressing larger issues of values and ethics.

My discussion will follow Kant's linguistic practice in employing the conceptual category of religion as cutting across the multiplicity of specific religious traditions, without seeking to efface their often profound differences in doctrine and practice. Despite these distinctive features, which are clearly indispensable for the historian of religions, the inclusive category of religion provides a conceptual framework sustaining a wider scope of analysis on a philosophical level. It also facilitates a method of interpretation and questioning with the potential to engage multiple religions in relation to ethical and political concerns, such as the furtherance of distributive and restorative forms of justice and of human rights and freedoms. In fact, the particular analyses Kant undertakes, while focusing mainly on Christian sources, are presented as a template for a general interpretive methodology that can in principle be applied more broadly (and he discusses, albeit in passing, a significant number of traditions in this regard). Kant's interpretation of religious traditions is intrinsic to a wider program, focusing on ethical and political concerns. Religion is especially important to these considerations because it is at once a public, institutionalized set of phenomena, and an inherited set of doctrines

affecting the worldviews and mindsets of individuals. In other words, it is both *external* (taking the form of shared writings, institutions, and cultural traditions) and *internal* (taking the form of worldviews, beliefs, and priorities). It therefore has both political and ethical implications, and in this way occupies a strategic role in the historical interplay of heteronomy and autonomy. Kant is especially concerned with how matters of doctrine and their accompanying symbol systems play a role in shaping the attitudes and modes of thinking of a populace or community. Do they foster passivity and subservience to power and authority, or do they foster a capacity to question and reflect openly upon existing conditions in accordance with universalizable principles?

RELIGION AND THE POLITICAL

In claiming that Kant's inquiries into religion have both ethical and political significance, I am especially concerned with *the political* as describing collective ideational resources as well as institutions and organizations shaped by these ideas. Free-floating doctrines and ideologies can have an impact in the public sphere without necessarily serving as the ideational basis for specific associations or institutions, although they can also be harnessed to these organizational structures. The broader concept of the political that I am using therefore includes politics per se, but extends further to designate cultural systems of meaning by which societies and communities orient themselves in establishing their overall priorities and values. Kant discusses religious communities and churches in this regard, but the model could also include any non-governmental organization informed by specific principles or goals.

   A helpful way of clarifying this sense of the political is through the French distinction between *la politique* and *le politique*, which has been summarized by the historian Stephen Englund. His discussion occurs in the context of analyzing political developments in the Napoleonic era, but they have a more general application as well. Englund notes that *la politique* "means politics, and is what comes to mind when a newscaster speaks of politicians, campaigns, lobbies, and diplomacy." In contrast with this more circumscribed domain, *le politique*, rendered as "the political," addresses non-governmental cultural forces that can directly and indirectly influence a given population. Englund summarizes the concept in a manner that is most germane to our present concerns: "*Le politique* transfers attention from the rough-and-tumble of the struggle for gain in the public arena to the larger picture, which is the forms, uses,

and distribution of power in society. As such, it points to a vast range of phenomena – from social organization and economic structure to culture and intellectual production." Moreover, from among these various cultural forms categorized under *le politique*, Englund singles out one that is of special interest to the present project: "For example, a thing as seemingly removed from 'politics' as *religious faith* may yet be shown to participate in *le politique*."[2] Religion is a key feature of the political in this wider sense, because it often has a profound influence in shaping people's identities, ethical values, and priorities; it thereby informs how they understand their world and their relations to one another. Its influence is less *localized* than that of political institutions per se; it may take the form of sub-communities within larger social-political frameworks, and it may have a trans-national presence cutting across a variety of diverse nation-states and cultural entities. It may very well be this less localized status that contributes to the ongoing power of religions to influence profoundly the way politics in the narrower sense is conducted.

While a notion precisely synonymous with *le politique* may not appear in Kant's writings, the rubric conveys some overarching themes in his work developed over an extensive period. Even in his explicitly social and political works, Kant is concerned not just with the mechanisms of state apparatus, or even with inter-state and inter-societal relations on the cosmo-political level. He also addresses the more pervasive if less tangible realm of shared patterns of thinking and systems of norms characteristic of the political in the broader sense. In this respect, he recognizes that organized religions have significant ethical and political power. This multi-leveled influence of religious traditions and authorities was still prominent in the Europe of Kant's time, which also explains why, like many of his contemporaries, he devoted considerable attention to issues

---

[2] Stephen Englund, *Napoleon: A Political Life* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2004), pp.142–43 (I have italicized the reference to religious faith). One political theorist who develops this distinction between politics and the political is Claude Lefort; see *Democracy and Political Theory* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1988), pp.216–17. Likewise Pierre Rosanvallon defines "the political" as "everything that defines political life beyond the immediate field of partisan competition for political power, everyday governmental action, and the ordinary function of institutions." *Democracy Past and Future* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2006), p.35. I should also note that this broader understanding of the political, concerning the way cultural worldviews, mores, and religious systems influence the organization of collective existence differs considerably from the definition of the twentieth-century legal and political theorist Carl Schmitt. He narrowly insisted that "the specific political distinction to which political actions and motives can be reduced is that between friend and enemy." Carl Schmitt, *The Concept of the Political* (University of Chicago Press, 1996), p.26.

concerning religion.[3] However, even with the rise of apparently secular
nation-states, and even where religious institutions have been officially
separated from the formal operations of governance, the force of religious
worldviews remains significant for large numbers of people globally. In
affecting the attitudes and priorities of communities, sub-communities,
and individuals, religious doctrines can indirectly inform what types of
leadership, which agendas, and which policies members of a society will
prioritize. Accordingly, many of these issues remain prominent in today's
world, if in altered ways. Therefore, it is extremely important that Kant
approaches religion not only in relation to the question of what we can or
cannot legitimately know, but also as intertwined with *practical* concerns
about the possibility of realizing sharable ethical principles under phe-
nomenal conditions. A key theme of these analyses concerns the difficul-
ties in applying ethical principles by human beings already informed by
a variety of contingent social and political forces. The need for analyzing
the priorities of existing conceptual and political institutions, including
those associated with religious traditions, arises from this concern. His
approach to religion is therefore multi-faceted, and it is both critical and
constructive. As he brings clear ethical principles to bear on existing tra-
ditions, Kant also formulates interpretive paradigms for comprehending
such traditions in relation to rational ethical principles. These inquiries
still have much to offer in clarifying the interrelations among religion,
ethics, and politics on a more encompassing theoretical level of analysis.

Is this conceptual approach to religion and the political too abstract?
To be sure, Kant's work on ethical, religious, and political issues generally
operates on a *meta-theoretical* level that draws from empirical examples
rather sparingly. Because of this, and also because of the strategic use of
binary categories in his critical analyses, Kant's thinking is sometimes
associated with various strains of idealist thought. This categorization
makes it easier to dismiss his work as disconnected from the various
social and political realities within which we live and make decisions.
However, two main points should immediately be made in this regard.
First, as I will demonstrate, Kant argues that public, empirically based
experience yielding sensory-intuitions is a key requisite for knowledge
claims. Simultaneously, as the concomitant of this empirical element in
his thinking, he develops an extensive critique of all thought-systems,

---

[3] Some historians have concluded that "the popular sobriquet for the eighteenth century – 'the
age of reason' – has less justification than 'the age of religion' or 'the Christian century'." Tim
Blanning, *The Pursuit of Glory: Europe 1648–1815* (London: Penguin Books, 2007), p.385. Blanning
is paraphrasing Derek Beales.

philosophical, theological, and religious, whose explanatory frameworks operate within closed relations of ideas, and hence really are disconnected from experience. Second, while Kant is intensely concerned with *ideas*, *ideals*, and *principles* (which will be defined more closely in the following chapters), he consistently argues that ideas can have considerable impact on the decisions and actions of both individuals and communities. In fact, I would propose that we are always informed by ideas of one kind or another. What Kant helps us accomplish is to interrogate the status of those ideas. Have they been refined through open dialogue and principled analysis, or are they functioning dogmatically and surreptitiously to influence the assumptions and priorities of a given populace? In this way, the dogmatic conceptions constructed speculatively by metaphysicians or transmitted by the cultural authority of religions are subjected to a critical analysis that is both epistemological and ethical. This critique is a component of Kant's endeavor to formalize universalizable principles that guide autonomous ethical and political practice. Once procedures for assessing ideas and principles in terms of the criteria of universalizability and inclusivity have been formulated, Kant then concentrates on how we can apply such critically revised ideas and principles within various cultural and political domains.

Pheng Cheah, who discusses Kant's work in a contemporary global political context, also links its overarching themes with an interrogation of the political. Cheah argues that "it is the essence of the political to waver between reality and ideals, between what is and what ought to be, in the endeavor to realize the ideal and to idealize reality."[4] In other words, the political is constituted as much by conceptual formations, such as belief systems, inherited norms, and ideologies, as it is by the institutions and practices of nation-states. Cheah then builds on this multiform understanding of the political, showing that the impact of ideas is essential to all social-political transformation: "Insofar as freedom must be regarded as an ideal that is capable of being realized, the distinction between ideal and real can and must be crossed. Conversely, one must regard the existing world as something that can be transformed in accordance with a rational and universal image."[5] There are a number of issues encapsulated in these very Kantian statements. First, the dynamic relation between ideas and existing conditions indicates that human reality is already constituted by

[4] Pheng Cheah, *Spectral Nationality: Passages of Freedom from Kant to Postcolonial Literatures of Liberation* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2003), p.24.
[5] *Ibid.*, p.36.

various ideational systems, as transmitted through political authorities, religious institutions, cultural traditions, and other official and unofficial forms of media. These can operate as the structuring background for judgments and decisions made by individuals, often outside the range of conscious awareness, critical reflection, and open discussion. Second, because we are phenomenal beings strongly affected by sense experience as well as socialized beings informed by culturally transmitted languages, customs, and mores, the engagement between more formalized regulative ideas such as freedom, truth, justice, or the *realm of ends* and existing empirical conditions needs to be mediated. One consequence of the social and phenomenal constitution of human beings is that ideas applied *in situ* always require the principled judgment of autonomous individuals, a point Kant frequently stresses when formulating his ethical theory. Ideas such as social justice and equality can provide general regulative guidelines for making judgments in varying circumstances, but not fixed blueprints for ethical-political transformation. Actual political realities can never conform to any closed order of ideas; however, the latter can through autonomous human efforts have indirect ameliorative effects upon things as they are. To be sure, any such transformative process will also remain incomplete and open to variation and correction.

Cheah also writes of "culture *qua* incarnation of human ideals," and this is an important way to understand the cultural and political influence of religion. He argues that cultural activity "supplies the ontological paradigm of the political because it is purposive activity through which we transcend our finitude and become free." This active understanding of culture, which includes elements of religion as a subset, indicates that it is a sphere of objectification where human freedom can be expressed or suppressed; i.e., where our potential for autonomy is played out. The fact that cultural production is not merely a reprieve from political realities, but can have some ameliorative impact, indicates what Cheah calls "the axiomatic sense of culture's cobelonging with politics."[6] Culture, thus defined, overlaps with the definition of the political articulated by Stephen Englund in the tradition of Lefort and Rosanvallon. It indicates a broad area of conceptual activity including not only religion but artistic, humanistic, and scientific endeavors expressing ideas and values that can restructure given social-political conditions (or that might intentionally and unintentionally have the opposite effect of encrusting prevailing assumptions). Subsequently, Cheah argues that the notion of

---

[6] *Ibid.*, p.7.

culture is essential to Kant's humanistic and historical project: "Culture (*Kultur*), as an objective realm broadly defined to include legal and political institutions and the arts and sciences, is the historical medium for the development of our rational capacities."[7] It is noteworthy that theorists have invoked notions like culture and the political to inquire into ethical concerns irreducible to either the problem-solving activity of individuals or the organized politics of nation-states. Insofar as cultural expressions of free-floating and institutionally harnessed sets of ideas affect the way we perceive and relate to others, they impact upon the ethical sphere. There is a dynamic or two-way interface between internal attitudes and external conditions, or between individual and collective ethical orientations.

To indicate how ethical principles are affected by cultural and political forces, and how political decisions, practices, and modes of organization often have substantial ethical implications, I will frequently have recourse to the hybrid expression *ethical-political*. This phrase is not explicitly used by Kant, although it echoes his references to the *ethico-civil* society, juxtaposed with the *juridico-civil* society, in *Religion*. Of course, it is an axiom of Kantian ethical and legal theory that ethics concerns the internal sphere of will and intentionality, and must be voluntary, whereas law and politics concern the external sphere of statutory codes that might be coercively enforced (see, for example, MM, 6:312). However, while this set of distinctions serves certain important functions, for example in distinguishing ethical decisions from observable consequences, Kant is also concerned with the public and political manifestation of ethical principles, as appears for example in his notion of the realm of ends. Ethical principles and maxims require both judgments and actions, if they are to modify shared conditions within socially constructed worlds. As others have noted, this cannot be reduced to a mere "application" of the categorical imperative, but includes a critical engagement with the institutions and traditions that shape our priorities.[8] An understanding of the ethical-political along these dynamic or interactive lines helps clarify how Kant negotiates an innovative approach to questions of religion. Even as he develops formidable epistemological critiques of metaphysical, theological, and religious systems disconnected from testable public and empirical realities, he also argues that many of the ideas and ideals

---

[7] *Ibid*., p.75.
[8] See Arthur Ripstein, *Force and Freedom: Kant's Legal and Political Philosophy* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2009), pp.6ff.

conveyed by these traditions, *if ethically interpreted and applied*, can have a transformative effect within social and political realities.

It is also very important that this concern with religious representations of ethical mores reveals a variegated understanding of discursive and symbolic resources. While for Kant the register of literal description is privileged with respect to epistemological issues, he also recognizes the possible constructive uses of non-literal narratives and images in other types of inquiry. For example, as a general rule for interpreting religious phenomena Kant discerns potential non-literal ranges of meaning in concepts and figures where a literal reading is discredited by epistemological or ethical principles. In this way, more complex linguistic resources such as symbol, metaphor, and analogy are grasped as relevant to expressing ethical aims in ways that are more intuitively accessible to human beings. Religions therefore emerge as focal areas of conceptual and cultural production with the potential to embody ethical ideas in more widely accessible representational forms. To be sure, the ethical principles Kant advocates do not always correspond to the principles overtly expressed by religious traditions; his analysis of these is therefore be critical as well as constructive. Although Kant never relinquishes the strict critical limits placed on knowledge claims central to the first *Critique*, he consistently allows that religious writings and traditions can assist in mediating abstract ethical ideas within specific social and political configurations. However, to serve this mediating function the parochial and exclusive elements in religions must be critically isolated. Religious sources are approached in a manner informed by inclusive and egalitarian ethical principles in accordance with the formulae of the categorical imperative. In other words, Kant's criticism of cultural traditions and institutions, including both religious and political ones, is guided by clearly defined principles.

In accordance with his ethical interpretation of traditions, Kant's approach to religion and theology emphasizes *human autonomy*. Since autonomy means the rational capacity to generate and follow laws that apply equally to all, it is simultaneously an ethical and a political concept. The question of cultivating one's own autonomy cannot be addressed without considering the autonomy of all other persons, and how these autonomous beings can be harmonized in a realm of ends. Hence there is an affinity between autonomy and ideas of reason, insofar as these assist us in attaining more encompassing, universalizable perspectives that are inclusive of the views and rights of others, as I will explicate in the following chapters. One of Kant's interpretive methods is to assess religious and