

On Allen W. Wood's *Kant and Religion*

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Allen W. Wood's new book on Kant and religion offers considerable insight into this rich and contested area of inquiry (Wood, 2020; cited in the text by page number). Wood, a leading scholar who has made noteworthy contributions to many topics within Kantian and post-Kantian studies, is well-positioned to engage the subject. His encyclopedic mastery of the material is evident throughout this new book. In the following, I will explicate some of Wood's main arguments, highlighting the relation between rational faith and historical religious forms as a focal concern. Here, the key question concerns the points of compatibility and incompatibility between practical reason and historical religions.

Religion as a theme traversing Kant's critical writings

Inquiries into religious and theological concepts appear throughout Kant's writings, even if we bracket Kant's pre-critical writings. The first *Critique* refutes theoretical proofs for the existence of a divine being; the critical epistemology underpins his negative assessment of the ontological argument and other traditional arguments (A592/B620ff. and cf. KpV 5:138, KU 5:463, 5:466, and 5:473). As Kant summarizes: "The concept of a highest being is a very useful idea in many respects; but just because it is merely an idea, it

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is incapable all by itself of extending our cognition in regard to what exists” (A601-02/B629-30). At the same time, the first *Critique* develops constructive regulative and practical approaches to the concept of God (A619/B647; A796/B824; A814/B842). The methodology of later writings, including the *Religion*, is continuous with these critical innovations: excluding knowledge of the supersensible while focusing on practical reason. The second *Critique*, in describing the moral law, emphasizes its unconditioned nature (KpV 5:31-32) and refers to “the majesty of this holy law [*das heilige Gesetz*]” (KpV 5:77-78; and cf. 5:123). More directly, Kant formulates the practical postulates of God and an immortal soul (KpV 5:125-26). He consistently argues that the practical idea of God generates “attributes” that “can never be used for a theory of supersensible beings, so that ... they are quite unable to ground a speculative cognition and their use is, instead, limited solely to the practice of the moral law” (KpV 5:137, 5:138). The third *Critique* interweaves a regulative approach to teleological thinking with an explication of moral theology. Kant refers to the “purely moral need for the existence of such a being, by means of which our morality acquires either more strength or (at least as we represent it) more scope” (KU 5:446). In this way, the “concept of the supreme cause as author of the world in accordance with moral laws” leads “to religion, i.e., the recognition of our duties as divine commands” (KU 5:481). Additionally, Kant devotes several shorter pieces to religious themes, and references to the concept of God appear in his legal and political philosophy as well. These points are well-known, but it is important to emphasize two issues. First, as he does with metaphysics generally, Kant reorients religious concepts so that they are grounded in practical reason. In this way, Kant makes a distinct and invaluable contribution to the Enlightenment tradition of linking universal laws of reason with divine law.¹ Secondly, “religion” is not a separate, compartmentalized topic for Kant; it constitutes a domain of inquiry that intersects with virtually every facet of his mature work, especially his practical philosophy.

There is no textual evidence that the *Religion* departs in any respect from the principles elaborated in Kant's mature critical philosophy, i.e., interpreting religion and

¹ For example, Spinoza (2007/1670), “the divine law which makes men truly happy and teaches the true life, is universal to all men... [that law] must itself be deemed innate to the human mind and, so to speak, inscribed upon it” 68; and cf. 8, 13, 49, 59-62. In a very different context, Mary Wollstonecraft (2014/1790) argues for the equality of women and men: “the nature of reason must be the same in all, if it be an emanation of divinity...” (p.80).

theology through practical reason. However, one major way in which the *Religion* (along with its sequel, *Conflict of the Faculties*) are unique is in analyzing doctrines of historical faith or revelation. While other critical writings mostly address concepts of rational theology as a subset of metaphysics, the *Religion* also examines scriptural sources and ecclesiastical history. These historical and cultural elements make the *Religion* an important resource for understanding how Kant connects religion with questions of social, political, and ethical advancement. Wood, accordingly, underscores the practical and social contributions of the *Religion*. He does not attempt a comprehensive discussion of the text, but he emphasizes core themes in Kant's ethical interpretation of theological concepts, while drawing upon a wide range of writings.² In so doing, he further demonstrates the continuity in Kant's mature thinking about religion in the three *Critiques*, the *Religion*, and later works; in every case practical reason remains the criterion.

Symbolism, Religion, Enlightenment

Wood focuses on *symbolism* as an individual and collective resource for disseminating ethical ideas and furthering the self-reflection essential to ethical development. He rejects the opinion that Kant "reduces" religion to morality (3), a view that assumes a supernatural standard and downplays how the moral law (as universal and unconditional) cannot meaningfully be understood as a reduction of something greater. To be sure, elements of historical faith, i.e., those that counteract the moral law, are excluded from rational religion. While insisting that practical reason is the interpreter of religion, Wood argues that "religion goes beyond morality, adding something to it that enriches the moral life" (3). That extra "something" turns out to be collective systems of representation, transmitted through scriptures and other means. Chapter 1.2, "Religion as essentially Symbolic," offers an account of the role of religious symbolism in facilitating access to ideas of reason (pp. 4-5ff.). As Wood stresses, "For Kant it is only through symbolism that the pure concept of God can be presented in a way that is meaningful to human beings and therefore truly religious" (7). Symbolism, in other words, offers linguistic and representational resources for expanding our access to concepts that do not merely

² For example, when Wood engages the concept of a "propensity to evil" he adroitly draws upon the *Groundwork*, the second *Critique*, *Anthropology*, "Idea for a Universal History," and other sources to supplement his analyses (70ff).

designate empirical objects, or designate conceivable supersensible objects modelled after empirical ones. For Kant, valid symbolic interpretation of religious concepts is guided by practical reason (13-19). The moral interpretation of historical religions facilitates the gradual realization of moral religion, also called rational faith and true religion. This interactive relation between ethical ideas and existing institutions across an indefinite temporal frame is a topic Wood explores with considerable insight later in the book, and I will return to it.

The theme of symbols is also given concentrated attention in Chapter 5.2 and 5.3 on symbolism and analogy, and on symbolism and religion respectively. As he does throughout the book, Wood draws on a variety of Kant's writings, showing the consistent approach to symbolism in the three *Critiques*, the *Religion*, and elsewhere. Wood demonstrates how specific areas of inquiry related to the theme of religion develop over numerous works, thereby enriching our understanding of key concepts. Hence in discussing symbolism, Wood cites the *Anthropology*: "it is enlightenment to distinguish the symbolic from the intellectual..., the temporarily useful and necessary shell from the thing itself" (Anth 7:192; Wood, 121). Wood emphasizes how Kant's approach to religion, symbolism, and practical reason is representative of his focus on Enlightenment (210). Enlightenment requires a process of approximating rational morality by combining inner reflection with rational modification of cultural resources. Kant succinctly makes this point when he writes, "Should one now ask, Which period of the entire church history in our ken up to now is the best? I reply without hesitation, *The present*. I say this because one need only allow the seed of the true religious faith now being sown in Christianity—by only a few, to be sure, yet in the open—to grow unhindered, to expect from it a continuous approximation to that church, ever uniting all human beings, which constitutes the visible representation (the schema) of an invisible Kingdom of God on earth." (R 6:131-32, Wood, 214).³ The "true seed" emerges and grows through an understanding of Christianity predicated on rational ethical principles and disseminated by the freedom to exercise reason publicly. Kant clarifies how Enlightenment and practical reason are conjoined in describing "a true enlightenment (an order of law originating in moral freedom)" (R

³ The fact that Kant, author of "What is Enlightenment?," is advocating in 1793 an enlightened, ethically-oriented approach to religion *should* be self-evident, although there are contrary views in the literature.

6:123n). These comments encapsulate Kant’s progressive model of a collective movement toward autonomy, driven by rational and ethical interpretation of existing forms. Building on the pivotal role of symbolism in expressing non-empirical concepts, a central contribution of Wood’s book is to distinguish the valid interpretations of religious concepts from invalid ones. Wood highlights literalism, superstition, and anthropomorphism as antitheses of an enlightened approach to religion (5-7, 14, 120-21, 177). However, as I will discuss below, Wood does not equate this enlightened, symbolic understanding of religion with “secularism.”

Faith or Belief

In Chapter 2, Wood links moral faith with the pursuit of the highest good in the world and explicates the “moral arguments” in the three *Critiques*. This analysis demonstrates that moral faith is associated with the pursuit of an ethical life by finite, imperfect rational beings. As Wood explains, practical assent and practical faith do not abrogate the standards of rational judgment to which Kant subscribes; they are in fact a resource for practical purposes. Summarizing arguments in the second *Critique*, Wood notes that Kant “denies that either belief or assent can be commanded, but he does describe the result of the moral arguments as ‘maxim of assent for moral purposes’ and a ‘voluntary (*freiwillig*) determination of our judgment’ (KpV 5:144-146)” (58). The stress on faith as non-coercible, and as a feature of human agency in pursuit of long-term ideal ends is essential.

Wood frames his inquiry into practical faith by drawing on Josiah Royce’s idea of a “lost cause,” defined as “any cause that cannot be fulfilled within the lifetime of the loyal community or any of its members” (36). This unlikely reference clarifies how moral faith emerges directly from Kant’s practical philosophy as positing ends that can only be approached asymptotically. Wood argues that “the highest good in Kant’s conception of it—as an end that is a duty for each of us, and a shared end for the ethical or religious community as Kant conceives of it—can be seen as a ‘lost cause’ precisely in Royce’s sense” (36, citing R 6:97). Faith in this sense is operative in all human efforts at individual and collective ethical advancement. Wood eloquently offers a personal reference to pursuing the “lost cause of advancing the work of science and scholarship” (36). Clearly,

these noble pursuits are not *hopeless*, but they are uncertain and imperfect in their outcomes, and subject to contingencies beyond one's control. One needs to be sustained by a faith and devotion to invest in moral effort while acknowledging that complete realization will never occur. All practical endeavor by fallible human beings is of this kind: even if guided by rational principles, it remains open-ended and future-directed, subject to the day-to-day contingencies of individual and historical life. It is because of the antagonisms endemic to phenomenal and social life that Kant introduces the concept of *moral courage* as a capacity for fidelity in the face of opposition. Moral courage is a concept that also links the *Religion* with Kant's rallying call to Enlightenment (R 6:57, 6:68, 6:183-84, E 8:35).

Less helpful, in my judgment, is Wood's recourse to Andrew Chignell's "Belief" (51ff.), differentiated by capitalization from the standard use of belief to designate accepting low evidence doctrinal claims. The capitalized term is used to render rational faith (*Vernunftglaube* KpV 5:126), practical faith (*praktischen Glauben*, R 6:62) or moral faith (*moralischen Glauben*, R 6:110). However, Wood must continually alert readers to the significance of the capitalized usage by stating, for example, that "Kant argues that there are rational grounds, based on practical rather than theoretical reason, for a morally committed person to have faith (or Belief) in God or representing your duties as divine commands" (139). Similarly, he later reminds us how "Belief (rational assent on practical grounds), [is] distinct from belief in the ordinary sense, habitual unconditional assent according to theoretical evidence," while noting that the former is compatible with "evidentialism" and the latter is not (202). Repeated clarifications of an artificial terminology are necessary because the English 'belief'—whether capitalized or not—is associated with commitment to dogmatic propositions and to the authority of inherited traditions however incompatible with reason and evidence. This latter form of belief is entirely different from "moral faith" as active ethical striving based on rational principles.

Because practical faith guides action by human agents, it is in this sense "subjective." That is, faith concerns the encompassing orientation or attitude governing the course of our lives as we seek to advance ethically under experiential conditions (54). Throughout the book, Wood contrasts one mode of religiosity with another. He observes that "Kant's moral arguments ...simply cannot deliver the comforting confidence of

unquestioned certainty, if that's what people want religious consolation to be. Religion should be more honest than that" (55). The book is filled with insights along these lines, distinguishing rational faith from what Kant often refers to as mere wishing (see R 6:51 on cult-like practices and "mere wishing," R 6:184-85 on servile submission and wishing, and R 6:201 on "deedless wishes").

Wood establishes differentiations internal to the concept of religion that eschew simplistic dichotomization of religious and secular in favor of a more nuanced, ethically oriented approach. On this point, Wood repeatedly uses Kant's "as if" formulations—specifically, that of understanding one's ethical duties (following the Moral Law) as divine commands (KU 5:481-82, R 6:99, 6:153-54, SF 7:36, OP 22:127-128). The "as if" or regulative approach to concepts, which permeates the *Religion* and the third *Critique* in particular, is essential to Kant's unremitting focus on human agency guided by rational representations. However, as noted, Wood does not want to call this approach "secular." He argues that "there is no ground for Reath's distinction between a merely 'secular' conception of the highest good, for which merely human effort might suffice, and the larger ('religious') conception, for which we cannot reasonably suppose it does" (48, citing Reath 1988). In his concluding remarks, Wood likewise insists that "Kant most certainly did not intend to embrace 'secularism' as opposed to religion" (210). In a certain way, this is correct; as noted, religious and theological concepts infuse Kant's work and are deeply connected to ideas of reason irreducible to phenomenal experience. If secularism means abandoning rational ideals and principles irreducible to cultural contingency, then Kant is not secular in that sense. However, if religion signifies literalist conceptions of higher supernatural powers, based on uncritical internalization of official doctrines, and secularism means grounding our judgments and practices on the autonomous exercise of practical reason, then Reath's differentiation between "human effort" and divine intervention is significant. Kant does not invoke the sacred/secular distinction, but he repeatedly stresses "natural" over "supernatural" interpretations. For example, in concluding the *Religion* he clearly emphasizes that "specially favored" individuals who feel "the special effects of grace" within them can "hardly withstand comparison" with "naturally honest human beings" (R 6:201-202; translation modified).⁴ Unfortunately,

⁴ *Gnadenwirkungen* is mistranslated as "effects of faith" in the CUP edition.

Wood does not address this distinction, and never explains what he means by secularism. Combined with his otherwise consistent emphasis on the symbolic and morally-focussed interpretation of religious concepts, this generates a degree of confusion.

Evidentialism

Wood's overall position is, in the overview, consistent in upholding Kant's focus on practical reason, despite occasional passages that call for further clarification. A crucial feature of Wood's approach, already noted in formulating the distinction between rational faith and dogmatic belief, is the emphasis on *evidence-based criteria* for judgment. Wood introduces "evidentialism" in the Preface, citing W. K. Clifford that "it is wrong, always and everywhere and for anyone to believe anything upon insufficient evidence" (xx). Here, after noting Hume's doctrine of "proportionality" between beliefs and the evidence on which these are based, and "Kant's 'deduction' of freedom and the moral law," Wood observes: "I do not regard assent based on such philosophical arguments as violating the evidentialist principle" (xx). In other words, Wood is concerned not merely with empirical evidence for assent, but also with rational evidence, including that of practical reason. Subsequently, Wood reiterates that "moral Belief [i.e., practical faith] does not violate Clifford's evidentialist principle" (57). Wood consistently adheres to this principle, although on occasion, when working with symbolic representations deriving from religious sources, he may appear to depart from it when he writes from the standpoint of Christian symbols (e.g. 17, 49, 121, 127, 137, 152, 155). Most importantly, Wood argues that evidentialism is not merely about testing facts but has moral consequences as well: "Violations of Clifford's principle [of evidentialism] are among the most insidious, as well as the most common, form of evil" (58, cf. 177). To this I would only add: given the claims, unsupported by textual evidence, made over the years about Kant's *Religion*, evidentialism could be extended to include scrupulous, properly documented use of sources.⁵

Rational and Historical Religions

The Preface to the first edition of the *Religion* contains an "experiment" summarized by Wood as "considering [biblical theology and pure rational religion] as a

⁵ See Wood, p.14n, 116n, 135n, 156-57n for some examples.

unity” (Wood 11, citing R 6:10). This is slightly misleading, as Wood disregards Kant’s statement that “the sciences [of biblical theology and philosophy] profit simply from being set apart, insofar as each science first constitutes a whole by itself; only after that shall the experiment be made of considering them in association [or, as a unity]” (R 6:10). Clearly, Kant is stressing that philosophy, especially practical philosophy formulating the moral law as foundational for rational faith, must establish clear principles based on reason alone (mere reason) before being mixed up with biblical theology and historical faith. In the second edition Preface, Kant briefly considers another experiment using the analogy of two concentric circles (R 6:12-13). Wood analyzes the *Religion* as interpreting various elements of the “outer circle,” i.e., historical religions, as symbolic representations of the moral principles constituting rational faith, the inner circle (11ff.). Theological concepts that represent ideas of practical reason can thereby be taken into the inner circle constitutive of moral faith.

Wood takes the outer circle of historical faith as synonymous with Christianity, although he makes brief references to Judaism and Islam late in the book. He states, “Kant’s *Religion* considers ‘fragments’ of an alleged revelation—namely, the Christian. Specifically, it takes up these: Original Sin, the Son of God as savior, divine grace, and the church” (Wood, 19). Indeed, it might be expected that Kant, writing in 1793 for an audience Wood describes as “orthodox Lutheran Christians” (140), would focus exclusively on Christianity. Yet, the rubric of historical faiths is inclusive in principle. Apart from repeated references to classical sources, especially Stoicism, Kant references Indian (Vedic) traditions at R 6:19, 6:73 note, Tibetan and Mongolian religions (R 6:108 note), some Indigenous traditions at R 6:176, and trinitarian formulations in “the religion of Zoroaster... Hindu religion...the religion of Egypt” (R 6:140 note).

I am not claiming that Kant’s passing comments reveal serious familiarity with religions other than Christianity. However, these wider references take on greater significance in relation to the underlying principle governing his approach to historical religions. This is stated forcefully: “There is only one (true) religion; but there can be several kinds of faith.—We can say, further, that in the various churches divided from one another because of their kinds of faith, one and the same true religion can nevertheless be met with” (R 6:107-8). Kant then enumerates “(Jewish, Mohammedan [Muslim], Christian,

Catholic, Lutheran) faith” (R 6:108). The “true religion” inherent in every faith is the moral law. In an important passage explaining a core objective of the *Religion*, Kant discusses how universality (the moral law) needs to be accompanied by “something that the senses can hold onto”; therefore, “some historical ecclesiastical faith or other, usually already at hand, must be used” (R 6:109). Although Kant is inconsistent in using the terms “religion” and “faith,” he understands the historical domain as having a global, inclusive scope. Kant stresses the need for a moral “interpretation of the revelation we happen to have” even if “this interpretation may often appear to us as forced, in view of the text (of the revelation), and be often forced in fact” (R 6:110, and Wood, 14). In making this point, Kant reiterates “all types of faith,” and by way of illustration writes: “the moral philosophers among the Greeks and, later, the Romans did exactly the same thing with their legends concerning the gods... Late Judaism, and Christianity too, consists of such in part highly forced interpretations ... the Mohammedans [Muslims] know very well ... how to inject a spiritual meaning in the description of their paradise... and the Indians do the same with the interpretation of their Vedas” (R 6:111). Therefore, with regard to the multitude of historical faiths, “they all deserve equal respect, so far as their forms are attempts by poor mortals to give sensible representation to the Kingdom of God on earth, but equal blame as well, when (in a visible church) they mistake the form of representation of this idea for the thing itself” (R 6:175n, and see the comparative examples at R 6:176). The “kingdom of God on earth” is a biblical concept and would not likely be accepted by different religions as the way to define their goals. Yet, insofar as “the Kingdom” designates a moral order, the realm of ends, Kant is arguing that all cultural systems can and should be directed toward that end, even if their modes of expression are radically different.⁶ Moreover, ethical interpretations that have arisen within various traditions, even if only by a small minority, are indicative of this potential for harmonization with rational moral principles, and this is especially important in his cosmopolitan vision of the ethical community. These points are consistent with Wood’s focus on traditional religions as offering symbols for ethical practice. Embracing rational religion means drawing upon the resources of traditions to cultivate ethical awareness embracing all of humanity, rather than

⁶ As Kant states in the second *Critique*: “the doctrine of Christianity even if it is not regarded as a religious doctrine, gives on this point a concept of the highest good (of the kingdom of God [*des Reichs Gottes*]) which alone satisfies the strictest demands of practical reason” (KpV 5:127).

fixating on culture-specific dogmatic details. Clearly, in today's globalized world this inclusive emphasis is more important than ever.

Autonomy versus heteronomy

Although Wood stresses the primacy of practical faith, he is concerned to show that practical reason is compatible with traditional religiosity: "rational religion does not deny those doctrines of revealed religion that it does not include" (13). This is correct, if "deny" means theoretically disprove. On the other hand, Wood is clear that "both rational and revealed religion must reject certain doctrines, or the apparent teachings of certain scriptures, when these are given certain (anthropomorphic or merely literal) interpretations" (14). This is consistent with Kant's emphasis on ethically focussed interpretations (15). The frequently reiterated critique of superstition, anthropomorphism, and literalism in Wood's book crystallizes in this ethical focus: there is something about these popular modalities of belief that caters to heteronomy and obstructs a focus on rational principles.

Wood opposes the view that there is "a 'disparagement' of Christianity" in the *Religion*. He argues that rather than denying "important Christian truths" and using "agreement with the religion of reason [as] a standard that any purported revelation must meet," and rather than imposing his views on theologians, Kant instead "is merely offering his own interpretation of these doctrines: an interpretation that enables them to be reconciled with a religion of reason" (Wood, 24-25). I am not sure where Wood finds the word "disparage"; certainly, Kant is doing nothing of the sort. However, he *is* engaging in a serious critical endeavor in which the stakes are high: the furthering or the obstructing of rational ethical principles among global communities. The tremendous influence of religions in Kant's time is attested to by his concern with "dominion over minds" (R 6:79, cf. SF 7:21-22, 36), which is explicitly attributed to "priestcraft" (R 6:200, and cf. SF 7:60).⁷ Whether Kant perfectly grasps and conveys the principles of the moral law, he is certainly attempting to be a spokesperson, as it were, for rational principles. To say that "he is offering his own interpretation" is to dampen rational ethical inquiry, leading us to a

⁷ In his Preface, Wood gives an example from the contemporary U.S. of dogmatic fundamentalist religion running contrary to principles of autonomy, noting that "a more exquisitely depraved combination of callousness, cruelty, and hypocrisy would even be hard to imagine" (xvii).

mere difference of opinions. Kant's statements, like all others, must be evaluated with reference to rational principles such as universalizability, consistency, inclusivity, equality, and justice; the standard remains practical reason itself. By contrast, heteronomous forms of religion, just as with heteronomous political systems, dismiss or override such rational principles and suppress the free exchange of ideas, in favor of dogmatic systems of authority, usually founded on unfalsifiable supernatural claims.

Attempts to heal rifts with more traditionally oriented thinkers appear in Wood's discussions of grace, where he stresses that a symbolic reading does not conflict with Christian doctrine (e.g., 133-38, 180-81). In discussing the question of "God's causality," Wood refutes scholars who try to attribute a doctrinal position on theological questions to Kant, stressing "Kant's total agnosticism about the metaphysical relation of freedom to either natural or divine causality" (156-57n). Because of the critical limits on supersensible knowledge, Kant cannot make, and does not make, any theoretical or dogmatic assertions whatsoever about divine activity. This also means, as Wood shows, that Kant does not criticize theological doctrines from a theoretical standpoint (154-156). Rather, for Kant, "the problem is moral self-knowledge, not metaphysical knowledge" (153, citing SF 7:54). This does not mean that Kant takes an uncritical stance concerning these doctrines: they are engaged in terms of their compatibility with the moral law. Discussing views on grace, Wood states, "Kant holds that unaided reason can neither affirm nor deny any of these doctrines... Any of them might be welcome if it serves the ends of religion by symbolizing parts of our moral and religious life in a way that furthers our moral improvement" (161). In other words, practical criteria remain primary for Kant.

The underlying issue concerns competing sources of normativity, especially principles of autonomy versus heteronomy (G 4:432-33, 4:440-43). Autonomy means freely limiting oneself in relation to the freedom of others; it is quite distinct from the lawless freedom unregulated by concern for others (G 4:446). In addressing human responsibility for evil maxims and actions, Wood offers a helpful discussion of "practical freedom" (63-66). In an earlier work, Wood summarizes Kant's argument that: "the principle of autonomy is the only possible solution to the riddle of obligation, and that all other principles of obligation must fail to solve it because they must be grounded on heteronomy of the will" (Wood, 1999, 159). This distinction is central to understanding the

differences between Kant and Wood on the one side, and more traditional approaches to divine action and grace on the other. Despite Kant's agnosticism, there are serious moral concerns about placing agency in a higher power, inscrutable to reason and therefore open to the manipulations of priestcraft, or investing unquestionable authority in literally read scripture, or in institutions stemming from antiquity. These are not necessarily dispensable, but in a Kantian framework they remain subject to the same rational principles as other products of human history. For this reason, Kant steadfastly counteracts passive reliance on "foreign influences" (R 6:117-18, 6:191, SF 7:42-43; Wood 157, 160). Wood notes, citing Kant, that revelation is synonymous with "a historical system," which means that revelations contain a wide range of non-rational and culturally contingent features.⁸ When Kant proposes examining fragments of a revelation in relation "to moral concepts" he is not assuming that all such fragments will lead back "to the same rational system of religion" (Wood, 17, citing R 6:12). He is only proposing to test them to see if they harmonize with a religion of reason; some will not. Wood obviously knows this. He is clear that the moral standard, and hence the standard of autonomy, is fundamental: "we can reasonably judge that something claimed to be divinely revealed is *not* genuine, if what is supposedly revealed is *contrary* to reason or the moral law" (18, citing SF 7:63, R 6:87).

To establish clear criteria differentiating autonomy from heteronomy, both in terms of ways of thinking and public institutions, Kant employs several "principles of distinction" in the *Religion*. These principles do not necessarily correspond to the "concentric circles" motif, and are drawn from practical, rather than theoretical reason as the touchstone for assessing historical forms of faith. A crucial instance appears in the following: "All religions, however, can be divided into the *currying of favor* (of mere cult) [*der Gunstbewerbung (des bloßen Cultus)*] and the *moral* [*die moralische*], i.e. the religion of *good life conduct*" (R 6:51, translation modified).⁹ Kant's analysis of Christianity as a "Natural Religion" (R 6:157ff), and as a "Learned Religion" (R 6:163ff.) applies this moral versus favor-seeking paradigm. While the former concerns moral teachings that are

⁸ This is a major theme of J. G. Fichte (2010/1792).

⁹ George di Giovanni's translation of *Gunstbewerbung* as "rogation" obscures the role of the concept of favor in the *Religion*. A better rendering of the same term as "courting of favor" appears at R 6:185n. (See DiCenso 2015 for further discussion).

universalizable, especially the Sermon on the Mount, the latter concerns historically formed teachings and practices that are not. The *parerga* discussed in “Remarks” added to each Part of the *Religion* also distinguish religious ideas outside the boundaries of mere reason; “it [reason] just cannot incorporate them into its maxims of thought and action” (R 6:52). The theoretically *and* practically inadmissible concepts explored in each section are: Effects of Grace; Miracles; Mysteries; and Means of Grace (R 6:52). In the concluding passages to the *Religion*, Kant analyzes “Priestcraft [*Pfaffenthum*]” as “the dominion which the clergy has usurped over minds by pretending to have exclusive possession of the means of grace” (R, 6:200). The ethical significance of these distinctions is clear.

The Holy One of the Gospels as *Urbild*

Chapter 5 discusses the status of “the Holy One of the Gospels” in the *Religion*. Wood explores how doctrinal theology concerning “hope for redemption through the saving work of Jesus Christ” as “the outer circle of revealed faith... leads back to the inner circle of revealed religion” (115). However, Wood emphasizes that this is a philosophical, not a theological inquiry, and that “it is therefore worse than gratuitous to speak, as many writers do, of Kant’s ‘Christology’” (116). He explores various attributes of Jesus presented in Scripture: the “ideal of humanity well-pleasing to God” (R 6:61), the “personified idea of the good principle” (R 6:60), and “humanity in its full moral perfection” (R 6:60) (116). Crucially, Kant argues that “it is our duty to *elevate ourselves* to this ideal of moral perfection, i.e. to the prototype [*dem Urbilde*] of moral disposition in its entire purity, and for this the very idea, which is *presented to us by reason* for emulation, can give us force” (R, 6:61). As always with Kant, the emphasis is on human agency and activity, guided by practical reason and by religious representations that express practical principles.

Unfortunately, the status of the Holy One as representing an ideal of reason is obscured by the rendering of the term *Urbild* as “prototype” in the di Giovanni translation, and Wood passes this along without comment. (This poor translation, like many others, is *not* corrected in the “revised” 2018 edition.) The technical status of the term *Urbild* is further obscured by inconsistency of translation. For example, the “*church invisible*” is defined by Kant as “the mere idea of the union of all upright human beings under direct yet moral divine world-governance, as serving for the archetype [*zum Urbilde dient*] of any

such governance to be founded by human beings” (RGV, 6:101). Kant also discusses “complete religion,” cognized through reason, as “a prototype [*Urbild*] for us to follow” (R 6:162). The variations in translation within the same text obscure how Kant is employing the same concept, *Urbild*, as a fundamental image that is historically informed, yet also representing ideas of reason.

Indicative of the potential confusion here is the case of Firestone and Jacobs who, seemingly based on mistranslation alone, weave a neo-Platonic vision of the “prototype” (2008, 156ff). They engage in anthropomorphization and shift moral agency away from humans in referring to “gracious condescension on the prototype’s part” (2008, 164). Wood correctly remarks that this Platonic rendering “plays a role in medieval (especially Scotistic) and early modern Christology. These speculations have textual support only if we suppose Kant has these historical allusions in mind, which seems to me highly doubtful because it would involve transcendent metaphysical commitments inconsistent with the critical philosophy” (116n).

Yet, Wood, one of the most important translators of Kant’s work in the past 30 years, does not clarify how Kant uses a specific term, *Urbild*, to refer to a wide range of representational ideals throughout the critical philosophy, which would help place Kant’s understanding of the “Son of God” in its proper conceptual context.¹⁰ It is a symbol expressing rational moral principles actualized by rational agents. Wood is aware of this, and discusses religious symbols as representing various aspects of morality and the moral path, again utilizing a variety of Kant’s writings (117-126). This culminates in section 5.4, “The Son of God as a Symbol.” Wood summarizes how “the moral striving for which we hope is represented symbolically as our striving to become well-pleasing to God,” how “the Son of God is a religious symbol for the change of heart or, more specifically, for the good disposition resulting from it,” and finally how “the end of this striving is represented symbolically in religious terms as God’s acceptance of us” (125). These points illuminate how Kant draws upon this scriptural narrative to exemplify the moral path.

¹⁰ Many instances of *Urbilder* or archetypes appear in Kant’s work. For example: Ideas for Plato are “archetypes of things themselves” (A313/B370); the idea of humanity (A318/B374); the Sage of the Stoics (A569/B597); the system of all philosophical cognition (A838/B866); the ideal of the philosopher (A839/B867); holiness of the will (KpV, 5:43); moral ideas, as archetypes of practical perfection (KpV, 5:127n); the ideal of holiness (KpV, 5:128-29); the archetype of beauty (KU, 5:235); the aesthetic idea (KU, 5:322) (See DiCenso 2013 for further discussion).

However, Wood runs into difficulties here that go beyond inattention to Kant's terminology. He notes that "the ideal is thought as a human individual," and "that it serves as a standard for our moral striving" (117). The question is, how feasible is it to interpret the Son of God, presented as a supernatural or divine as well as a human being, as a model for human ethical striving? Wood concludes that "the ideal cannot be thought by us as 'an example to be emulated'" (117, citing R 6:64). A few pages later Wood cites the same passage and reiterates, "we cannot think of ourselves as emulating the ideal because its purity of will is achieved innately and without effort" (126). However, while Kant argues that we need not "absolutely deny that he might indeed also be a supernaturally begotten human being," he insists that "from a practical point of view any such presupposition is of no benefit to us, since the prototype [*das Urbild*] which we see embedded in this apparition must be sought in us as well (though natural human beings), and its presence in the human soul is itself incomprehensible enough" (R 6:63-64). In other words, while Kant maintains an agnostic stance concerning doctrinal claims, he argues that as a symbol for the actualization of the moral law in human life, the *Urbild* should *not* be considered supernatural. In this vein, Kant states: "the elevation of such a Holy One above every frailty of human nature [i.e., making of him a supernatural being] would rather, from all that we can see, stand in the way of the practical adoption of the idea of such a being for our imitation [*unsere Nachfolge*]" (R 6:64). The *Urbild* can have this representational efficacy because it is an ideal of reason to which we, as rational beings, can have access. In the technical meaning of *Urbilder* as representing ideas of reason, and hence as potentially accessible to and actualisable by human beings, the Son of God is indeed an "example to be emulated."

Instead, rather than understanding the Son of God as a human being courageously striving to remain true to the moral law in the face of persecution, Wood argues that "The Son of God can, however, serve as a symbol for the purity of disposition to which a human being aspires and even hopes to attain by undergoing a moral revolution or change of heart" (126). This is not incorrect, but it restricts the symbolic reference to the ideal or holy disposition and dissociates this from the travails of human life. By contrast, it is especially important that Kant presents the narrative of Jesus's life as personifying "rational beings in the world [*des vernünftigen Wesens in der Welt*]" (R 6:60; 6:61). Kant refers to the "sufferings, up to the most ignominious death" that the ideal human endures, and observes:

“human beings cannot form for themselves any concept of the degree of strength of a force like that of a moral disposition except by representing it surrounded by obstacles and yet—in the midst of the greatest possible temptations—victorious” (R 6:61).¹¹ The moral challenges represented in accounts of his life also concern *our* ethical endeavors in the world, and here Kant uses a term explicated in the third *Critique*, *Nachfolge*, to describe the ethical emulation we undertake voluntarily (KU 5:283, R 6:62, 6:64). Kant explicates the narrative framework of Jesus’s life as a rational model, an archetype or *Urbild*, for human ethical striving in the face of uncertainty and adversity. It is only if the Son of God is “taken as” divine that this representational force for practical purposes falters. Once again, the central interpretive issue for Kant concerns how religious symbols, without violating autonomy, help us become oriented to and motivated by the moral law.

Autonomy and Grace

As noted, Wood argues that Kantian autonomy is not incompatible with traditional religious ideas, including that of grace (Wood 151, 158, 180-81). However, grace must be understood as a supplement to, rather than a substitute for, our autonomous practical endeavors; in Kant’s words, “the human being must make himself into whatever he is or should become in a moral sense, good or evil.” In an oft-cited passage, Kant continues: “Supposing [*Gesetzt*] that some supernatural cooperation is also needed to his becoming good or better, whether this cooperation only consist in the diminution of obstacles or be also a positive assistance, the human being must make himself antecedently worthy of receiving it” (R 6:44, translation modified). Although it has contributed to misreadings of Kant as explicitly invoking divine assistance, Wood downplays the significance of *Gesetzt* being translated as “granted” by di Giovanni, rather than the more appropriate “suppose” or “supposing” (as it is at e.g. A551/B579, G 4:398, and KU 5:451). He states, “the meaning of what Kant has said is quite clear, however it might be translated. In the German, and in both translations, the import of the antecedent clause is simply conditional” (158n). That is, even if we assume divine assistance, our autonomous efforts remain primary and indispensable. Kant argues that the idea of grace can support ethical practice in the face of the inevitable hindrances that finite rational beings encounter.

¹¹ Kant reiterates this crucial point: “The teacher of the gospel, through his teaching, suffering, and “meritorious death,” gave to us “an example conforming to the prototype [*dem Urbilde*] of a humanity well-pleasing to God” (R, 6:128-9).

However, one “must incorporate this positive increase of force into his maxim: in this way alone is it possible that the good be imputed to him, and that he be acknowledged a good human being” (R 6:44). Kant is concerned with the attitude and freely chosen maxims of moral agents; this is crucial to the doctrine of moral evil, predicated as it is on reason, choice, and responsibility (Wood, 66). Once again, one “must be able to hope that, by the exertion of *his own* power, he will attain to the road that leads in that direction [i.e., to a “new heart”], as indicated to him by a fundamentally improved disposition” (6:51; italics original).

In trying to reconcile Kant with more traditional thinking, Wood also cites R 6:88: “A human being’s moral improvement is likewise an affair incumbent upon him, and heavenly influences may indeed always co-operate in this improvement, or be deemed necessary to explain its possibility” (Wood, 151n). Wood comments: “Kant here allows that God’s unilateral action might be necessary even for the change of heart. He regards it as unknowable whether this divine action is needed or actually occurs. But he holds we must strive to make ourselves worthy of it antecedent to depending on it” (ibid). Although “unilateral action” by God is never mentioned by Kant, Wood correctly emphasizes Kant’s focus on human effort. However, it should be observed that the cited passage appears in “General Remark” to Part II, on the topic of miracles (one of the *parerga* excluded from rational religion). Kant’s agnosticism is not as nonjudgmental as Wood portrays. The passage continues: “Yet he [the person seeking moral improvement] has no understanding of himself in the matter: neither how to distinguish with certainty such influences from natural ones, nor how to bring them and so, as it were, heaven itself down to himself. And, since he knows not what to do with them, in no case does he *sanction* miracles but rather, should he pay heed to the precept of reason, he conducts himself as if every change of heart and all improvement depended solely on the application of his own workmanship” (R 6:88). The stronger point is that much confusion can arise from passively awaiting supernatural signs and interventions; one must follow what is clear and known to us, the precept of reason (the moral law). Therefore, miracles, mysteries, effects of grace and means of grace, are classified as *parerga*.

Finally, whether Kant’s practical inquiry into the significance of the concept of grace is more like Augustinianism or Pelagianism is irrelevant, precisely because Kant’s

focus is practical, not metaphysical. As Wood stresses, “Kant holds that unaided reason can neither affirm nor deny any of these doctrines” (161).

The Ethical Community

A crucial issue emerging from Kant’s analysis of radical evil in Part I concerns the need to address evil on a societal level without abrogating individual freedom and responsibility. Wood cites the *Religion* concerning how our sense of self-worth is gauged in relation to others, how the individual, for example, “is anxious that other human beings will consider him poor and will despise him for it.” Kant stresses the mutual corruption arising from this *amour propre*, to use Rousseau’s term, or unsociable sociability, to draw from “Idea for a Universal History,” in which the mere presence of others fuels a relentless comparative and competitive dynamic. As Kant concludes, “they will mutually corrupt one another’s moral predisposition [*Anlage*] and make one another evil” (Wood 78-79, citing R 6:93-94, translation modified). The predisposition to the good, as Kant details in his discussions of the predispositions to animality and humanity, must be developed through interpersonal relations. Hence it can be corrupted by various forms of self-love, including the “striving for ascendancy” from which arise “jealousy and rivalry” and “the greatest vices of secret or open hostility to all whom we consider alien to us” (R 6:27). As Wood summarizes: “to say that for Kant the radical human propensity to evil has a social and historical origin is only to report what Kant explicitly says” (78).

In chapter 7, turning to Part Three of the *Religion* where the ethical community is introduced, Wood summarizes Parts One and Two of Kant’s project as concerning the internal change of heart in relation to Christian concepts such as grace and the Son of God. He states, “the *Religion* has still not asked how the struggle against evil could be carried on effectively. What can we do now to effect a change of heart in ourselves or in others?” (164). This last concern, he argues, is taken up only in Part Three, and he returns to the issues of mutual corruption and unsociable sociability. However, the social element is not suddenly introduced in Part Three of the *Religion*; it is there from the start. As noted, Wood places great stress on symbolic interpretations of inherited religious traditions. These traditions are not individually created—they are culturally and historically formed and transmitted. The same applies more generally to scriptures and sacred texts in all

traditions, as well as to doctrines, codes of conduct, and other practices. These are collective and social, and yet have a tremendous impact on the psychological and ethical formation of individuals. Kant is concerned throughout the *Religion* to reinterpret Christian faith (and by extension other historical faiths, Wood 188) to render them more suitable as vehicles for the moral law. Wood sees this connection, and inserts a section, 7.6, on “The Interpretation of Scripture” into his discussion of the ethical community (174ff.). Kant makes rational interventions into shared cultural and religious institutions, thereby actively contributing to the conditions supporting a change of heart, and a change of *Denkungsart*.

Wood explains that, “the ethical community is in its concept universal, encompassing all humanity,” and is distinguished from any political community by that universality as well as its non-coercive focus on inner states (165-66). It is vital that moral religion and ethical community concern all of humankind—they are not culture or tradition specific. Wood explicates how the ethical community, as rational and universal, is “an ideal in the sense that no existing community ever fully lives up to it” (167). The ideal ethical community is also called the church invisible, because it concerns internal ethical matters, but it does not correspond to existing, visible churches. As noted, Kant describes the “ethical community” as “the church invisible (the mere idea of the union of all upright human beings under direct yet moral divine world-governance, as serves for the archetype [*zum Urbilde*] of any such governance to be founded by human beings” (R 6:101). Wood notes that the four features of the church invisible are given under “the four headings of the table of categories” (168, citing R 6:101-102). It could also be noted that *the moral law* grounds the four basic characteristics of the church invisible: *universality*, *purity*, *freedom*, and “the *unchangeableness* of its *constitution*” following “secure principles *a priori*.” The moral law is defined as *universal* at G 4:402, 4:421, 4:431, 4:436, as *pure*, i.e., strictly *a priori*, at G, 4:405, 4:410, 4:411, 4:426; as establishing human relations under the principle of *freedom* at 4:433ff., 4:438; its *unchanging nature*, i.e., resistance to exceptions and historical contingencies, is stated at 4:424.¹²

One of Wood's strongest contributions is explicating the active interface of the ideal with existing communities: “In order effectively to combat evil, the ethical community must exist here on earth, as a human institution” (168). Because of the need to

¹² See DiCenso (2019) for further discussion.

work with existing historical structures, “Kant cannot be understood as rejecting revealed (Christian) religion ... as the outer circle of religion” (170). At the same time, this does not mean Kant accepts revealed traditions on heteronomous terms. Moral religion “consists solely in the performance of our ethical duties, symbolically presented in religious terms” (170). Because of this tension between existing churches and the moral ideal, Wood argues, “religion must be subjected to a historical dynamic, through which the two contrasting thoughts can be brought together” (171). Noting the patterns of priestcraft and domination in historical traditions, including Christianity, Wood observes how human institutions can be “far removed from, even in certain ways directly opposed to, the rational aims that human beings must realize through them” (171). At the same time, Wood emphasizes “that an ethical community is possible only through the historical progress of existing churches” (172). While this is true, the question remains: what *drives* this progress toward universal moral principles, which does not occur without the intervention of rational agents? We are returned to the need for an enlightened, ethical interpretation of existing institutions, accompanied by freedom of speech in the public sphere, so that the heteronomous and contra-rational elements of religions are reformed into vehicles of moral autonomy. Wood also makes this point, noting the problems of idolatry and literalism; avoiding these involves “accepting the responsibility to interpret religious symbols” (173n, R 6:199).

Wood notes significant parallels in Kant’s approaches to religious and political transformation: “politics should begin with an imperfect or even despotic state and seek to bring it closer to a true condition of right” (182). One might exchange “should” for “must,” since all existing states are imperfect. Nevertheless, the point is important; Kant is not a naïve utopian who thinks we can disregard existing political or ecclesiastical institutions and replace them with purely rational ones. This is a recipe for chaos or, as Kant puts it, “anarchy” (TP 8:302 including Kant’s footnote). Kant prioritizes an “evolutionary” over a “revolutionary” model of progress (SF 7:87-88). Concerning religious reform, Kant likewise emphasizes how “equality springs from true freedom, yet without anarchy, for each indeed obeys the law (not the statutory one),” and how “the basis for the transition to a new order of things must lie in the principle of the pure religion of reason... inasmuch as it is to be a human work, through gradual reform” (Wood 182-83, citing R 6:121-22). The

use of the term “statutory” to describe both political and religious codes indicates that, in each case, historically formed institutions are gauged in relation to ideas of reason. However, since ideal models cannot be imposed on reality, there must occur a gradual interaction between ideal and real, to which each contributes. In the final chapter, Wood reiterates that “Kant’s project must be to advocate gradual reform of these [religious] practices from within” (187). As he further explains, “If pure rational religion is simply the telos of a process of religious reform that Kant hopes will take place in ecclesiastical faiths, then we cannot know what pure rational religion truly is until that process of reform has taken place” (187). This is a crucial point, i.e., that any ideal must be applied through the judgment and action of rational beings living under existing societal and political conditions; depending on the particulars of those conditions, the outcomes will vary. This is also why Kant emphasises approximation to the ideal rather than completion, and why, as Wood also notes, the application of the ideal to ecclesiastical faiths includes all historical religions (188)—hence there will be different versions of the “rational religion” should it ever come into being.

However, Wood ends chapter 7 on a melancholy note, lamenting that Kant’s “hopes for religion have not been borne out.” More pointedly: “Ecclesiastical religion fails in its religious vocation when it becomes an enemy of enlightenment, when it defends traditional, backward ways of thinking rather than leading the way to enlightened social reform” (184). Likewise, in his conclusion, Wood observes: “If Kant errs at this point, it is in his overestimation of the capacity of religious thought and institutions to develop and reform” (211). In fact, because of its heteronomous systems of thinking and authority, statutory faith can become a “fetter” blocking progress in autonomy and enlightenment (Wood 214, citing R 6:121). The question of over-riding criteria is essential: for ethical reform to occur, the principles governing moral religion, the moral law and its correlate autonomy, must have primacy over heteronomous mores. This is where Kant poses a challenge to traditional patterns of religious thinking and is one reason why Kant’s hope for an enlightening of ecclesiastical institutions has gone largely unfulfilled. Wood advances the process of religious enlightenment in several respects with his clear treatments of symbolic interpretation in the service of practical reason. However, his position sometimes becomes weakened or muddled in his efforts to emphasize the

harmony of rational faith and historical, especially Christian institutions, thereby downplaying Kant's cosmopolitan project grounded in practical reason.

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