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## Immanuel Kant and Christian Theology

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## Immanuel Kant and Christian Theology

### Abstract

Abstract TBA

### Keywords

Kant, Religion, Theodicy, Deism, German Pietism

### Cover Page Footnote

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## Immanuel Kant and Christian Theology

Two hundred thirty-one years ago, Immanuel Kant wrote *Religion Within the Limits of Reason Alone*,<sup>1</sup> where he explored the relationship of human reason to the Christian faith. The book was rejected by the religious scholastic community in Königsberg, East Prussia, his hometown, including the University of Königsberg, the university where he taught. King Friedrich Wilhelm II declared Kant's book to be especially pernicious and forbade all professors to lecture on the book.<sup>2</sup>

"Your books are contraband there [Germany] as in Austria," wrote Conrad Stang to Kant, "but especially your work on religion. Alas, why must truth have to battle against so many enemies before its voice is half heard!" He added: "Its fortunes are somewhat better among the women. You can't guess how enthusiastically young ladies and women are taken with your system and how eager they all are to learn about it."<sup>3</sup> A few years later, the contraband was lifted.

This paper is a primer on that book. The case will be made that in *Religion* Kant did something new: he evaluated the Christian faith with insights and beliefs not found in his earlier books.<sup>4</sup>

## Kant, the Man

Immanuel Kant was the fourth of nine children. He was born in 1724 in the city of Königsberg, East Prussia—known today as Kaliningrad, a Baltic city

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<sup>1</sup> Immanuel Kant, *Religion Within the Limits of Reason Alone*, transl. Theodore M. Greene and Hoyt H. Hudson (New York: Harper & Row, 1960). Hereafter in this paper, the book's title will be shortened to *Religion*.

<sup>2</sup> In a letter to his friend Carl Friedrich Staudlin, written shortly after the publication of *Religion*, he summarized the book by saying: "I have proceeded conscientiously and with genuine respect for the Christian religion but also with a befitting candor, concealing nothing but rather presenting openly the way in which I believe that a possible union of Christianity with the purest practical reason is possible" (Kant, *Correspondence*, transl. and edited by Arnulf Zweig, May 4, 1793 [New York: Cambridge University Press, 1999], 458).

<sup>3</sup> *Correspondence*, "From Conrad Stang," October 2, 1796.

<sup>4</sup> It falls in line with a new cadre of scholars, small as it is, that is seeking to rethink the book's central message. This cadre of scholars is not homogenous. Chris Firestone and Nathan Jacobs, who co-authored *In Defense of Kant's Religion*, presented a theology in keeping with the conservative Christian faith of the eighteenth century. I disagree with them since he strayed from classic Christian conservatism in the way in which he addressed the theodicy question. Phillip Rossi, from whom I studied Kant while at Marquette University, was open to the possibility of Kant being a genuine believer in Christ yet held some reservations. I also found John R. Silber and Theodore M. Greene to provide insights that piqued the direction that I took in his paper. Leslie Stevenson also offered insights that suggested a Kantian theology similar to that which I presented in this paper. Though I drew on insights from these above-mentioned scholars in the formation of this paper, with Firestone and Jacobs closest to my own, the general thesis of this paper is my own.

and Russian exclave located between Lithuania and Poland. In the early eighteenth century, Königsberg was one of the two major centers of German Pietism, the other being Halle, Germany. He recalled his parents as admirable Christians, having conducted themselves “in an honorable and dignified manner...incapable of being provoked to anger and hostility.”<sup>5</sup> He added:

I can take pride only in that both my parents, in exemplary uprightness, ethical propriety, and order, without leaving a fortune (but also no debts), gave me an education which, looked at from the moral standpoint, could not be any better, and for which, every time I remember it, I find myself stirred with the most grateful feelings.<sup>6</sup>

Recalling his walks with his mother in the outdoors, Kant said:

My mother was a loving, soulful, pious, righteous, and tender woman who guided her children in the fear of God through her pious teachings and virtuous example. She often took me outside the city, drew my attention to the works of God, spoke with a pious delight of his omnipotence, wisdom, and goodness, and impressed upon my heart a deep reverence for the creator of all things. I will never forget my mother, for she planted and nourished in me the first seed of goodness, she opened my heart to the impressions of nature, she aroused and enlarged my thoughts, and her teachings have had a lasting wholesome influence on my life.<sup>7</sup>

On the day of his father's death, when Kant was twenty-one years of age, he noted in the family register book: “Anno 1746, on March 24, in the afternoon, at four-thirty, my beloved father was called away by a holy death. God, who in this life did not grant him the enjoyment of happiness, allows him, therefore, to partake of eternal happiness.”<sup>8</sup>

When Kant entered adulthood, however, this pious upbringing was displaced by a stoic cerebralism that resulted in his distancing himself from poetry,

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<sup>5</sup> F. T. Rink, *Ansichten aus Immanuel Kant's Leben* (Königsberg, 1805), 14; my translation.

<sup>6</sup> Emil Arnoldt, *Kants Jugend und die fünf ersten Jahre seiner Privatdozentur im Umriss dargestellt* (Königsberg, 1882), in E. Arnoldt, *Gesammelte Schriften*, ed. O. Schöndorffer (Berlin, 1908), 110; my translation.

<sup>7</sup> Reinhold Bernhard Jachmann, *Immanuel Kant. Geschildert in Briefen an einen Freund* (Königsberg: F. Nicolovius, 1804), 9th letter, 99; my translation.

<sup>8</sup> Arnoldt., 107, 109; my translation.

music, the reading of novels, his siblings, and church attendance. In his later life, his friends described him as profoundly unhappy.<sup>9</sup>

Though raised in the culture of German Pietism, Kant's interest was philosophy. He was most influenced by rationalistic philosophy with a special interest in the writings of Isaac Newton, Gottfried Leibniz, David Hume, and Jean-Jacques Rousseau. Curiously, all four philosophized from different perspectives and arrived at different conclusions. Kant's published books were received poorly in the literary world, due to their extreme tediousness. Then, in 1781, at the age of fifty-seven, he wrote *Critique of Pure Reason*. This book was followed by three other books: *The Groundwork for the Metaphysics of Morals* (1785), the *Critique of Practical Reason* (1788), and the *Critique of Judgment*. (1790). Despite their tediousness, all four were deemed masterpieces. In them, he took Enlightenment thought to a new level. Also, as was typical of the Enlightenment oeuvre, he disallowed God any meaningful place in the conversation. "He was accused far and wide," wrote Theodore M. Greene, "of undermining religious belief."<sup>10</sup>

Then, at the age of seventy, Kant wrote *Religion Within the Limits of Reason Alone* (1793), a book where he reinserted God back into the Enlightenment oeuvre. It was done in a manner that was meaningful and cogent. Still, given his anti-Christian reputation, *Religion* created a stir among the theologians in Königsberg. It was received with jaded eyes and quickly censored and condemned.<sup>11</sup>

### Kant's Letters

#### Letter to Carl Friedrich Stäudlin (May 4, 1793)

In a letter to his friend Carl Friedrich Stäudlin, dated May 4, 1793, the year the first edition of *Religion* was published, Kant explained the purpose of *Religion*:

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<sup>9</sup> See Ben-Ami Scharfstein, *The Philosophers: Their Lives and the Nature of their Thoughts* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1980), 212-230.

<sup>10</sup> Theodore M. Greene, Introduction, *Religion Within the Limits of Reason Alone*, transl. Theodore M. Greene and Hoyt H. Hudson (New York: Harper & Row, 1960), xviii.

<sup>11</sup> A good example of this is the letter written by King Friedrich Wilhelm II to Kant: In it, he said: "Our most high person [speaking of himself] observed with great displeasure how you misuse your philosophy to distort and disparage many of the cardinal and foundational teachings of the Holy Scriptures and of Christianity... We expect better of you since you yourself must see how irresponsibly you have acted against your duty as a teacher of youth and against our sovereign purposes" (Kant, "Letter from Friedrich Wilhelm II," (Kant, *Correspondence*, October 1, 1794).

With the enclosed work, *Religion within the Limits [of Reason Alone]*, I have tried to complete the third part of my plan. In this book I have proceeded conscientiously and with genuine respect for the Christian religion but also with a befitting candor, concealing nothing but rather presenting openly the way in which I believe that a possible union of Christianity with the purest practical reason is possible.<sup>12</sup>

Here he explained that it was his purpose with this book to openly present “a possible union of Christianity with the purest practical reason.”<sup>13</sup>

In the Second Preface to the *Critique of Pure Reason*, written six years before *Religion*, Kant had already hinted at what this union would be: “I have therefore found it necessary to deny *knowledge*, in order to make room for *faith*.”<sup>14</sup> For without faith, he added, pure reason is rendered impossible, since it lacks transcendent insight.<sup>15</sup>

In short, *Religion* is an unpacking of the implications of denying knowledge so that room would be made for faith. As Kant put it: “Morality thus leads ineluctably to religion, through which it extends itself to the idea of a powerful moral Lawgiver, outside of mankind, for Whose will that is the final end (of creation) which at the same time can and ought to be man’s final end.”<sup>16</sup>

In *Religion* Kant unpacked who this powerful moral Lawgiver was: the Son of God who came “from heaven to earth...served as the archetype of pure righteousness embodied in human flesh...and [with] his sufferings...saved mankind “from everlasting perdition.”<sup>17</sup>

#### Letter to King Friedrich Wilhelm II (October 12, 1794)

In a letter to the king of East Prussia, Friedrich Wilhelm II, who had harshly reprimanded him in a letter dated October 1, 1794, Kant offered a reply. He noted that *Religion* aimed to speak to the nature of true religion, and how it is related to revealed religion. It was written as a scholarly discussion “for specialists in theology and philosophy, in order to determine how religion may be

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<sup>12</sup> Kant *Correspondence*, May 4, 1793.

<sup>13</sup> Ibid.

<sup>14</sup> Immanuel Kant, *Critique of Pure Reason*, transl. Norman Kemp Smith (New York: Macmillan Company, 1934), 29; italics in the original.

<sup>15</sup> Ibid.

<sup>16</sup> *Religion*, 5, 6.

<sup>17</sup> Ibid., 57, 58; cf. 69, 71, 108, 109, 134. Bernard M. G. Reardon makes the case that Kant “insists that the only way for man to please God and gain salvation is through a practical faith in the incarnate Son of God; a faith that is, whereby he makes his own the disposition of which the incarnate is the ideal exemplar” (*Kant as Philosophical Theologian* [Totowa, N.J.: Barnes and Noble, 1988], 112).

inculcated most clearly and forcefully into the hearts of men.”<sup>18</sup> He was therefore “not guilty of disparaging Christianity in that book since it contains no assessment of any actual revealed religion.”<sup>19</sup> He added, however, that Christianity had entered the “dark ages of clericalism”—likely referring to medieval Christendom and his troubling concerns for an ungodly clericalism that he believed existed in his day—and had only recently been “recovered in its purity.”<sup>20</sup> Kant concluded the letter by noting:

My conscience is clear: I have never let the Divine Judge out of my sight, in writing my works on religion, and I have tried voluntarily to withdraw not only every error that might destroy a soul but even every possibly offensive expression. I have done this especially because, in my 71<sup>st</sup> year, the thought necessarily arises that I may soon have to give an accounting of myself before a judge of the world who knows men’s hearts. Therefore I have no misgivings in offering this vindication now to the highest authority in our land, with full conscientiousness, as my unchangeable, candid confession...I am not to be guilty of such distortion and depreciation of Christianity (as has been claimed).<sup>21</sup>

### **The Preface to the Second Edition of *Religion***

In the Preface to the Second Edition of *Religion*, written in 1794, Kant provided his most comprehensive interpretation of the book. He wrote:

Since, after all, *revelation* can certainly embrace the pure rational religion, while conversely, the second cannot include what is historical in the first, I shall be able [experimentally] to regard the first as the *wider* sphere of faith,

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<sup>18</sup> Kant, *Correspondence*, October 12, 1794. In *Religion*, Kant observed true religion required three dimensions: revealed faith (*fides statutaria*), rational faith (*fides elicitata*), and commanded faith (*fides imperata*). Combined they yield that which he called “faith *par excellence* (*fides sacra*).”

<sup>19</sup> Ibid. This statement was a stretch of the truth since *Religion* repeatedly spoke of the Christian faith, as will be seen in this paper. Due to the letter Kant just received from the king (Oct. 1, 1794), where he was accused of distorting and disparaging cardinal doctrines of the Christian faith, in this reply he likely attempted to distance himself from any such criticism by distancing himself from the Christian faith.

<sup>20</sup> Ibid. In *Religion*, he noted: “This moral disposition which in all its purity (like unto the purity of the Son of God” who “bears as a vicarious substitute the guilt of sin for him [the sinner], and indeed for all who believe (practically) in Him” (p. 69; brackets in the original).

<sup>21</sup> Ibid.

which includes within itself the second, as a *narrower* one (not like two circles external to one another, but like concentric circles).<sup>22</sup>

Kant understood true religion as possessing two circles: the first he called divine revelation and the second he called rational religion (see Figure 1). Of the two, divine revelation was dominant, which he called “the *wider* sphere of faith.”<sup>23</sup> The other, that being rational religion, was the narrower sphere. Moreover, the two exist in a concentric relationship, meaning that (a) parts of divine revelation exist outside the parameters of rational analysis, (b) divine revelation informs rational religion with needed information, and (c) divine revelation and rational religion do not exist side by side and thereby function independently of one other. An example of such truths that reside outside the parameters of rational religion, yet part of divine revelation, would be the doctrine of the Trinity. He explained:

If this very faith (in a tri-unity) were to be regarded not merely as a representation of a practical idea but as a faith which is to describe what God is in Himself, it would be a mystery transcending all human concepts, and hence a mystery of revelation, unsuited to man’s powers of comprehension; in this account, therefore, we can declare it to be such.<sup>24</sup>

In addition to the doctrine of the Trinity, Kant spoke of three mysteries: (a) the mystery of the divine call, (b) the mystery of atonement, and (c) the mystery of election. Each in turn, he describes as “absolutely incomprehensible to our reason,” “an unfathomable mystery,” and “an absolute mystery.”<sup>25</sup> For human reason to grasp these teachings, divine revelation must inform the human mind (see Figure 1).

The concept presented in this diagram is therefore a pure practical reason that must be postulated as true. One cannot incrementally reason his or her way to it via pure reason. The concept affirmed in this diagram is, rather, a question of faith.

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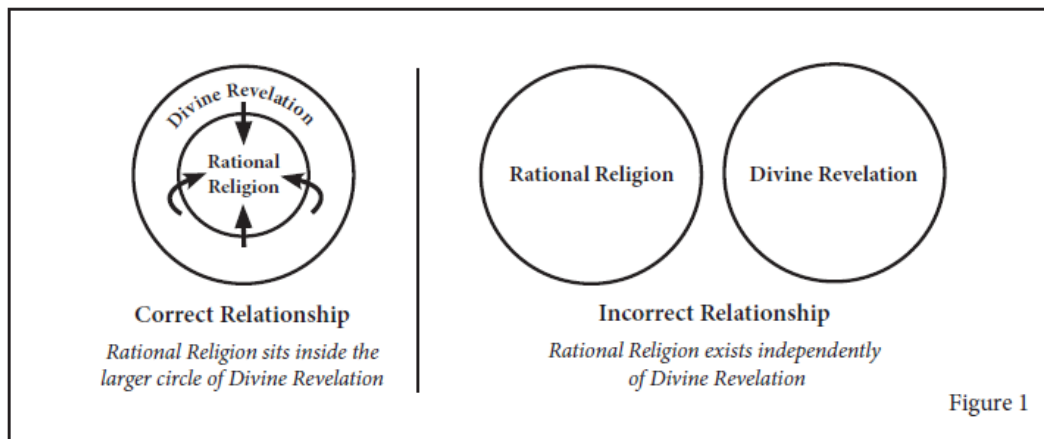
<sup>22</sup> *Religion*, 11, italics in the original. The term “experimentally,” presented in brackets, is also part of the English translation.

<sup>23</sup> *Ibid.*, italics in the original. Also see “Preface to the Second Edition,” in *Critique of Pure Reason* (transl. Norman Kemp Smith (New York: St. Martin’s Press, 1965), where Kant wrote: “I have therefore found it necessary to deny *knowledge*, in order to make room for *faith*” (p. 29, italics in the original). Without faith, he added, pure reason is rendered impossible, and along with it morality, since it lacks transcendent insight. In this respect, metaphysics precedes physics.

<sup>24</sup> *Ibid.*, 133, cf. 138.

<sup>25</sup> *Ibid.*, 133, 134.





### The Gospel

We will now look specifically at the gospel of Jesus Christ, as presented in *Religion*. Kant presented the Christian faith in *Religion* in terms of divine revelation—specifically, the Christian Bible.<sup>26</sup> It not only surpasses all other religions in degree, implying something akin to a Schleiermachean scale of degrees where all religions are efficacious, some more than others, but in kind, implying uniqueness.<sup>27</sup> The primary source of this presentation comes from the Christian

<sup>26</sup> In a curious anecdote from Kant's earlier days as a university student, Theodore M. Greene comments on Kant's genuine grasp of the Christian gospel, so much so that one of his professors recommended that he pursue a life as a minister of the gospel: "It was not until late in his university course that he actually attended lectures in theology. Then, partly from a desire to extend his general knowledge, and partly from the felt need to master the principles of theology as related to philosophical studies, he attended Schultz's lectures in Dogmatics. He may also have wished to convince his old pastor that he had not grown out of sympathy with the central tenets of the Christian faith. These lectures, we are told, he thoroughly enjoyed; and his work for the course must have been satisfactory, for at the end of it Schultz called in Kant, together with two other students, and offered to secure them good openings and speedy preferment if they cared to enter the ministry" (Ibid., xxix, xxx). Johann Schultz remained a loyal friend of Kant from that time onward, evidenced in the many letters sent back and forth between the two, as chronicled in Kant's *Correspondence*.

<sup>27</sup> In contrast, Kant devalued the three other major world religions: Judaism, Islam, and Hinduism, characterizing them with misanthropy (Judaism), arrogant pride (Islam), and pusillanimity (Hinduism). (*Religion* 172n). Christianity, on the other hand, is predicated upon true *piety* which, said Kant, "is meant the principle of a passive attitude toward a godliness which is to be awaited from a power above (*Religion*, 173n; italics in the original).

Judaism, Islam and Hinduism are mentioned again in *Religion* where their value is "not according to a particular covenant (i.e., not Messianic) but *moral* (knowable through unassisted reason" (*Religion* 127n; italics in the original). More will be said of this later in this paper in our discussion of universal world-religions. Judaism receives one more mention where its

Bible. In what follows, the gospel, as understood by Kant, will be summarized in six points.

1. *Son of God*. The Son of God is both the archetype of perfect humanity who came to the earth embodied in human flesh, and divine from all eternity past—making him the God-man.
2. *Original sin*. The propensity to sin is universal within the human race and has its origin in Adam's fall into sin.
3. *Atonement*. The Son of God became a vicarious substitute through his suffering and death whereby he made possible a living hope in the afterlife for all who believe.
4. *Gospel*. Salvation comes by faith alone apart from the rigors of a moral life, yet results in the believer experiencing a mystical or magical transformation of life that is both moral and incomprehensible to rational man requiring a *salto mortale* (leap of death) to all human reason.
5. *Holy Spirit*. The Holy Spirit is the enabler of this mystical or magical transformation of life by energizing believers to love God and His holy law.
6. *Nature of faith*. The nature of faith is threefold: it is a revealed faith, a rational faith, and a commanded faith.

### 1. Son of God

Early in *Religion* (Book II), Kant defined Jesus Christ as the Son of God who came “from heaven to earth and had given men in his own person, through his teachings, his conduct, and his sufferings, as perfect an example of a man well-pleasing to God” and thereby serves as the archetype of pure righteousness embodied in human flesh, “supernaturally begotten” by “a virgin mother.”<sup>28</sup> In addition, he bears the divine nature, or as Kant put it, he is the “divine person...in actual possession of this eminence and this bliss from all eternity”<sup>29</sup> with the intent to save mankind “from everlasting perdition.”<sup>30</sup> Following his Passion, he then returned to heaven, whence he came. He left behind him, by word of mouth, his last will (as in a testament); and, trusting in the power of the memory of his merit,

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interpretation of Jewish scripture works counter to a genuine moral piety (*Religion*, 101, 117, 118).

<sup>28</sup> Ibid., 74n, 75n; cf. Matt 1:23; Lk 1:35. He admitted that this “is hard to explain, yet which cannot be disowned.”

<sup>29</sup> *Religion*, 57, 58. Kant adds: “The Scriptures...ascribe to Him the very highest sacrifice which a loving being can make, a sacrifice performed in order than even those who are unworthy may be made happy (‘For God so loved the world...’); though we cannot indeed rationally conceive how an all-sufficient Being could sacrifice a part of what belongs to His state of bliss or rob Himself of a possession” (Ibid., 58n).

<sup>30</sup> Cf., Matt 25:46; 2 Thess 1:9.

teaching, and example, he was able to say that “he (the ideal of humanity well-pleasing to God) would still be with his disciples, even to the end of the world.”...Hence, in a holy book miracles and mysteries find a place; the manner of making these known, in turn, is also miraculous, and demands a faith in history; which, finally can be authenticated, and assured as to meaning and import, only by scholarship.<sup>31</sup>

In so many words, Kant defined Jesus Christ as the God-man: (a) he is the archetype of the person man, and (b) he is the divine person who existed in bliss throughout all eternity.<sup>32</sup> Moreover, since he is the God-man, he can (c) save mankind from everlasting perdition. Though Kant did not reference the Chalcedonian Creed in this description of the Son of God, that which he articulated is, an approximation of that creed.<sup>33</sup> Because of this dual nature, that which he accomplished through his sufferings and death would bequeath the true believer with a righteousness “not his own, whereby he is reconciled with God.”<sup>34</sup> yet fully appropriated to them.

Moreover, in association with this appropriated righteousness, the true believer is adopted into the family of God. The way Kant expressed it: “He is the brightness of His glory. In him God loved the world, and only in him and through *the adoption of his disposition* can we hope to become the sons of God.”<sup>35</sup> In this statement from Kant, the archetype that Jesus possesses and actualizes is “the ideal disposition that we lack. By adopting this disposition, or nature, in the most literal sense—we too can hope to become pleasing to God.”<sup>36</sup>

<sup>31</sup> Ibid, 120; the enclosed quote comes from Matt 28:20; cf. Acts 1:1-9.

<sup>32</sup> Kant readily acknowledges that “it is indeed a limitation of human reason, and one which is ever inseparable from it, that we can conceive of no considerable moral worth in the actions of a personal being without representing that person, or his manifestation, in human guise. This is not to assert that such worth is in itself (*κατ’ ἀληθειαν*) so conditioned, but merely that we must always resort to some analogy to natural existences to render supersensible qualities intelligible to ourselves” (Ibid., 58n).

<sup>33</sup> Firestone and Jacobs write: “For Kant, the prototype is divine in the sense that he exists within God from all eternity; he proceeds (eternally) from the being of God and is not a created thing, and as such, he is rightly called the Son of God...The prototype is an ideal human within God from all eternity. Thus, there is a sense in which the prototype bears a divine nature; he is unique, representing the most perfect human being that is implicit in or eternally proceeds from God’s own being” (*In Defense of Kant’s Religion*, 163). This, of course, rules out the notion that Kant embraced Arianism—that is, Jesus was a created being and therefore not divine “from all eternity.”

<sup>34</sup> Ibid., 108; cf. Rom. 10:3; Phil. 3:9. Kant expressed it: “To be sure, such an attainment will ever remain a righteousness not our own...Yet an appropriation of this righteousness for the sake of our own must be possible when our own disposition is made at one with that of the archetype [the God-man, Jesus Christ]” (Ibid, 59, 60).

<sup>35</sup> Ibid., 54, italics added. Scripture passages in these two sentences come from Heb 1:3; Jn 3:16; and Jn 1:12.

<sup>36</sup> Firestone and Jacobs, *In Defense of Kant’s Religion*, 164.

## 2. Original Sin

Throughout *Religion*, Kant is quite serious that all of humanity is a moral species and thus has a moral nature, where good and evil is freely chosen. That said, Kant also affirmed that, in a very real sense, “‘in Adam we have all sinned’ and still sin.”<sup>37</sup> Kant then goes on to say that this fall into sin (Gen 3:6) results “‘from an already innate wickedness in our nature.’”<sup>38</sup> For Kant, then, mankind’s sin nature (a) has its origin in Adam’s fall into sin, and (b) is evidenced on a practical level due to its universality throughout mankind since “it is clear that we daily act in the same way”<sup>39</sup> as Adam.

Kant calls this a “propensity to evil” which possesses “no conceivable ground from which the moral evil in us could originally have come. This inconceivability, together with a more accurate specification of the wickedness of our race, the Bible expresses in the historical narrative.”<sup>40</sup> Original sin is therefore to be believed on the merits of the Bible alone since human reason, independent of divine revelation, could never have conceived of it.

## 3. Atonement

As observed in the previous section, radical evil exists in human nature. The dilemma that it poses for mankind is the debt of sin. Since radical evil resides within human nature itself, it “brings with it endless violations of the law and so *infinite* guilt...It would seem to follow, then, that because of this infinite guilt, all mankind must look forward to *endless punishment* and exclusion from the kingdom of God.”<sup>41</sup>

How, then, can one’s guilt for prior wrongdoing be “undone” and “wiped out”<sup>42</sup>? Kant was convinced that it is beyond human capacity for a person to wipe

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<sup>37</sup> *Religion*, 37. The biblical citation comes from Rom 5:12. The added phrase, “and still sin” Kant draws from the entirety of the epistle to the Romans.

<sup>38</sup> *Ibid.*, 38.

<sup>39</sup> *Ibid.*, 37. Later in *Religion*, Kant again referenced Adam’s fall into sin and its implications for all of humanity: “A kingdom of evil was thus set up in defiance of the good principle, a kingdom to which all men, descended (in natural wise) from Adam, became subject” (*Ibid.*, 74). In this same section in *Religion*, Kant argued that the Son of God was not subject to Adam’s fall into sin since he was not of the seed of Adam, having been born of a virgin. (*Ibid.*, 75n).

<sup>40</sup> *Ibid.*, 38, 39; that historical narrative, said Kant, is located in Genesis 2-3. Kant also referenced Romans 5:12 where the Apostle Paul gave his interpretation of the Genesis passage; cf. Firestone and Jacobs, *In Defense of Kant’s Religion*, 148, 149.

<sup>41</sup> *Religion*, 66; italics in the original.

<sup>42</sup> *Ibid.*, 172.

out his or her sin.<sup>43</sup> Kant then asked, must a person “look forward to *endless punishment* and exclusion from the kingdom of God?”<sup>44</sup>

No, said Kant. The answer is the Son of God who “bears as *vicarious substitute* the guilt of sin for him [the sinner], and indeed for all who believe (practically) in Him; as savior He renders satisfaction to supreme justice by His sufferings and death;<sup>45</sup> and as *advocate* He makes it possible for men to hope to appear before their judge as justified.”<sup>46</sup> The sinner “will be saved by virtue of that faith alone”<sup>47</sup> All that is required of the sinner is to believe “practically in Him”<sup>48</sup>—that is, from the heart. It is a faith that includes a corresponding change in the practice of one’s life. It is in this respect that the believer is granted the “hope of the absolution from his guilt.”<sup>49</sup>

The deist, of course, will vehemently object to such a reading of *Religion*. Stephen R. Palmquist, for example, writes: “As a philosophical theologian, Kant cannot appeal to the atonement of Jesus, since it can be known only through revelation,” which, added Palmquist, stands opposed to the entirety of the Kantian literary corpus. In its place, the atonement must be understood symbolically. Each person must “symbolically go to the cross and (though now morally good due to the change in disposition) suffer a punishment on behalf of the old man.”<sup>50</sup>

The problem with Palmquist’s interpretation, however, is that it runs headlong into the very questions Kant was attempting to answer on page 107 of *Religion*. “The section in which Kant’s presentation of atonement appears begins by noting that (1) not accruing new moral debts is not equivalent to paying off old ones, and (2) we cannot produce a surplus of righteousness over and above what duty requires of us.”<sup>51</sup> The sinner is therefore incapable of paying the debt of sin himself or herself by means of a morally upright life.

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<sup>43</sup> Ibid., 66.

<sup>44</sup> Ibid., italics in the original; cf. Matt. 25:46; Rev. 20:10.

<sup>45</sup> Curiously, though Kant referenced the sufferings and death of the Son of God in *Religion*, he never referenced the blood shed by the Son of God for the sins of the world.

<sup>46</sup> Ibid., 69; italics in the original.

<sup>47</sup> Ibid., 110.

<sup>48</sup> Ibid., 69. Being saved practically in Christ has two parts: (a) a forensic declaration of justification, and (b) a resultant changed life. Without the changed life the forensic justification is called into question—that which he calls “a *drudging* and mercenary faith” (Ibid., 106; italics in the original).

<sup>49</sup> Ibid., 70; cf. Rom 3:25, 26; 1 Pet 2:24; 3:18; 1 Jn 2:1, 2. The term Kant used here for absolution (*Lossprechung*) was the common German term used for the full payment for a transgression in both religious and civil contexts. Martin Luther also spoke of absolution in the *Smaller Catechism* (§§18-19) although the German term he used was *Sühn*, which according to German dictionaries is interchangeable with *Lossprechung*.

<sup>50</sup> Stephen R. Palmquist, *Kant’s Critical Religion* (Ashgate: Aldershot, 2000), 460, 461.

<sup>51</sup> Firestone and Jacobs, *In Defense of Kant’s Religion*, 178.

#### 4. Gospel

The gospel proper found in *Religion* is quite in keeping with the German Pietism of seventeenth-century Europe. According to Kant, it is not enough that Jesus serves humanity as the vicarious substitute for sin. The individual must embrace this divine grace if he or she is to benefit from it. He summarized the gospel in two long sentences, both pregnant with meaning.

First, a person is saved by trusting in the divine satisfaction rendered at the cross of Jesus Christ by faith alone. Here is the way Kant phrased it:

We must believe that there was once a man (of whom reason tells us nothing) whom through his holiness and merit rendered satisfaction both for himself (with reference to his duty) and for all others (with their shortcomings in the light of their duty), if we are to hope that we ourselves, though in a good course of life, will be saved by virtue of that faith alone.<sup>52</sup>

Second, this faith is a gift of God. It therefore comes to the individual independent of rational analysis. Kant therefore calls it the *salto mortale* (leap of death) of human reason, or what Søren Kierkegaard would later call the leap of faith. In Kant's words,

yet were this faith to be portrayed as having so peculiar a power and so mystical (or magical) an influence, that although merely historical, so far as we can see, it is yet competent to better the whole man from the ground up (to make a new man of him) if he yields himself to it and to the feelings bound up with it, such a faith would have to be regarded as imparted and inspired directly by heaven (together with, and in, the historical faith), and everything connected even with the moral constitution of man would resolve itself into an unconditional decree of God: "He hath mercy on whom he will, and whom he will he hardeneth," which, taken according to the letter, is the *salto mortale* [leap of death] of human reason.<sup>53</sup>

Hence, this true gospel is characterized by: (a) belief in a man (*sola Christi*) who rendered satisfaction for all the shortcomings of those who believe, (b) salvation by faith alone (*sola fide*), (c) an incomprehensible power that begins the transformation of the believer into a new man and given to those specifically chosen by an unconditional decree of God (*sola gratia*), and (d) a historical faith imparted and inspired directly by heaven (*sola scriptura*). All this is the *salto*

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<sup>52</sup> *Religion*, 110.

<sup>53</sup> *Ibid.*, 111.

*mortale* (leap of death) of human reason. Hence, all four *solas* fit neatly in classic Reformation theology.

Sandwiched in between these two long sentences, Kant added three additional sentences, introduced by the phrase: “This proposition [the gospel] says something very different from the following.”<sup>54</sup> These sentences are three false gospels.

The first false gospel comes from an individual striving with all his or her strength to do the will of God and overcome whatever deficiencies he or she may have. In the words of Kant,

with all our strength we must strive after the holy disposition of a course of life well-pleasing to God, to be able to believe that the love (already assured us through reason) of God toward man, so far as man does endeavor with all his strength to do the will of God, will make good, in consideration of an upright disposition, the deficiency of the deed, whatever this deficiency may be.<sup>55</sup>

The second false gospel comes from a ritualistic expiation from a religious priest where he or she is declared absolved from sin. Kant likely had in mind here the *ex opere operato* common in Roman Catholicism.

All religions have involved expiation, on whatever basis they put it, and the moral predisposition in each individual has not failed, on its side, to let its claims be heard. Yet at all times the priests have complained more than the moralists: the former (with summons to the authorities to check the mischief) protesting loudly against the neglect of divine worship, which was instituted to reconcile the people with heaven and to ward off misfortune from the state; the later complaining, on the other hand, about the decline of morals, a decline which they zealously set to the account of those means of absolution whereby the priests made it easy for anyone to make his peace with the Deity over the grossest vices.<sup>56</sup>

The third false gospel comes from an inexhaustible fund in heaven ready to provide divine payment for sins rendered by an individual. Kant likely had in mind here the treasury of merits that was canonized at the Council of Trent, Session VII, canon vi, viii. This teaching, he said, resulted “in a decline of morals.” The way he phrased it:

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<sup>54</sup> Ibid., 110.

<sup>55</sup> Ibid., 110.

<sup>56</sup> Ibid., 111.

In point of fact, if an inexhaustible fund is already at hand for the payment of debts incurred or still to be incurred, so that man has merely to reach out (and at every claim which conscience makes one would be sure, first of all to reach out) in order to free himself of sin, while he can postpone resolving upon a good course of life until he is first clear of those debts—if this were possible it is not easy to conceive any other consequence of such a faith.<sup>57</sup>

Contained within these three false gospels are: (a) salvation can be attained through the rigors of a moral life—that is, good works, (b) ritual observance of a sacerdotal system for the expiation and absolution of sin, and (c) the existence of a treasury of merits in heaven that a sinner can access via personal payment—e.g., finances or good works—and thereby acquire an indulgence that frees one of sin.

Later in *Religion*, Kant returned to the specifics of the gospel, citing passages from the Sermon on the Mount to make his point that belief in the true gospel is essential since all who fail to embrace it are on a broad road that leads to death (Matt 7:13, 14). The false gospels, then, are an “insidious hope”<sup>58</sup> that leads to destruction. Finally, said Kant, “History testifies that in all forms of religion this conflict between [the] two principles of faith [that is, the gospel] has existed.”<sup>59</sup>

## 5. Holy Spirit

Added to Kant’s understanding of the gospel is the role of the Holy Spirit. He energizes faith in the gospel so that people become characterized by divine love. This love is to be directed to God Himself—that is, to the Father, the Son, and the Holy Ghost.<sup>60</sup> In addition, people are to love His holy law:

This Spirit, in and through which the love of God, as the Author of salvation (really our own responding love proportioned to His), is combined with the fear of God as Lawgiver, i.e., the conditioned with the condition, and which can therefore be represented as “issuing forth from

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<sup>57</sup> Ibid., 111.

<sup>58</sup> Ibid., 148.

<sup>59</sup> Ibid., 111.

<sup>60</sup> *Religion*, 136, 137; cf. 1 Jn 5:7.



both,” not only “leads to all truth” (obedience to duty), but is also the real Judge of men (at the bar of conscience).<sup>61</sup>

Salvation, Kant explained, is rooted in the Holy Spirit who energizes an individual’s faith to embrace Jesus Christ as Savior from sin. He cited John 3:17-18 as validation of this faith, who will judge the quick and dead at the Last Judgment. He also cited 2 Timothy 4:1, where those who possess a practical faith (that is, a living faith evidenced by good works) are separated from those whose faith is a mere formality. Those, Kant said, will be forced to “depart empty-handed,” declared guilty, and face an incalculable eternal misery.<sup>62</sup>

In addition, Kant said that it is the Holy Spirit who bears witness with our spirit that we are children of God.<sup>63</sup> The Holy Spirit is the One who instructs and animates us “with basic principles for action, and wholly subjects whatever Scripture may contain for historical faith to the rules and incentives of pure moral faith, which alone constitutes the element of genuine religion in each ecclesiastical faith.”<sup>64</sup>

Kant cautioned, however, that an individual should not rely strictly upon an internal (mystical) witness of the Holy Spirit, whom he called the Comforter and Paraclete, upon the soul to give validation of true religion since all people are prone to a false sense of confidence. Rather, believers should also look to their “way of life.”<sup>65</sup> Only when both an inner and outer witness affirm a true religion within the soul can one possess confidence concerning the afterlife.<sup>66</sup>

## 6. Nature of Faith

The final question is the nature of faith. Kant defined it in a threefold manner.

First, Christianity is a *rational faith* (*fides historice elicit*).<sup>67</sup> The Christian faith, he said, is “a learned faith,” relying upon history and erudition that constitutes its foundation. One cannot, he said, start with an unconditional belief, that is a fideistic faith—faith grounded in faith—but rather a faith that is grounded in a careful learning of its doctrines and dogmas. The true service of the clergy, he added, is to assist in the teaching of these doctrines and dogmas to an unlearned

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<sup>61</sup> Ibid., 136n; Jn 15:26; 16:13. Kant’s use of the term *Lawgiver* when speaking of God is in keeping with such Reformation scholars as John Calvin who insisted that believers are obliged to live moral lives, which Calvin called the third use of the law (see *Institutes* 2.7.12).

<sup>62</sup> Ibid., 135, 136n; cf. 63.

<sup>63</sup> Ibid., 61, 62.

<sup>64</sup> Ibid., 102, 103.

<sup>65</sup> Ibid., 62, 63n, 65, 71, 72, 107, 108.

<sup>66</sup> Ibid., 65.

<sup>67</sup> Ibid., 152.

laity. This prevents the formation of a blind faith—that is, a faith without investigation as to whether that which is being studied is indeed of divine origin.<sup>68</sup>

Kant cautioned, however, that the clergy should not regard themselves as “the only chosen interpreters of a Holy Scripture.” Such a clergy “costs the church dearly” since “it brings down upon its head the whole of antiquity and buries itself beneath it.”<sup>69</sup> Citing John 5:39, Kant insisted that the believer must therefore become a scriptural scholar, engaged in his or her own investigation and interpretation of Scripture, relying upon the Spirit of God in all such inquiry.<sup>70</sup>

Second, Christianity is a *revealed faith* (*fides statutaria*).<sup>71</sup> This is a faith grounded in “the revealed doctrines of Christianity,” including its “revealed propositions (in themselves hidden from reason).”<sup>72</sup> is faith found within Scripture. Among these revealed doctrines would be the Trinity,<sup>73</sup> the virgin birth,<sup>74</sup> the crucifixion,<sup>75</sup> and the resurrection and ascension.<sup>76</sup>

The historicity of Scripture, which Kant called “ecclesiastical faith,” resides within revealed faith since many of its facts and precepts cannot be verified through rational analysis—such as the virgin birth, crucifixion, resurrection, and ascension of Jesus, alongside other teachings such as the Trinity and the hypostatic union of Christ.<sup>77</sup> Rational and revealed faith fit nicely together, Kant added, “so that he who follows one (under guidance of moral concepts) will not fail to conform to the other. Were this not so, we should have either two religions in one individual, which is absurd, or else one *religion* and one *cult*, in which case...they must need separate from one another, and the purely moral (the religion of reason) be allowed to float on top.”<sup>78</sup>

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<sup>68</sup> Ibid.

<sup>69</sup> Ibid., 153.

<sup>70</sup> Ibid., 103.

<sup>71</sup> Ibid., 151.

<sup>72</sup> Ibid., 152.

<sup>73</sup> Ibid., 100.

<sup>74</sup> Ibid., 74n, 75n. Here Kant wrote: “To conceive the possibility of a person free from the innate propensity to evil by having him born of a virgin mother is an idea of reason accommodating itself to an instinct which is hard to explain, yet which cannot be disowned, and is moral, too” (Ibid., 74n).

<sup>75</sup> Ibid., 69. Kant described the crucifixion of Jesus Christ as “His sufferings and death.”

<sup>76</sup> Ibid., 119n. Here Kant wrote: “With which the public record of his [Christ’s] life ends (a record which, as public, might serve universally as an example for imitation). The more secret records, added as a sequel, of his *resurrection* and *ascension*, which took place before the eyes only of his intimates, cannot be used in the interest of religion within the limits of reason alone without doing violence to their historical valuation.”

<sup>77</sup> Ibid., 94ff.

<sup>78</sup> Preface to the Second Edition, *Religion*, 11-12. Later in *Religion*, Kant wrote: “Only the supposition of a complete change of heart allows us to think of the absolution [of sin], at the bar of heavenly justice, of the man burdened with guilt” (Ibid., 71; cf. 60-61 and 61n).

Third, the Christian faith requires a *commanded faith* (*fides imperata*).<sup>79</sup> It is here where belief is pressed upon the soul to bring about obedience to God. It is wedded to “the very impulse of good actions and to uprightness in the conduct of life, which the man who reads Scripture or hears it expounded must feel cannot but convince him of its divine nature.”<sup>80</sup>

Referring to a passage from the *Critique of Pure Reason*, Leslie Stevenson writes: “Here Kant strikes an existentialist note, giving us a sneak preview of his practical philosophy. It seems that the distinction between moral beliefs and theoretical beliefs about the supersensible is not between different propositions, but different styles of believing the same propositions: firmly believe in a moral way, unstably believe in the doctrinal way.”<sup>81</sup>

Here, then, is that which Kant called “a saving faith.”<sup>82</sup> It is the interplay between rational faith, revealed faith, and commanded faith. “It is no longer called merely the Christian *religion*, but the Christian *faith*.”<sup>83</sup> As such, it stands apart from “a *drudging* and mercenary faith”<sup>84</sup> which, according to Kant, is a false faith since it lacks a transformed moral life in its afterglow.

### Summary of the Gospel Presentation

Kant drew almost exclusively on revelatory sources—that is, the Bible—in his explanation of the gospel. His solution to the “innate wickedness”<sup>85</sup> in mankind, for example, drew from both Old and New Testaments. He added that this gospel stands apart from human reason (e.g., “*salto mortale*.”<sup>86</sup>). It possesses a “peculiar a power and so mystical (or magical) an influence.”<sup>87</sup> Moreover, Kant

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<sup>79</sup> Ibid., 151.

<sup>80</sup> Ibid., 104.

<sup>81</sup> Leslie Stevenson, “Opinion, Belief or Faith, and Knowledge,” *Kantian Review* 7 (2003): 95. The passage cited from *Critique of Pure Reason* comes from A820/B857.

<sup>82</sup> Ibid., 106, 109, 153.

<sup>83</sup> Ibid., 151, italics in the original.

<sup>84</sup> Ibid., 106, italics in the original.

<sup>85</sup> Ibid., 38. Kant drew from Gen. 2:16-17; 3:6 and Rom. 5:12 to make this claim (see *Religion*, 37-38).

<sup>86</sup> Ibid., 111, 58, 111. *Salto mortale*, as already noted in this article, translates: the leap of death—specifically, the leap of death of human reason.

<sup>87</sup> Ibid., 111. Here Kant drew from Rom. 9:18 which speaks of divine election. He wrote: “In all this therefore we must entrust judgment to the All-Seeing; but this is expressed in the text as though His decree, pronounced upon men before they were born, had prescribed to each the role which he was some day to play. *Prevision* regarding the order of appearances is at the same time *predestination* for a World-Creator, when, in this connection, He is conceived of in terms of human senses. But in the supersensible order of things, according to the laws of freedom, where time drops out, it is only an *all-seeing knowledge*; and yet it is impossible to explain why one man

also wrote candidly of the virgin birth, crucifixion, resurrection, and ascension as historical events. Finally, his presentation of the gospel conformed to the *Second Preface to Religion* (see Figure 1).

In addition, this presentation of the gospel in *Religion* is unique in the Kantian corpus. He had hinted in the *First Critique*, in the section entitled “The Canon of Pure Reason,” that he needed to take such a turn toward religious faith,<sup>88</sup> and later reiterated this same hint in the *Second Preface to the First Critique*.<sup>89</sup> Then, shortly after the publication of the first edition of *Religion*, he made it plain in a letter to his friend Carl Friedrich Stäudlin that his elucidation of the Christian faith in *Religion* was, as he put it, “the third part of my plan”<sup>90</sup>—that is, not part of the first or second parts of his plan in his previous books.

Those who therefore insist that Kant was not presenting in good faith a Reformation understanding of the gospel in *Religion* are left to wild speculations. Allan W. Wood, for example, argued that Kant intentionally wrote cryptically about religion so that those who were weak-minded among his readership would not know his true intentions. He disparaged the Christian faith and replaced it with an Enlightenment substitute, one “without the supernatural aid of miracles, signs or other divine revelations through mystical experience, ecclesiastical tradition or holy scripture.”<sup>91</sup> Such a speculation is fanciful and unwarranted.

The author of this article embraces a *prima facie* reading of Kant in his presentation of the gospel. Making this claim, however, is not without a glaring problem: how then can the presence of a secular gospel, which also exists in *Religion*, be reconciled with the religious one? The presence of two distinct gospels in *Religion* is the most perplexing conundrum in Kant’s book. In addressing this conundrum, Kant remained coy. John R. Silber claims that Kant

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conducts himself in one way, and another according to opposite principles and to harmonize [this knowledge of causes] with the freedom of the will” (Ibid., 111, 112n, italics in the original). The purpose of this is “so that God may be all in all” (Ibid., 112). Here Kant was citing 1 Cor 15:28).

<sup>88</sup> Kant, *The Critique of Pure Reason*, A828/B856.

<sup>89</sup> Ibid., 29.

<sup>90</sup> Kant, Correspondence, May 4, 1793, written shortly after the publication of the first edition of *Religion*. Thomas Greene provides a curious problem that Kant needed to work out in his own heart, a problem that may have taken him to his years as an elder scholar to resolve. While at home as a child, he “encountered pietism at its best, in the Collegium, he came upon a pietism whose zeal fostered a spirit of hypocrisy... ‘He was quite unable,’ says Borowski, ‘to acquire a taste for that form of piety, to which many of his classmates adapted themselves, often from very low motives.’ That whole experience in the Collegium was for him a painful one, for he was sensitive in nature, and the remark he is said to have made in later life, that ‘fear and trembling overcame him whenever he recalled those days of youth slavery,’ may well be authentic” (Introduction to *Religion*., xxviii). It is this contrast between the Christianity he experienced at home and that which he experienced at the Collegium that needed repair and renewed reflection.

<sup>91</sup> Allan W. Wood, “Kant’s Deism,” in *Kant’s Philosophy of Religion*, 2, 3.

“merely vacillates. There is neither antimony nor resolution.”<sup>92</sup> Resolving this conundrum will be given full attention in the remainder of this article.

### The Theodicy Riddle

The bridge between the gospel (revealed revelation) and a universal world-religion (rational religion) is Kant’s attempt to settle the theodicy riddle. Stated as a question, he asked: how is it possible for a righteous God to judge people to hell who never had the opportunity to either embrace or reject the gospel in the years of their lives? He described such a condemnation to the wrath of God those who had no opportunity to hear the “statutory faith”—that is, the Christian faith—in this lifetime as “*religious illusion*.”<sup>93</sup>

This question reached as far back as John Calvin where he grappled with the doctrine of predestination and how it impacted the doctrine of divine justice. A *prima facie* examination of the doctrine of predestination would cause most anyone to question divine justice. Calvin knew it, most conservative theologians of the present day know it, and so too did Kant.

Calvin concluded that the believer must take care not to speculate too deeply about the doctrine of predestination and how it impacted divine justice—that is, theodicy. He insisted that any such discussion on the topic is

confusing and even dangerous. No restraints can hold it back from wandering in forbidden bypaths and thrusting upward to the heights... Since we see so many on all sides rushing into this audacity and impudence, among them certain men not otherwise bad, they should in due season be reminded of the measure of their duty in this regard.<sup>94</sup>

Calvin added that Christians who attempt to solve this mystery “are penetrating the sacred precincts of divine wisdom. If anyone with carefree assurance breaks into this place, he will not succeed in satisfying his curiosity and he will enter a labyrinth from which he can find no exit.”<sup>95</sup>

Kant agreed. He wrote:

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<sup>92</sup> John R. Silber writes: “Kant himself knew, I think, that he was in trouble... It is a tribute to Kant’s reasonableness and humanity that he contradicted his theory by admitting the possibility of grace. But the contradiction involved is a serious one whose resolution demands either the drastic redefinition or obligation or the introduction of the miracle of forgiveness.” So instead of offering a sound solution to this problem, Kant “merely vacillates. There is neither antimony nor resolution” (*Introduction to Religion*, “The Ethical Significance of Kant’s Religion,” cxxxii, cxxxiii).

<sup>93</sup> *Religion*, 156, italics in the original.

<sup>94</sup> *The Institutes of the Christian Religion*, 3.21.1.

<sup>95</sup> Ibid.

The mystery of *election*. Even if that vicarious atonement be admitted as possible, still a morally-believing acceptance of it is a determination of the will toward good that already presupposes in man a disposition which is pleasing to God; yet man, by reason of his natural depravity, cannot produce this within himself through his own efforts. But that a heavenly grace should work in man and should accord this assistance to one and not to another, and this not according to the merit of works but by the unconditional decree; and that one portion of our race should be destined for salvation, the other for eternal reprobation—this again yields no concept of a *divine justice but must be referred to a wisdom whose rule is for us an absolute mystery*.<sup>96</sup>

Yet Kant then backtracked. He attempted to unravel this “absolute mystery.” Drawing upon his own skills as a philosopher of religion, he sought his own solution.

The answer that Kant suggested was a rational religion that was universal in scope and did not require divine revelation. It would be, rather, a divine revelation that emanated from within the human mind. It is, he presumed, “another road”<sup>97</sup> to salvation.

Pure religious faith alone can found a universal church; for only [such] rational faith can be believed in and shared by everyone, whereas an historical faith, grounded solely on facts, can extend its influence no further than tidings of it can reach, subject to circumstances of time and place and dependent upon the capacity [of men] to judge the credibility of such tidings.<sup>98</sup>

Here, then, Kant articulated his most troubling conundrum in *Religion*. At first, he acknowledged that divine election and its relationship to divine justice are enshrouded in “absolute mystery” and should be respected as such. He then reversed himself and attempted to unlock this mystery via a rational faith that existed independently of divine revelation. With this reversal, he edged close to that which Karl Rahner, centuries later, would call “anonymous Christianity,”<sup>99</sup> an

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<sup>96</sup> *Religion*, 134; the last italicized phrase is added by the author.

<sup>97</sup> *Ibid.*, 145.

<sup>98</sup> *Ibid.*, 94; cf. 156.

<sup>99</sup> Karl Rahner accepted the notion that without Christ it was impossible for an individual to be saved from sin, but he could not accept the notion that people who never heard the gospel would be condemned by God in the afterlife (see *Karl Rahner in Dialogue: Conversations and*

understanding of the Christian faith where all people everywhere possess an implicit faith and an infused grace upon their souls which resulted in a redeemed life—independently of a profession of faith in the gospel of Jesus Christ.

### The Conflict of the Faculties

Following *Religion*, the next book that Kant wrote was *The Conflict of the Faculties*. It was written one year after *Religion* in 1794, but not published for four years, in 1798.<sup>100</sup> It was intended to be a rebuttal to his critics who had mounted such a fierce attack on *Religion*. The first of the three essays speaks directly to these attacks.

The primary thesis of this book was that a distinction must exist between public and private reason. Public reason is that which scholars use when discussing problems being debated and challenged by other scholars. Leeway and freedom are required as scholars look beyond established opinions and consider that which many may consider false or possibly even heretical. Only then will scholarship advance into new realms with new insights and possibly even open the doors to new paradigms. Nicolaus Copernicus comes to mind, as well as Galileo and Martin Luther. All of science should be open to such new ideas, said Kant, including religion. Here the scholar “has complete freedom to argue, to communicate to the learned public of the world the use of his own reason in religious matters...In his scholarly writings he speaks freely in his own name.”<sup>101</sup>

In contrast, private reason is where, as a civil servant, a scholar performs the functions for which he was hired. “So the clergyman, as a representative of the state, is not free to argue with the tenets of the church when he addresses his congregation: here obedience, not argument, is called for....In his sermons he speaks in the name of the church and at its dictation.”<sup>102</sup>

Both forms of reason, said Kant, have their place. With *Religion*, he knew that he was challenging important dogmas within biblical orthodoxy. Yet, he believed that is precisely what the church needed: a healthy dose of self-criticism and theological debate. The correct response, then, is constructive dialogue in a collaborative effort, not censure and condemnation. Only then would theologians,

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*Interviews*, 1965-1982, transl. Harvey D. Egan [New York: Crossroad]). Also see Anita Röper, Karl Rahner, Klaus Risenhuber, *The Anonymous Christian* (New York, 1966), 145-179; and W. J. Dalton, *Christ's Proclamation to the Spirits* (Romer, 1965), 22-23; Bo Reicke, *The Disobedient Spirits and Christian Baptism* (Copenhagen: 1946), 47-49).

<sup>100</sup> More specifically, the first of the book's three essays, “The Conflict of the Philosophy Faculty with the Theology Faculty,” was written one year after the publication of *Religion*. Kant mentioned this in his letter to Stäudlin (Kant, *Correspondence*, Dec. 4, 1794).

<sup>101</sup> Introduction to *The Conflict of the Faculties*, ix.

<sup>102</sup> *Ibid.*

as well as philosophical scholars, be enabled to weed out the bad from the good.<sup>103</sup> “We can never accept it [an interpretation of Scripture] as true simply because we are ordered to (*de par le Roi*)”<sup>104</sup>—that is, by order of the King. Human reason must be employed. Scholars should therefore have the freedom to “lay claim to any teaching, in order to test its truth.”<sup>105</sup>

This, in so many words, is that which Kant had attempted with *Religion*. Underscoring this point, Norman Kemp Smith explained: “Kant explicitly called upon his readers to assist him as co-workers. He knew that there were contradictions in his writings, but he was confident that they could be resolved by readers who mastered his position in its entirety. Kant also believed that we can often understand an author better than he has understood himself.”<sup>106</sup>

Clearly, in *Religion* Kant presented a conundrum of two gospels: the first as understood in terms of classic Reformation theology, and the second as understood in terms of a secular and a-historical universalized gospel available to all. He had punted the problem to theologians and philosophers, anticipating their help in providing useful correctives and insights.

Sadly, however, shortly after the publication of *Religion*, a constructive collaborative engagement from the ranks of the biblical theologians of his day did not occur. Instead, his book was almost immediately censored and roundly condemned. It was also banned from the University of Königsberg, the very university where he taught.

In a letter sent to Stäudlin, Kant characterized the response from the biblical theologians as a series of “anathemas launched from out of the clouds over officialdom”<sup>107</sup>—that is, their response had the air of despotic gods thinking themselves to possess divine inspiration, as if they were the mouthpiece of God. Self-criticism, collaborative dialogue, and constructive debate were therefore dismissed as unnecessary. In a second letter, this one sent to Johann Gottfried Kiesewetter, Kant wrote: “It is one thing to censor a book and another to correct religious devotions, two distinct jobs that require entirely different warrants.”<sup>108</sup>

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<sup>103</sup> In his “Letter to Carl Stäudlin,” May 4, 1793,” Kant explained that through such a critic, the biblical theologian would “be armed against any future attack” 458.

<sup>104</sup> *Conflict of the Faculties*, 43.

<sup>105</sup> *Ibid.*, 45.

<sup>106</sup> Norman Kemp Smith (“The Historical Context and Religious Significance of Kant’s *Religion*” in the *Introduction of Religion*, xcix).

<sup>107</sup> *Ibid.*, “Letter to Carl Stäudlin,” May 4, 1793. A more complete response in this letter to Stäudlin is the following: “The biblical theologian can oppose reason only with another reason or with force, and if intends to avoid the criticism that attends the latter move (which is much to be feared in the current crisis, when freedom of public expression is universally restricted), he must show our rational grounds to be weak, if he thinks ours are wrong, by offering other rational grounds. He must not attack us with anathemas launched from out of the clouds over officialdom.”

<sup>108</sup> Kant, *Correspondence*, December 13, 1793.



### Reason Alone

How are the two words “reason alone” (German: *bloßen Vernunft*) to be understood? Given that they are included in the title of Kant’s book *Religion Within the Limits of Reason Alone*, these words are clearly important. Since the word “Alone” (*bloßen* in the literal German) means unassisted or unaided, it has caused many to conclude that the book intends to frame religion in an anti-divine revelation manner, in terms of *human* reason alone. For example, Allan Wood wrote that *Religion* “is precisely to the deist’s natural or rational religion, a religion within the boundaries of unassisted natural reason.”<sup>109</sup>

The term *reason*, as presented in *Religion*, however, speaks otherwise. It is an interplay between reasonable faith, revelational faith, and commanded faith,<sup>110</sup> a triad that was mentioned earlier in this paper. In all three, the human mind is fully engaged.

The Christian teaching is built not upon bare concepts of reason but upon facts, it is no longer called merely the Christian *religion*, but the Christian *faith*, which has been made the basis of a church. The service of a church consecrated to such a faith is therefore twofold: what, on the one hand, must be rendered the church according to the historical faith, and, on the other, what is due it in accordance with the practical and moral faith of reason.<sup>111</sup>

It was “reason alone” inasmuch as it stood apart from the excesses of eighteenth-century clericalism which, Kant claimed, too often sought to dominate the laity.<sup>112</sup> He argued that the unlearned in churches should learn from the clergy, provided that they do not learn blindly (*fides servilis*), “without investigation as to whether it really is a divine command.”<sup>113</sup>

### Conclusion

The interpretation of *Religion* in this paper is, admittedly, novel. Yet, given the many conundrums that exist in the book, which left all scholars in a situation where a clear and unincumbered interpretation is not possible, novelty should be

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<sup>109</sup> Allen Wood, “Kant’s Deism” in *Kant’s Philosophy of Religion Reconsidered*, 2.

<sup>110</sup> See *Religion*, 152ff.

<sup>111</sup> *Ibid.*, 151, 152; italics in the original.

<sup>112</sup> *Ibid.*, 156ff.

<sup>113</sup> *Ibid.*, 152.

welcomed.<sup>114</sup> It is perhaps because of its many conundrums that *Religion* has been neglected for decades in modern scholarship.<sup>115</sup>

The premise of this paper is that Kant deliberately left the conundrums in *Religion* unresolved. They therefore should not be resolved—as has been the case by many in modern scholarship—by imposing a hermeneutical system found in his previous books, such as the Three Critiques. Such an approach runs counter to Kant's intentions.

In his correspondences immediately before and after the publication of *Religion*, Kant made it clear that he intended to do something new with this book.<sup>116</sup> He had hoped for a robust discussion and debate following *Religion's* publication by scholars to help resolve the theological conundrums that he believed plagued the theologies in eighteenth-century Christian Europe.<sup>117</sup>

It is beyond dispute that as a child Kant was raised in a devout German Pietist home. When he moved away from home in his late teens and entered the world of scholarship, he still maintained a respect for the spirituality evidenced in the lives of his parents. Even as an adult, with his notoriety as an Enlightenment scholar, he did not abandon, at least to some extent, the spiritual moorings of his childhood years. Then, in his later years, he engaged in a deep dive into Christian theology, yet did so in a manner that did not dispense with secularism. It is this collision of secularism with Christian theology—specifically, the Christian theology of German Pietism—that gave rise to the many conundrums within *Religion*.

Was Kant a genuine believer in the gospel of Jesus Christ? The Second Preface of *Religion* and how he defined the gospel in various sections within *Religion* suggest that he was. This, however, is a generous answer. Though most scholars insist that Kant was a deist, or at best a theist, this paper has argued that such may have been the case, but only before he wrote *Religion*. It is also possible that he was a latent Christian throughout his adult life and wrote his Three

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<sup>114</sup> As noted earlier in this paper, John R. Silber observed that throughout *Religion* Kant “merely vacillates” (Silber, op.cit., cxxxii).

<sup>115</sup> At least this is the opinion of Philip Rossi and Michael Wreen, as noted in the opening sentence of their book *Kant's Philosophy of Religion Reconsidered*. They said: “After decades of neglect, Kant's account of religion...has once again become a topic of interest.” It should therefore no longer stand at the periphery of the Kantian corpus (page ix).

<sup>116</sup> In a letter to Stäudlin, he said quite openly that *Religion* was something new, that it was the third part of his overall plan. This third part of the plan, he also said to Stäudlin, dealt specifically with the Christian faith (*Correspondence*, May 4, 1793).

<sup>117</sup> In the letter to Stäudlin, for example, he criticized the biblical theologians for their unwillingness to discuss this book with him: “The complete education of a biblical theologian should unite into one system the products of his own powers and whatever contrary lessons he can learn from philosophy. (My book is that sort of combination.) By assessing his doctrines from the point of view of rational grounds, he shall be armed against any future attack” (Kant, *Correspondence*, May 4, 1793). Also see Norman Kemp Smith, *Religion*, xcix).

Critiques, *Groundwork*, and other books in the guise of a son of the Enlightenment, only to return to his true spiritual moorings late in life. As noted earlier in this article, he made hints about his return to the Christian faith in the Second Preface of the *First Critique*. Still, in the final analysis, it is difficult to answer the question with unswerving conviction regarding Kant's belief in the gospel, as per the theology of German Pietism or even that of Luther, Calvin, et al.

One final comment. An answer about whether Kant was a genuine believer should make allowances for his intensely inquisitive mind unwilling to allow mysteries to remain unresolved—not at least without a serious attempt to find answers to perplexing questions, such as the question pertaining to the theodicy riddle. To his credit, Kant was willing to listen with sincere interest to the theologians of Germany as they critiqued *Religion* and offered correctives, none of which ever came.

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