

In Defense of Kant's *Religion*

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FOREWORD

In Defense of Kant's Religion, by Chris L. Firestone and Nathan Jacobs, joins the rather long list of commentaries on Immanuel Kant's late text, *Religion within the Boundaries of Mere Reason*, as among the most challenging and illuminating, perhaps as *the* most challenging and illuminating.

Kant's *Religion* has the deserved reputation of being one of the most profound and suggestive, yet also problematic, texts in the entire Kantian corpus. It is profound in its analysis of our human moral condition. Our condition is not merely that we all do things we ought not to do, so that we are guilty of having done this wrong thing and of having done that wrong thing. Our condition is that there is something evil about ourselves; there is in us a propensity or disposition to act against the moral law. We are not committed to the moral law as our supreme incentive. We are committed to obeying the moral law only as long as doing so does not seriously interfere with what we judge to be to our personal advantage. Radical moral evil has somehow become attached to our species—by a free choice, otherwise it would not be *moral* evil.

The fundamental question that Kant's analysis raises for him is whether, in spite of our deplorable moral condition, there is ground for moral hope. A good many commentators, myself included, have thought we spied conundrums of various sorts in the details of Kant's answer to that question. Others have emphasized these conundrums less than the various points at which Kant's answer appears to be out of accord with his critical philosophy as a whole.

In part 1 of their discussion, Firestone and Jacobs provide a masterful review of the secondary literature on Kant's *Religion*; the review is masterful both in its coverage and in its analysis of the various positions that have been staked out pro and con the coherence of Kant's *Religion* internally and with the rest of his philosophy. The question that emerges forcefully is whether it is possible to interpret the text in such a way as to save it from the barrage of charges that have been fired against it. Is Kant's *Religion* a coherent text of critical philosophy?

With these charges in mind, in part 2 of their discussion Firestone and Jacobs engage in a close and deep reading of Kant's text, informed by a knowl-

edge of the relevant parts of the philosophical climate of the day. What emerges is a Kant very different from the one we thought we knew, more metaphysical, more willing to engage in speculative theology, less dismissive of actual religion. A good many of the conundrums that commentators have thought they spied are dissolved; whether all of them are is not yet clear to me. But the position that emerges is also strange, so strange that many of us will wonder whether this could really be what Kant had in mind. The great merit of Firestone and Jacobs's discussion is that they rub our skeptical noses in the text; over and over they point to what Kant actually said.

A central feature of their interpretation is that they interpret literally what most, if not all, of us have taken to be metaphorical. I have in mind especially, though not only, their interpretation of what Kant says about humanity's *prototype*. Most commentators, again I include myself, have taken Kant to be speaking metaphorically here; he did not believe that there actually is a prototype. But the authors provide what is, to my mind, conclusive evidence that Kant was not speaking metaphorically; it was his view that there really is an eternal prototype of humanity. The existence of that prototype is an essential component within his explanation of how it can be that we, who harbor radical evil, yet have ground for moral hope.

Kant studies have experienced a number of jolts in recent years, stimulated by close and deep reading of all of Kant's major texts and by knowledge of the philosophical and intellectual climate within which Kant worked. My own guess is that Firestone and Jacobs will prove to have delivered as big a jolt as anyone. After one has worked through their interpretation, it is no longer possible to read the text of Kant's *Religion* in the way one did before. We won't all immediately jump onto the bandwagon; the Kant that emerges is too strange. We will wonder whether there's not some other way of reading the text, not yet thought up, that preserves the profundity and dissolves the conundrums while making Kant less strange. Until that other way emerges—I am not at all confident that it ever will—this interpretation has the merit not only of dissolving most if not all the conundrums but of offering us the best close, deep, and intellectually imaginative reading of the text that we have.

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People vs. *Religion*

After more than two hundred years of deliberation, the jury is still out on how to best understand Immanuel Kant's major text on religion, *Religion within the Boundaries of Mere Reason*.¹ Some interpreters are resolute in downplaying the significance of *Religion* to Kant's philosophical portfolio. By focusing on various aspects of his sociopolitical context and early anti-metaphysical tone, they dismiss the text by appealing to Kant's hidden motivations: he was simply writing either to placate the Prussian censors so that his views on religion could be published or to appease the religious sensitivities of his manservant, Lampe, who had been severely shaken by the conclusions of the *Critique of Pure Reason*. Other interpreters, however, warmly accept *Religion* into the fold of Kant's critical philosophy. They focus, in a more positive sense, on Kant's Pietistic Lutheran upbringing, arguing that his chief intent was either to move certain Christian essentials into the safe confines of reason alone or to establish the contours of a rational religious faith in accord with both his religious convictions and mature critical philosophy. Whatever we make of these disparate arguments, the jury of contemporary Kant interpreters remains deadlocked over how best to understand Kant's *Religion*.

In *Kant and the New Philosophy of Religion*, the case is made that there are essentially two interpretive trends regarding Kant's philosophy of religion in the field of Kant-studies—one is principally negative toward religion and theology, while the other affirms religion and theology.² For ease of reference, the editors called these two trends “traditional” interpretations and “affirmative” interpretations. Interpretations designated “traditional” are primarily negative in

their assessment of the prospects of grounding religion and theology in the Kantian paradigm. Traditional interpreters have a wide range of positions on the place of God in Kant's philosophy: some, such as Allen Wood and Denis Savage, argue that Kant's philosophy is basically deistic;³ others, including Keith Ward and Don Cupitt, think Kant's philosophy is most amenable to theological non-realism;⁴ and still others, such as Matthew Alun Ray and Yirmiahu Yovel, argue that Kant's philosophy supports either atheism or agnosticism but nothing more.⁵ Despite their differences on the exact nuances, all these interpreters agree that Kant's philosophy works decidedly against those who would seek to gain a foothold for religion and theology in reason; and, at the end of the day, they find that Kant's philosophy of religion offers no real help in overcoming this basically negative thrust.

Contrary to their negative counterparts, theologically affirmative interpretations of Kant typically hold that Kant's philosophy provides a rationale for God-talk and religious faith. But the case cannot be made without looking beyond the first *Critique*, and sometimes to Kant's writings both before and after 1781. These affirmative readers usually make a point of capturing a sense of the whole of Kant's philosophical enterprise—something that is lost when too strong an emphasis is placed on the first *Critique*. The arguments articulated and defended among these theologically affirmative interpretations vary greatly, but all within this camp agree that this diversified theological affirmation is the real legacy of Kant. Ronald Green, Ann Loades, Stephen Palmquist, Adina Davidovich, John Hare, Elizabeth Galbraith, and others have therefore argued that traditional interpretive approaches to Kant on religion and theology are wholly inadequate.⁶ If the affirmative camp is right, traditional interpretations are either shortsighted or negligent. They either miss the plethora of positive resources for grounding religion and theology in Kant's philosophical paradigm or plainly bungle opportunities for understanding Kant's more metaphysically robust insights as genuine contributions to the critical philosophy.

The editors' conclusions in *Kant and the New Philosophy of Religion* regarding these interpretive trends were fourfold: (1) based on a select assortment of first *Critique* principles, those espousing some form of traditional interpretation unanimously deny the possibility of grounding religion and theology in Kant's philosophy; (2) these traditional renderings of Kant comprise the "largest unified minority report" on how to interpret his philosophy of religion, but, when all relevant data are considered, they represent neither the majority in the field of Kant-studies nor the most accurate interpretation of Kant on religion and theology; (3) cogent arguments exist for thinking Kant's critical writings, taken as a whole, provide the grounds needed for positive incorporation of religion and theology into Kant's philosophical program; and (4) the hermeneutic superstructure of the traditional interpretation is in need of renovation, if not outright demolition, and the basis for an affirmative

grounding of religion and theology in Kant's philosophy needs to be more adequately articulated.

Our purpose here is to make a significant advance on points three and four by providing a comprehensive interpretation of Kant's *Religion* that defends it against recently mounting charges of incoherence. Our interpretation and defense is set in the context of a civil trial that considers arguments from both the traditional and the affirmative camps. We will call forward witnesses from each side in order to draw out the best evidence for and against *Religion*. While we believe this classic text to be innocent of the charge of incoherence, clearly the quantity of negative research on *Religion* casts a dark shadow over its inner workings. Thus, in dialogue with this expert testimony, we will develop an interpretation that, we believe, sheds new light on the text and exonerates it from the charges of its critics. Our goal is to demonstrate in a comprehensive manner that, when all relevant resources are brought to bear, a full acquittal of Kant's *Religion* is the only reasonable verdict.

While it is true that the jury is still out on Kant's philosophy of religion as a whole, a strong team of interpreters has, in recent years, assembled for the prosecution of Kant's *Religion*. Scattered throughout the literature are essays and books, which argue that the key "insights" of *Religion* are fundamentally flawed. Philip Quinn writes of Kant's "remarkable antinomy" in *Religion*, and Nicholas Wolterstorff finds Kant's rational religion so stocked full of "conundrums" that the coherence of his arguments is under threat at nearly every turn.⁷ Such critics highlight the way Kant's reasoning often appears conflicted, if not outright contradictory: Kant suggests we have a predisposition to good as well as a natural propensity to evil; he suggests we have an evil disposition that is innate yet freely chosen; he thinks we are in need of divine grace, but we must in effect earn this grace.

Many see this dissonant talk as the inevitable result of synthesizing an Enlightenment, moralist system that is concerned with rights and obligations and assumes *ought* implies *can* with a biblical worldview that presumes human depravity and humanity's need for divine grace.⁸ As a result, traditional interpreters find serious problems in attributing much importance to *Religion* for Kant's philosophical paradigm, and thus move for a guilty verdict: not only does Kant's *Religion* appear incoherent at key junctures, but even its fundamental aspirations seem at cross purposes. Therefore, *Religion* should be separated from the critical philosophy proper and relegated to the gallows along with Kant's less significant work.

Gordon Michalson's publications are perhaps the best example of this traditional push. Michalson presents some of the most thoroughgoing analyses of the challenges facing Kant's philosophy of religion. In the light of his findings, Michalson submits, "Kant's position is a nest of tangles," "riddled with inconsistencies," and "sufficiently problematic" so as to lead to an "entire set of wobbles."⁹ While a number of witnesses for the prosecution will be

called throughout our survey of current scholarship, Michalson's work will provide us with the main arguments for the incoherence of *Religion*. As star witness in the case against *Religion*, Michalson will serve as chief interlocutor for our defense.

We should note that not all negative witnesses will be welcome at this hearing. Some negative witnesses are hostile to the idea that Kant has anything positive or constructive to say about historical faith, and thus presume at the outset that *Religion* is necessarily a rehashing of Kant's established moral philosophy, which is taken to be incompatible with revealed religion. Yirmiahu Yovel examples this interpretive strategy in *Kant and the Philosophy of History*. According to Yovel, "Almost every positive idea that Kant has to express under the title of rational religion has already been expressed in his ethics, while what is new in the *Religion within the Limits of Reason Alone* (1793) is mainly an uncompromising attack upon existing religions and an attempt to eliminate them from the historical scene."¹⁰ To the extent that *Religion* adheres to Kant's critical philosophy, traditionally understood, Yovel thinks it must be read exclusively through the lens of the moral philosophy, and this means *Religion* is essentially "destructive" to revealed religion. To accept such an overtly pessimistic view of Kant's philosophy of religion, however, one must simultaneously take an artificially low view of Kant's religious sincerity—something Kant took to be an important part of his personal integrity.¹¹ Such hostile witnesses, who would so clearly testify against the grain of Kant's religious convictions, will not be admitted into the courtroom of deliberation. In building our defense, we will instead examine only those interpretations of Kant that take his philosophy of religion seriously, but still dispute its nature and coherence.

Any defense of Kant's *Religion* must come to grips with one of the central and immediate difficulties inherent in the task. This difficulty concerns what Philip Rossi calls the "theological spectacles" of the interpreter.¹² Given the complexity and diversity of *Religion* and the inevitable subjectivity of the interpretive process, interpreters tend to see in Kant what is amenable to their own theological stance. This is true not only for persons of religious conviction and theists generally, but also for atheists, agnostics, and non-realists. To be sure, interpreters exist in the field of Kant-studies who wear what might be called a-theological spectacles, which have just as much potential for skewing the meaning of the text as affirmative theological spectacles—Yovel would be one obvious example. No one is immune to this sort of criticism. How, then, do we overcome the potential for a deadlock based on hermeneutic subjectivity? We submit that if the interpretive task is to remain fair and to have hope of succeeding, interpreters must revisit the text in a context of open rational discourse and careful textual analysis. The evidence we offer in defense of *Religion* therefore consists first and foremost of careful textual analysis in dialogue with some of the very best interpretations of the last century.

This being said, anyone who has given close consideration to the details of *Religion* will be aware that theological spectacles are not the only hindrance to a unified reading of the text. It cannot be denied that Kant's writings are partially to blame for the fragmented interpretive landscape of Kant-studies. Those who would see a moral reinterpretation of Christianity, where the central tenets of the faith are reduced to picturesque portrayals of moral struggle, can find scattered support in Books One and Two of *Religion*. Those wishing to see *Religion* as an effort to reduce religion to morality, which results in either the abolition of religion or an emergent religious pluralism, can find choice passages in Book Three. Anyone wanting to emphasize Kant's political vision, which strips the state of its ties to ecclesiastical faith and presses toward the League of Nations, can find useful passages in both the latter portions of Book Three and parts of Book Four. None of this is to say that these disparate themes represent an accurate rendering of *Religion*. Rather, they speak more of Kant's tortured vocabulary, complex German, philosophical subtleties, and diverse corpus, all of which, when taken together, allow for understandings of *Religion* that, when pressed by the exegetical specifics, make Kant's writing seem excessively convoluted. Portions of *Religion* seem contradictory and can give the impression that the text is a Gordian knot—presenting a never-ending set of difficulties that, rather than being untangled, must be cut. The text, to many, seems not only unintelligible, but also theologically negative and metaphysically destructive. However, Kant's arguments are far more positive and constructive than these isolated passages would indicate; and they are certainly more subtle and complex than a “face-value” reading admits. Therefore, acknowledging the inevitable hermeneutic complexities of the interpretive task, we seek to offer a reading of *Religion* that is firmly based on the internal textual specifics—rather than some prior understanding of Kant's critical goals—and resolutely aimed at yielding a coherent whole. Our only self-aware hermeneutic rudder is the rule of charity, which presumes that the best reading of the textual specifics is the one that makes Kant's claims most cogent.

Before outlining the basic structure of this work, important to note at the outset is that, in our defense of *Religion*, the content of Kant's arguments begins to look remarkably Christian. Despite this result, we will not present *Religion* as an apologetic for the Christian faith. Such a characterization, we believe, would be wrongheaded. In our understanding of *Religion*, Christianity comes out in a better position than other historical faiths, and we believe Kant, in this sense, offers “rational assistance” to Christianity. However, Kant's tone throughout *Religion* is clearly not defensive of any historical faith; instead, Kant's tone suggests an uncompromising, and, in many ways, offensive assessment of historical religion. The relationship between Kant's *Religion* and Christianity is, from a Christian perspective, a mixed bag. In the positive sense, Kant's project bears a striking similarity to the Christian gospel; and Kant ultimately affirms Christianity (at least as taught by Jesus himself) as

a rational religion, seeing the relationship between “New Testament” Christianity and “Old Testament” Judaism (as Kant understands it) as the sort that ought to exist between rational religion and historical faith. On the negative side, Kant’s project, in exalting the dictates of reason over historical faith, undercuts the historical element of Christianity, nullifying (or at least suspending purely rational assent to) a great many things that Christians have understood to be essential to their faith. Defending the internal coherence of *Religion* from an expository vantage point and commending its desirability for Christianity are two entirely different matters, and we will, in this volume, focus exclusively on the former.¹³

The outline of this work is as follows. Chapters 1, 2, and 3 make up part 1, “Perspectives on Kant’s *Religion*.” In chapters 1 and 2, we will consider the testimony of key Kant interpreters as important background information for understanding the indictment against *Religion*. These witnesses will testify regarding two questions, the answers to which are crucial for making an informed decision about the nature and purpose of the text. The first question, taken up in chapter 1, regards the metaphysical motives behind *Religion*. As a critical philosopher (as opposed to a pre-critical philosopher or dogmatic metaphysician), was Kant primarily positive or negative about the prospects for metaphysics? To answer this question, we will call Vincent McCarthy, Stephen Palmquist, Keith Ward, and Allen Wood to the stand. The second question concerns the philosophical character of *Religion*. Are there ample resources for grounding *Religion* in the critical corpus, and if so, are these resources sufficient to show the text to be a genuine contribution to Kant’s philosophical program? To answer this question, we will call, in chapter 2, Philip Quinn, Nicholas Wolterstorff, Ronald Green, Adina Davidovich, John Hare, and Bernard Reardon to the stand. Part 1 culminates in chapter 3 with the testimony of star witness for the prosecution, Gordon Michalson. While Green, Davidovich, Hare, and Reardon offer renditions of *Religion* that help give some sense of direction and stability to Kant’s arguments, despite the negative evidence presented by Quinn, Wolterstorff, and others, Michalson’s testimony casts a shadow of suspicion over the argumentative specifics. Michalson’s summary of the indictment lays out a comprehensive and yet-unanswered set of difficulties that any interpretation must overcome if Kant’s *Religion* is to be judged coherent and of lasting significance to the field of philosophy of religion.

While part 1 examines two key dimensions of the case as understood by Kant interpreters and provides the final indictment of *Religion*, part 2 provides a thorough defense of this classic text. Chapter 4 begins this defense by focusing on key resources in the critical philosophy and in *Religion* itself that are important preliminary considerations for understanding the shape of *Religion* and its theological talk. They are Kant’s notions of pure cognition, the two experiments identified in the Second Preface of *Religion*, and the moral dis-

position, which is a point of concern throughout *Religion*. We make the case that these features of Kant's argument are present at the earliest stages of *Religion* and are crucial to keep in mind throughout in order to understand the text as a coherent work of philosophy of religion, and one consonant with Kant's critical philosophy. Chapter 4 will thus serve as our opening statement in defense of *Religion*. Following this opening statement, chapters 5, 6, 7, and 8 present the four exhibits central to our defense. Each of these chapters is dedicated to our interpretation of one of the four books of *Religion*—chapter 5 sets forth our interpretation of Book One, chapter 6 sets forth our interpretation of Book Two, and so on. Collectively, they address the specific issues in the indictment and make the case that a coherent understanding of *Religion* is possible.¹⁴

Employing the rule that Kant's arguments are "innocent until proven guilty," we contend in our closing statement that the reading provided in the previous chapters casts reasonable doubt on the charges of incoherence brought against *Religion* and, in this light, move for an acquittal. Our interpretation and defense shows that, although Kant may be charged at points with constructing a somewhat unclear or even convoluted text, his argument is essentially consistent. That said, we will not be suggesting that *Religion* is without blemish. Difficulties remain. However, what becomes clear from our analysis is that the difficulties with *Religion* are more like the age-old problems germane to Greek philosophy and Christian thought than they are contradictions of the kind suggested by readers like Michalson. Even though Kant's *Religion* is not a perfect text, we will show it to be innocent of the charges brought against it, and, on this basis, rest our case in defense of Kant's *Religion*.

1

The Metaphysical Motives behind *Religion*

Our purpose in part 1 is to examine recent scholarship on Immanuel Kant with a view to understanding the basic issues at stake when interpreting *Religion* and to present the major components of the case against its coherence. In pursuit of these objectives, we will cross-examine a number of the main Kant experts of the last forty years, asking of their work some basic questions concerning the content and context of Kant's philosophy of religion: What, if any, metaphysical motives lay behind the exposition of Kant's philosophy? Does *Religion* emerge out of a philosophical program that is fundamentally for or against the rational incorporation of religious faith? What characteristics of Kant's critical philosophy support the specific arguments of *Religion*, and which ones militate against them? And how does Kant's critical philosophy both enhance and limit the way *Religion* can be interpreted? The answers to these questions are leading indicators for determining how *Religion* should be interpreted, and thus for discerning the consistency or inconsistency of its arguments. They constitute what we call the *metaphysical motives* behind and *philosophical character* of the text. They also provide the conceptual backdrop for the indictment of *Religion* on the charges of patent and pervasive incoherence. These three aspects of the case (the metaphysical motives, the philosophical character, and the indictment) make up the three major divisions of part 1.

By covering this preliminary ground in some detail, we provide a backdrop, not only for the case against *Religion*, but also for its defense, which we take up in earnest in part 2. If the testimony of part 1 indicates that the

metaphysical motivations behind *Religion* are incompatible with or contradictory to the critical philosophy, such evidence will support the charge that the text is fundamentally flawed. If, on the other hand, the testimony regarding the philosophical character of Kant's work provides resources for an interpretation of *Religion* that shows it to advance positively on the critical philosophy, we will have good reason to think the arguments of *Religion* are coherent. The indictment against *Religion* thus rests on showing that when its metaphysical motives and philosophical character are properly understood, the text becomes unstable and falls under the weight of internal and irreconcilable conundrums, while an adequate defense of *Religion* depends on showing that Kant's metaphysical motivations and the philosophical character of *Religion* support an interpretation of the text that overcomes the so-called conundrums.

We begin in this chapter by cross-examining two opposing positions on the historical situation and psychological state of Kant and the impact these considerations have on his philosophy of religion. Vincent McCarthy is decidedly pessimistic in his evaluation of the metaphysical motives behind *Religion*. He understands *Religion* to be a text in tension, conceptually trapped between Lutheran Pietism and Enlightenment rationalism. In trying to graft what is essential to the former onto the latter, Kant inevitably creates irresolvable difficulties for his philosophy as a whole and his philosophy of religion in particular. Stephen Palmquist's position on *Religion* directly opposes McCarthy's testimony. Palmquist understands the text to be consistent with Kant's intention of developing a critically viable form of religion in the midst of a revolutionary new way of understanding philosophy. Palmquist traces this "critical religion" from Kant's pre-critical essay "Dreams of a Spirit-Seer Elucidated by Dreams of Metaphysics" to the *Opus Postumum*, describing this development in Kant's thinking as "Critical Mysticism." For Palmquist, *Religion* is best thought of as a transcendental analysis of hope that is consonant with the Copernican nature of Kant's critical philosophy and caps off Kant's critical study on the possibility of religious experience.

With these two interpretations providing a backdrop for understanding the metaphysical motives behind *Religion*, Keith Ward and Allen Wood are called to the stand to provide mediating positions. Ward finds something true in both sides of this debate. With Palmquist, Ward argues that Kant wants to arrive at some critically viable form of rational religious faith. However, with McCarthy, Ward thinks that Kant's theoretical strictures put Kant into a conceptual straitjacket without a critically satisfying means of escape. Despite Kant's desire to make room for faith and the existence of certain existential tendencies in Kant's thinking on religion and theology, Ward does not see how Kant can get beyond moral formalism and theological non-realism when viewing religion from the point of view of the theoretical and practical philosophy. Kant's denial of theoretical knowledge of God and later practical postulation of

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God set up, for Ward, a Copernican version of “Hume’s fork.” One can either rely on empirical judgments for the establishment of rational foundations for theology or look to the postulation of God for purely moral purposes. In the end, however, neither choice is satisfying as a *rational* foundation for religion and theology.

Allen Wood’s testimony is very different from Ward’s. Wood avers that sufficient critical warrant exists in the *Critique of Pure Reason* for thinking that Kant intends to develop rational religious faith in a way that moves beyond theological non-realism. God, for Kant, cannot be known like objects of experience. Nevertheless, Wood shows that Kant’s conception of God in the first *Critique* contains the notion of the “*ens realissimum*” and argues that this basic conception of God “comes about in the course of our attempt to conceive the conditions for the ‘thorough determination’ of things.”¹ Wood argues additionally that certain things, such as “knowledge, volition, and moral goodness,” can be predicated of God.² This conception of God in the first *Critique* serves as the cornerstone for the development of rational religious faith as a morally grounded and existentially significant religious epistemology. Unlike Palmquist, however, Wood thinks that Kant’s rationalistic faith in God cannot amount to mysticism. Instead, Wood’s early work presents Kant as a theist, forwarding a substantial argument that traces Kant’s reasoning from the first antinomy of the *Critique of Practical Reason* on through to *Religion*. It supports the view that Kant’s philosophy grounds not an abstract and sterile theism but a moral faith in a benevolent, gracious, and “living God.” Wood argues, in short, that Kant’s understanding of *moral faith* develops according to a clear logic into *rational religious faith*.

Witness for the Prosecution: Vincent McCarthy

Vincent McCarthy’s *Quest for a Philosophical Jesus* provides a good example of the traditional approach to interpreting Kant’s *Religion*.³ The way McCarthy approaches *Religion* is less expository and more analysis of Kant’s upbringing, his intellectual influences, the evolution of *Religion* as a text, and the relationship between *Religion* and the critical philosophy proper. The picture McCarthy paints presents *Religion* as an attempt to create a synthesis between Kant’s early Lutheran Pietism and Enlightenment rationalism.⁴ This synthesis is not understood by McCarthy as an affirmative theological maneuver or a Christian apologetic, however. McCarthy understands Kant to have “the far more ambitious goal of scrutinizing all religion from the standpoint of moral reason and penetrating to its central and deepest truths.”⁵ Even so, McCarthy believes that, despite expressing an intent to evaluate critically all forms of religion, Kant was unable to break free of his Christian heritage and, with it, the European bias against other religions. What Kant therefore provides in the end is a rationalist version of a theology of symbol that unabashedly and uncrit-

ically promotes Christian concepts and imagery, despite its underlying intention to place all religion under the authority of reason.⁶

At bottom, McCarthy finds an irresolvable conflict in Kant's desired synthesis between rationalism and the anthropology of Pietism. The Enlightenment represented an almost naïve optimism regarding humanity's ability to attain moral ideals, while Pietism retained a sober (and almost somber) understanding of human depravity and the limits of human ability to affect moral renewal. As is well known, Kant sides conceptually with the latter in Book One of *Religion*, forwarding his now famous (or perhaps infamous) doctrine of "radical evil." Yet, McCarthy understands Kant, in embracing human depravity, to be inadvertently bringing tension into his relationship with both rationalism and Pietism: the theological doctrine of depravity was shunned by the rationalists, who recognized radical evil as a crippling blow to humanity's hope of moral progress, while at the same time, Kant's highly rational approach to themes such as radical evil roused suspicion in religious Pietists, who harbored mistrust in the "enlightened" faith of reason.⁷ McCarthy's interpretation of *Religion* thus views the text as a bold attempt to bring diametrically opposed starting points together, the result of which is both a rationalistic antinomy regarding human moral progress and a radical reconstruction of the Christian religion along Copernican lines.

Undergirding McCarthy's interpretation is a supposition regarding Kant's "properly" critical writings: only those works bearing the word "Critique" constitute properly critical philosophy, according to McCarthy. McCarthy's position is that, in *Religion*, Kant moves beyond what is allowed under first and second *Critique* strictures, violating Kant's own limitations on God-talk without a sufficient critical rationale. For this reason, McCarthy is convinced that *Religion* occupies a position outside the confines of the critical philosophy. Since, for him, Kant's discussion of God, grace, revelation, and redemption is a plainly uncritical endeavor, driven by non-philosophical motivations, McCarthy finds no convincing grounds for theology in Kant's thinking. Instead, McCarthy views Kant's religious talk as just that—religious talk, which is empty speculation according to Kant's philosophical framework.⁸ This ungrounded discourse is precisely what McCarthy thinks is so problematic about *Religion*.

Since the critical philosophy unravels all God-talk, *Religion* cannot be an application of the critical philosophy to religion. Kant's religious talk, argues McCarthy, is neither historical theology nor transcendental philosophy; it is, instead, the byproduct of a deeply religious man's desire to reunite the discipline of philosophy with the essential elements of a beleaguered Christianity. Kant's chosen means for achieving this reunification is the moral philosophy. McCarthy sees a gradual development in Kant's thinking on religion and theology, beginning with the postulation of God in the second *Critique*. God the postulate emerges because "reason cannot conceive the attainment of the

highest good . . . unless there is a highest intelligence.”⁹ This postulate has nothing to do with religion or theology, however. McCarthy’s position is that, for Kant, “a God-idea gives us only knowledge of our own mind . . . and no knowledge whatsoever of the reality of God.”¹⁰ The God concept as a formal moral postulate never escapes pure subjectivity. The actual existence of God is not necessary for Kant; all that matters is “what God is for us as moral beings.”¹¹

Despite the theological non-realism his reading entails, McCarthy recognizes that Kant’s understanding of God develops beyond a mere postulate in the *Critique of the Power of Judgment*, becoming a transcendental necessity for moral purposiveness.¹² McCarthy points to Kant’s May 4, 1793, letter to Stäudlin, in which Kant indicates that *Religion* addresses the question, What may I hope? This question is the third of the four questions that Kant’s philosophical program intended to answer. According to McCarthy, hope enters Kant’s philosophical purview in force, not in the third *Critique*, where nature and freedom are considered simultaneously, but in *Religion*, where radical evil makes its appearance. In showing us incapable of fulfilling our moral duty, *Religion* finds the highest expression of hope in the possibility that God would choose to overcome evil: “One must hope and indeed one can hope, and such hope is practical. For it honeys the rim of the cup of duty and cuts short the danger of despairing of ever being well-pleasing to God, precisely the despair that could result from the consciousness of radical evil.”¹³

Despite Kant’s apparent logic in moving from radical evil to the question of hope, the doctrine of radical evil seems, to McCarthy, unabashedly and unjustifiably borrowed from historical Christianity. McCarthy writes, “[T]here is an unexpressed unity [in *Religion*] constituted by the one subject matter that is constantly referred to but never systematically addressed: the Christian religion. Christianity stands in the background of the entire work, frequently enters the discussion indirectly and occasionally more directly. But in neither fashion is its entry adequately accounted for.”¹⁴ Even though radical evil may serve as the catalyst for Kant’s introduction of religion into the realm of hope, McCarthy points out that this way of addressing the third question—What may I hope?—radically revamps Kant’s earlier answer to the second question, What ought I to do? If humans are incapable of doing what they ought to do, Kant’s *ought-implies-can* principle no longer stands. Insofar as *Religion*, in this way, cripples Kant’s moral philosophy and does so via a starting point that cannot be critically deduced, McCarthy sees *Religion* as decidedly uncritical and far removed from the fourth *Critique* many expected.¹⁵ Kant’s *Religion* seeks to carve out room for religion in general and Christianity in specific, but this project is hardly an account of religion within the boundaries of mere reason. If Kant ever gave such an account, McCarthy thinks it the second *Critique*.

From the foregoing we can identify the four main claims that frame

McCarthy's interpretation: (1) the critical philosophy does not allow room for the kind of God-talk or theology we see in *Religion*; (2) given the decidedly uncritical nature of the text, *Religion* is not a fourth *Critique*; (3) the starting point of *Religion* (viz., radical evil) is in no way deducible from the critical philosophy, and must therefore be a theological import from Kant's early Pietism; and (4) the importation of the Christian doctrine of original sin undoes the *ought-implies-can* principle and requires a shift in focus from the individual autonomy of the critical philosophy to a new foundation for moral hope.¹⁶

With these guiding principles in hand, the specifics of McCarthy's interpretation of *Religion* unfold. Book One begins with radical evil, which McCarthy views as a philosophical restatement of the Christian doctrine of original sin.¹⁷ McCarthy understands Kant as making a straightforward attempt to parallel the story of Adam in Genesis with a rational account of human depravity. Human beings begin in a natural state of goodness (or *pre-disposition*) and this natural state is the one to which human beings are destined to return. Evil, however, has entered all of humanity. McCarthy sees this entrance as different from the Christian notion of inherited sin and equally distinct from the "social fall" of Rousseau. Kant instead holds that every individual is responsible for his or her own moral fall. Radical evil is universal only because every individual tends to fall freely into evil: "Kant's notion of radical evil is everyman's original sin, the product of his own misused freedom that has placed self-love above the moral law."¹⁸ Thus, McCarthy's Kant accepts the "truths" of original sin (humanity begins good, falls into evil, and this fall is universal), but rejects the doctrine's historical content and hereditary character—while humanity universally falls into evil, this is not due to the transgression of a single ancestor but due to each individual's free willing of evil.

To be sure, radical evil is not meant to explain *why* humans universally choose evil—the choice itself is inscrutable. The doctrine, from what McCarthy can tell, is merely an empirical observation: we see evil in human history and our daily lives. But by introducing the problem of radical evil, Kant makes room for a divine solution. The introduction of God becomes necessary in the face of humanity's moral impairment, for if humans are incapable of becoming morally upright on their own, outside intervention is needed. "Many can grasp the moral law without God or religion," suggests McCarthy, "but [Kant] cannot realistically conceive of man's overcoming radical human weakness without God."¹⁹ The difficulty, of course, is that McCarthy sees no justification for the introduction of radical evil, and even finds significant reasons to avoid the doctrine: (1) radical evil is entirely contrary to Kant's a priori principles, "good . . . is the natural state [of man] and . . . is known a priori,"²⁰ and (2) radical evil constitutes the biggest disruption to Kant's critical philosophy since it "disturbs the otherwise clear and rounded Kantian system and alters the understanding of religion that would otherwise issue."²¹ In the end, however, McCarthy thinks such inadequacies are immaterial to Kant, in that Kant's goal

is not the rational engagement of evil, but the introduction of a hope friendly to Lutheran Pietism.

The introduction of hope comes in Book Two, where the notion of grace first appears. According to McCarthy, grace is as inevitable in Kant's Christianized conception of religion as evil. This is not to say, of course, that grace is a critically derived, a priori concept. Rather, grace is a doctrine that asserts itself as necessary in the face of evil. The difficulty, however, is that certain concepts of grace are unwelcome in Kant's program, specifically those that threaten moral responsibility—the cornerstone of practical reason. As a result, McCarthy understands Kant's philosophy of religion to entail a semi-Pelagian concept of grace—God offers grace, but this offer is extended only to those who do all in their power to earn it.²² In the eyes of God, this earned grace is extended to moral converts at conversion. Our turn to the good, evidenced in our subsequent moral progress, gives us reason to hope that, despite our inevitable periodic failings, we will be judged well-pleasing to God. In other words, Kantian hope is hope that God will choose to count our turn to the good and our subsequent struggles sufficiently well-pleasing in themselves. Such grace is distinct from supernatural assistance to fulfill the law, for grace comes in response to the moral agent's turn to the good in the form of an affirmative judgment, not prior to the moral agent's turn to the good as assistance to initiate this turn.

In addition to the basic concepts of grace, McCarthy tries to account for two other significant themes that we find in Book Two: (1) Kant's renewed interest in the human disposition and (2) Kant's extensive use of Christic images. Regarding the former, McCarthy is dismissive. He acknowledges Kant's frequent references to the disposition and the apparent link between the disposition and grace, but for McCarthy, "Such language does not clarify Kant's philosophical teaching at all; it rather confuses it."²³ As for Kant's apparent Christology, McCarthy relies on symbolic theology for his explanation. He thinks that in Book Two what Kant intends to offer is a philosophical reinterpretation of the Gospel of John in keeping with the reinterpretation of original sin in Book One of *Religion*. Book Two opens with talk of the Word, which is the Son of God, and moves on to describe a Christic figure Kant calls "the prototype of perfect humanity." Jesus Christ is presented in this symbolic theology as the first to withstand evil.²⁴ The Christic narrative is a metaphor, offering moral agents a picture of perfect humanity; it offers a "stimulus to action" for moral converts, and in this way provides grace for moral improvement. To be sure, this stimulus is not efficacious because of some redemptive action in history. Kant's emphasis, according to McCarthy, is always and only on our duty to conform to this symbol, a conformity which itself constitutes the suffering that atones for radical evil in the eyes of God. Redemption is not brought about by a historical Christ-figure; redemption is self-redemption worked out in our mirroring of the symbol that is Christ.²⁵

Despite the emphasis McCarthy places on individual duty in *Religion*, he recognizes the communal thrust of Book Three. Kant suggests that humans must band together in effort to form an ethical commonwealth. In McCarthy's assessment, this emphasis on community is an offshoot of the universal nature of the moral law. The need for a universal moral community arises from the convergence of the universal moral law and the universal epidemic of radical evil. The reality of evil, for Kant, does not change what we ought to do, but it certainly changes our ability to do it, and therefore a communal effort is necessary for hope of ever overcoming radical evil.²⁶ This communal emphasis provides a way for Kant to justify the existence of both the church and sacred Scripture in expressly Christian terms. The church is a necessary vehicle for transporting individuals with moral faith to an ethical commonwealth; it promises to transform Kant's collection of redeemed moral individuals into a people of God.

In McCarthy's assessment, this linking of Enlightenment philosophy with Christian ecclesiology does not provide a critical rationale for historical religion. Ultimately, Kant wants philosophy to be the final authority for church doctrine and biblical interpretation.²⁷ With interpreters such as Yirmiahu Yovel, McCarthy understands Kant's goal to be the eventual disposal of the church since it is merely a vehicle for the instantiation of pure religion. A church can be a true church only if "it recognizes itself as transitional and as the imperfect vehicle of pure religion."²⁸ Kant thus advocates the rational purification of ecclesiastical bodies as they assume their vehicular role for moral religion. His vision, on McCarthy's reading, is one in which Christianity is purged of miracles and mysteries, as well as matters of atonement, grace, and sacramental ritual. This purging is not the outright removal of such doctrines from the faith but the symbolic reinterpretation of them set in motion in Books One and Two of *Religion*.²⁹

McCarthy sees Kant moving in Book Four from a purely symbolic theology to a more historical discussion of Jesus. While Kant understands the historicity of Jesus to be significant, in Book Four it becomes clear that this significance is not the kind most Christians affirm. Jesus is hailed only as the first teacher of true religion. Kant engages various sayings of Jesus with a view to showing Christianity (as originally expounded) to be in keeping with rational religion. Whether this crediting of Christianity is justified is doubtful to McCarthy, for Christian doctrine was smuggled in at the beginning of *Religion*; thus Kant's affirmation of Christianity at the end of *Religion* is dubious in its circularity. McCarthy sees the analysis of Christianity in Book Four as merely one of many echoes of Kant's Pietistic roots:

Kant's repeated singling out of Christianity and Christ (even when he does not refer to them by name) are, in fact, unjustified by his method of inquiry. A philosophical consideration of religion may, of course, look at historical religion and, indeed, should do so. But Kant looks all too instinctively at

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Christianity, so much so that one finally recognizes that his interest in Christianity underlies his philosophical inquiry into religion. Were he evenhanded, he would have to investigate at least parallel material from other historical religions. His standpoint is clear, however, even if unsupported: he regards Christianity as the only truly moral religion. Thus his continued interest in highlighting its moral content and in transforming or eliminating less praiseworthy elements is evident throughout.³⁰

Kant's Pietistic roots, in McCarthy's view, do not allow for an evenhanded assessment of religion. Instead, these roots drive Kant toward a favorable assessment of Christianity from the outset.³¹

In the end, McCarthy thinks virtually all the religious innovations in *Religion* betray Kant's desire, stemming from childhood, to carve out room for Christian faith despite its incongruence with the critical philosophy. As McCarthy summarizes, "Kant's treatment of Christ comes in the aftermath of the publication of the epoch-making Reimarus *Fragments*, edited by Lessing, in which Jesus and his disciples were depicted as schemers and deceivers. Thus, as Despland notes, 'Kant was at the beginning of a series of thinkers for whom it became clear that Jesus must either be reinterpreted or lost.' In part, Kant tried to save Jesus from the *Aufklärer*."³² In *Religion*, the entire endeavor of rescuing the Christian faith from the *Aufklärer* progresses, in McCarthy's view, under tension at each stage—the tension between the autonomous will and radical evil, the tension between the individualism of the second *Critique* and the ethical community of *Religion*, and the tension between the need for the church and the need to disband dogma and religious practice. McCarthy sees these tensions throughout as reflective of the greatest tension in *Religion*, namely, Kant's desire to merge his Pietistic roots with his critical philosophy. The implication is that only moral reason and God as postulate constitute legitimate developments in Kant's philosophy. The rest of Kant's rational religion must be interpreted either as adhering closely to moral reason and theological non-realism or as positing something novel and fundamentally out of step with the critical philosophy. Kant's philosophy of religion is thus either reductive toward historical religion or productive in an anti-critical way. But in either case, it remains in fundamental opposition to both religious experience and historical religion, despite Kant's metaphysical motivations.

Witness for the Defense: Stephen R. Palmquist

What makes Stephen Palmquist's testimony significant is that, rather than approaching the text with the skeptical lenses afforded by McCarthy, Palmquist argues that Kant genuinely intends to establish a rational basis for religious experience and practice, and this intent is present from the earliest manifestations of his critical philosophy. In other words, *Religion* is not an afterthought for Kant; it is the natural outcome of his philosophical quest, tempered by

years of critical reflection and religious conviction. Contrary to McCarthy, Palmquist does not see a sharp break between Kant's Pietistic upbringing and Enlightenment culture. Instead, Palmquist argues for a smooth transition. The gulf between Kant's pre-critical, rationalist metaphysics and Kant's groundbreaking transcendental philosophy is not nearly as great as some would suggest. Palmquist argues for a close connection between Kant's pre-critical interest in mysticism and the later development of his transcendental philosophy and theology.

Key to this interpretation is Palmquist's recasting of one of the most contentious essays Kant ever wrote, "Dreams" (1766). Kant wrote the essay in response to an encounter with the writings of Swedish mystic Emanuel Swedenborg. Swedenborg is famous for his contributions to numerous fields of inquiry, from science and politics to philosophy and religion. However, Swedenborg's more fantastic claims seemed to intrigue Kant most. Kant waited anxiously for, and then reportedly bought, Swedenborg's *Arcana Coelesti*, an expensive multi-volume treatise documenting Swedenborg's extraordinary mystical experiences and inspired interpretations of these experiences. Although Kant read *Arcana Coelesti* with great interest, unclear is what influence the specifics of the book had on Kant. Kant was apparently less than impressed on the whole, and—perhaps feeling a bit swindled—wrote "Dreams" in order to lambaste Swedenborg's writings, averring that they "contain not a single drop of reason" (2:360).

The traditional way of handling Kant's understanding of Swedenborg is to take the language and tone of "Dreams" at face value. Such an approach indicates that Kant (under the influence of the newly encountered writings of David Hume) disavowed his earlier intrigue with the Swede's mystical musings and clairvoyant experiences. "Dreams," on this reading, is prima facie evidence that Kant held at best an ambivalent view of Swedenborg's corpus and publicly expounded visions, and at worst a resolutely antithetical view toward the enthusiasm (*Schwärmerei*) that Swedenborg exemplifies. What is often pointed out is that Kant's criticism of Swedenborg's "mystical" accounts focuses on their lack of philosophical rigor. Kant's language is at times harsh and his tone often sarcastic, and this too is marshaled as clear support for the traditional understanding of Kant's position. Often interpreters take this firm rejection of Swedenborg's writings to mean that Kant was against the very possibility of any kind of mysticism whatsoever.³³ Credibility is added to such an interpretation when one realizes that Kant later did not include "Dreams" in a book of his collected writings—presumably because he was somewhat embarrassed by the essay.

Palmquist begins his interpretation of "Dreams" by acknowledging that Kant rejects most of Swedenborg's claims as critically untenable. Palmquist suggests, however, that the reason for Kant's uncharacteristically harsh treatment of Swedenborg's work is not clear. Limiting ourselves to what Kant

actually writes, we discover that Kant is clearly against mysticism of a certain kind, namely, fanatical forms of mysticism that attempt to usurp reason's authority and superstitious kinds of mysticism that attribute special powers to worldly things without good reason (see 2:360). But Palmquist points out that although Kant condemns Swedenborg's writings as an ad hoc mixture of both of these bad forms of mysticism, he does not disavow all forms of mysticism. The "tone" of "Dreams" is often over-interpreted and made to say as much. But Palmquist contends that the lack of a blanket rejection of mysticism in "Dream," when coupled with a careful look at the more positive material that runs parallel to this work in the critical philosophy, gives reason to think Kant may have developed a positive position on mysticism in his subsequent writings.

Palmquist believes that a positive case for the initial stages of "Kant's critical mysticism" can be made by comparing "Dreams" with the first *Critique*. In describing the content of "Dreams" as it relates to Swedenborg's writings, Palmquist insists, "Many of the important doctrines of his Critical philosophy are foreshadowed in this book (*and*, using rather different language, in Swedenborg's own books)."³⁴ For instance, in one passage in "Dreams" Kant outlines two advantages to maintaining a critical approach to metaphysics, both of which sound very much like his emphasis on critical inquiry and rational limitations in the first *Critique*. The first advantage is the neutralization of mystics such as Swedenborg, who enlist reason to support theories about hidden properties of things without reasonable cause (see 2:367). The second advantage, according to Kant, "consists both in knowing whether the task has been determined by reference to what one can know, and in knowing what relation the question has to the empirical concepts, upon which all our judgments must at all times be based. To that extent metaphysics is always a science of the *limits of human reason*" (2:367–68).

Other passages in "Dreams," Palmquist points out, foreshadow the central themes of the second *Critique* (see, e.g., 2:369–73). For example, in a series of rhetorical questions, Kant asks, "What, is it only good to be virtuous because there is another world? Or is it rather the case that actions will one day be rewarded because they are good and virtuous in themselves? Does not the heart of man contain within itself immediate moral prescriptions?" (2:372). Material links like these provide support for Palmquist's contention that Kant's encounter with the writings of Swedenborg is more constructive than typically thought.³⁵ Rather than understanding "Dreams" as a work of either "pre-critical" or "critical" philosophy, Palmquist sees it as a transitional writing. It exhibits the kind of critical balance and resourcefulness important to Kant's early writings and anticipates features integral to his later transcendental or "Copernican" writings.

Palmquist argues that the main difficulty in finding something positive in Kant's critical engagement with mysticism is that interpreters often read

"Dreams" and the first *Critique* as compatible "Copernican" rejections of mysticism. Yet, for Palmquist, "Dreams" represents a pre-Copernican mixture of perspectives in which Kant vents his critical frustration with his inability to cope satisfactorily with Swedenborg's claims. The question of knowledge commanding Kant's attention in the first *Critique* led to the formulation of a theoretical account of reason in which mysticism finds no secure foothold. Palmquist writes, "The fact that 'glimpses [of "the infinity in the finite and the universality in the individual"] are distrusted' by Kant is taken by most interpreters as a distrust of immediate [religious] experience, when in fact Kant's expression of distrust in such 'glimpses' always relates to their inadequacy when viewed from reason's theoretical standpoint, the standpoint that aims at and depends on empirical knowledge."³⁶ This does not mean that, as the critical philosophy developed, Kant remained unable to find a suitable place for religious experience and practice, however. On the contrary, Palmquist sees this concern to place religious experience and practice as present throughout the Kantian corpus and finally brought to critical completion and fruition in Kant's writings on religion and posthumous writings.

The posthumous writings, or *Opus Postumum*, are important for Palmquist's interpretation of Kant because these papers demonstrate, more clearly than any other writings, Kant's intention to complete his philosophy as a systematic whole, including God, man, and world within its architectonic parameters. The third *Critique* and *Religion* constitute the third part of Kant's plan, and, as we will see, this placement is integral to Palmquist's interpretation of *Religion*. However, the question of man—including man's place in the world and relationship to God—is never fully addressed as a final synthesis within the critical architectonic. The *Opus Postumum*, while incomplete and tentative at best, show that Kant was indeed interested in providing a complete and critical account of reason that incorporates God, man, and world into one system. When this fact is coupled with a careful analysis of Kant's metaphysical transition from the pre-critical writings to the critical philosophy, it appears that Kant sought from beginning to end to include a critical account of religious experience at the transcendental boundaries of reason.

Palmquist's technical name for this final movement in Kant's thought is the "Transcendental Perspective."³⁷ Palmquist contends that this is the one overarching perspective that is important for understanding the nature and extent of Kant's philosophy and its overall relationship to the philosophy of religion. The Transcendental Perspective does not have a special relationship to any single *Critique*, but is the perspective governing all of them. Palmquist puts it thus: "There is no 'transcendental standpoint'—i.e. no separate *Critique* corresponding to the transcendental perspective—because this perspective forms the Transcendental Perspective which governs *all* the [perspectives] on the very highest level on which the principle of perspective operates in Kant's System."³⁸ The Transcendental Perspective critically "unpacked" consists of

an empirical standpoint in the first *Critique*, a moral standpoint in the second *Critique*, and a combined aesthetic/teleological standpoint in the third *Critique*. As Palmquist writes, “This over-arching ‘Transcendental (or ‘Copernican’) Perspective’, which is based on the assumption that the subject imposes certain a priori conditions on the object, defines the systematic context into which all three Critical systems fit.”³⁹ The Transcendental Perspective proceeds on the assumption that religious experience is experience of a special kind: according to Palmquist, Kant’s God is assumed to be the ground of being, and as such funds experience in each of its forms. Religious experience, therefore, is fundamentally distinct from all other forms of experience—scientific, moral, and aesthetic. In a word, it is *mystical* and bound up with the transcendental nature of bare reason as a whole.

For our purposes here, we need not go into the details of Palmquist’s interpretation of the critical philosophy.⁴⁰ Neither Palmquist’s case for Kant’s “critical mysticism” nor the significance of the *Opus Postumum* to the critical philosophy is at issue here. What Palmquist’s interpretation adds by way of testimony that McCarthy overlooks is the positive utility of the many religiously and theologically affirmative resources in Kant’s work. So far, we have focused on Palmquist’s case for positive metaphysical motives behind the construction of the critical philosophy. Palmquist’s case for the positive incorporation of *Religion* into the critical philosophy depends less on these holistic considerations and more on the role of the third *Critique*. According to Palmquist, the third *Critique* in particular is what allows Kant to transform mere moral faith into a critically robust form of rational religious faith.

Palmquist presents the third *Critique* as “the crowning phase of [Kant’s] entire System.”⁴¹ According to Palmquist, “in the *Critique of Judgment* Kant argues that the opposite standpoints of nature (our causally-determined, theoretical knowledge) and freedom (our self-determined, practical action) are *synthesized* by various forms of existential judgment.”⁴² Palmquist points to a lengthy appendix in the third *Critique*, where Kant explains how this synthesis provides a foundation for “moral theology,” where God can be seen as more than a “deistic watchmaker.” He instead becomes a “*living God*, who can be encountered—albeit, symbolically—in just such forms of human experience as are examined earlier in the book.”⁴³ The judicial, or third, standpoint of transcendental reason, brings critical culmination and existential import to the architectonic substructure of Kant’s entire philosophical system and, as such, is crucial for determining the meaning of *Religion*.

The problem of unity is highlighted in the third *Critique* (see 5:176) and manifests itself in a distinctly religious form in Book One of *Religion*. Without aesthetic and teleological judgment, nature would appear blind to human moral striving, and human moral striving would appear queer to nature. Unless reason has within its faculties a source of hope, it becomes unstable. The third *Critique* brings harmony to reason through the experience of beauty and

sublimity, and these experiences provide us with a sense of purposiveness that compels human judgment to contemplate the meaning of the highest good. This is, of course, not new to Kant's way of thinking. He had already highlighted the significance of the highest good in the first antinomy of practical reason in the second *Critique*. In the third *Critique*, however, the issue of the highest good comes to the fore and eventually leads Kant to consider religion. In this way, the third *Critique* becomes the crowning phase in Kant's critical trilogy, setting the stage for a transcendental building process, meant to stabilize the fact-value divide and initiate a critical approach to philosophy of religion.

Palmquist is sensitive to the shortcomings of interpretations that understand *Religion* to somehow reduce religion to morality in an eliminative way. (Eliminative reduction occurs when "one special way of explaining something is not only necessary, but *self-sufficient*, so that it can actually replace, or *explain* away all other explanations.")⁴⁴ However, Palmquist suggests that understanding *Religion* in such a decisively moral way makes Kant's arguments appear radically inconsistent. And it would be better, in the light of the perspectival nature of Kant's philosophical program leading up to *Religion*, to see *Religion* as an answer to the question, What may I hope? and as requiring third *Critique* resources for its interpretation. According to Palmquist, "[*Religion*] ought to be viewed as itself a transcendental *Critique of Religion*—i.e., as an attempt to delineate the *boundary* between true religion and false religion by setting forth the *necessary conditions for the possibility of religious experience*."⁴⁵ In this way, *Religion* presents a prolegomena to "Critical Mysticism."

These considerations surrounding the critical philosophy and its relationship to Kant's metaphysical motivations set the stage for Palmquist's interpretation of *Religion*. According to Palmquist, there exists a plethora of "perspectival" considerations in *Religion* that Kant imports from the critical philosophy. Put simply, Palmquist suggests that each of the four books of *Religion* is best understood as a manifestation of one of four different perspectives emanating from the critical philosophy—the transcendental, logical, empirical, and hypothetical perspectives, respectively. Each of these four perspectives branches out into three distinct moments in Kant's argument. Thus, *Religion*, for Palmquist, has a kind of architectonic structure (not unlike Kant's *Critiques*) that, when properly understood, reveals the essence of bare reason as it applies to religious experience. A summary of this twelve-fold structure is displayed in "Figure VII.8: Kant's Circle of Religion" of *Kant's Critical Religion*. To unpack all the idiosyncrasies of Palmquist's approach to *Religion* would take us well beyond the confines of the required testimony. Instead, we will here take only a brief look at the contours of each book in *Religion*, according to Palmquist's reading, and home in on Kant's arguments regarding the moral disposition found therein.

Palmquist takes the central question of Book One of *Religion* to be, Is human nature originally good or evil? Kant's answer to this question, argues

Palmquist, is two-sided. On the one side, when we refer to the “potential that resides in every human being . . . we must regard human nature as originally good.”⁴⁶ This is how Palmquist understands Kant’s talk of “the predisposition.” On the other side, if “the question refers to the *actual* state of every human person in their first (and subsequent) moral act(s), then we cannot avoid the conclusion that an original (‘radical’) evil exists in every human nature.”⁴⁷ Humans in this sense are “evil by nature.” Palmquist summarizes, “Kant never explains the origin of ‘radical evil’ . . . , but merely sets it up as a sign of the inscrutability of evil’s true origin.”⁴⁸

Book Two, by contrast, asks, How can an *evil* person *become* good? Kant’s answer again, says Palmquist, involves two parts. First, “no matter how good we are, we cannot be good enough to please God.”⁴⁹ God is holy and perfect; we are unholy and flawed. The gulf is too big to be traversed by mere human effort. Second, “by acting morally we render ourselves *susceptible* of ‘higher and, for us [i.e., for bare reason] inscrutable assistance.’”⁵⁰ Kant, thinks Palmquist, holds that we can hope to become pleasing to God by acting morally, and in doing so we make ourselves susceptible to divine assistance in our moral deficiencies. Book Two, according to Palmquist, is essentially an argument for the claim, “*grace is a necessary condition of becoming good.*”⁵¹ We must believe in grace because the integrity of our moral dispositions depends on it. “The solution to the problem of personal evil,” argues Palmquist, “rests on an inscrutable element in the system: the notion that there is a higher moral Being who will assist us in our moral weakness, thus making practical faith . . . effective.”⁵² The practical personification of God’s gracious provision is “the ‘ideal of moral perfection’ that exists in every human person as an ‘archetype’ and ‘can give us power.’”⁵³ That is, Palmquist assumes that all humans have within them an idea of a morally perfect person, and this idea can help spur on moral converts in their moral striving. According to Palmquist, there is no rational explanation for the existence of this concept of a morally perfect person within us, “other than to assume it is an inscrutable gift from some higher moral power.”⁵⁴

Whereas Books One and Two consider the rational dimension of religion by way of the existence of inscrutable evil in human nature and faith in divine (and equally inscrutable) moral assistance, Book Three displays Kant’s “concern for establishing the context for the expression of the good heart in the real world of *experience* . . . [by] adopting . . . an *empirical* religious perspective.”⁵⁵ Palmquist understands the empirical perspective to be demonstrated explicitly in Kant’s turn to social or communal considerations, or what Kant calls “the ethical commonwealth.” Kant likens the ethical commonwealth to a church with both invisible and visible dimensions. It is the duty of human beings with good hearts to band together and form their kindred, invisible unity into a visible kingdom of God on earth. According to Palmquist, “The empirical perspective . . . concludes . . . by making ‘empirical faith,’ also known as

'historical ecclesiastical faith,' a necessary element of genuine religion."⁵⁶ The rest of Book Three shows how the empirical insights of reason "are to be *applied* in a real, historical religion."⁵⁷ For Palmquist, "like radical evil and the assistance-giving archetype in the first two stages, the details of the divine organization of the church must be 'filled in' by some historical tradition."⁵⁸ Christianity is Kant's religion of choice in this regard.

Palmquist places Book Four of *Religion* under the rubric of the hypothetical perspective of reason insofar as it "establishes the conditions under which the church, as given in [Book Three], can serve God, despite the limitations of earthly existence."⁵⁹ True service to God constitutes the direct activity of bare reason or natural religion, while indirect service to God is a product of revealed religion. Indirect service, as a sort of non-moral "add-on," has its place in any thoroughgoing analysis of religion as the clothing of pure religious faith. However, when it is understood to be somehow self-sufficient or detached from natural religion, it shades off into pseudo-service to God and religious delusion. Natural religion alone is necessary to please God; revealed religion, on the other hand, is made up of an admixture of both moral action and morally indifferent action. Morally indifferent action, according to Palmquist, plays a "supporting role" in the quest for true religion by providing a dispositional context that promotes moral action.⁶⁰ Yet, Kant's main concern in Book Four is to properly prioritize natural and revealed religion, and point out where religion goes wrong when it misprioritizes these features.

Looking deeper into this basic structure to Palmquist's reading of *Religion*, we find first Palmquist's understanding of the disposition. Palmquist defines the generic human disposition as "the timeless ground of a person's maxims at any given point in time."⁶¹ Precisely what this means for Palmquist is difficult to determine. Although he seems initially satisfied with maintaining this somewhat paradoxical definition, he takes Kant's aims in *Religion* to require an explication of the human disposition in order to get at the transcendental conditions of religious experience and the contours of critical religious belief. As Palmquist draws out Kant's understanding of the disposition, he contrasts the human disposition with the original predisposition. The predisposition, says Palmquist, is "the timeless ground of a person's maxims at the very *outset* of life, before any moral actions have been performed,"⁶² while the human disposition is essentially a combination of the "predisposition" and what we might call the "disposition proper." When, however, the disposition is considered in its original state of goodness, it is thought of as an indeterminate predisposition to good. When the disposition is considered subsequent to its employment in nature it is thought of as the disposition proper, which has been determined by human freedom. This second way of considering the disposition is what Palmquist thinks Kant has in mind when he says humans are "evil by nature." When the human disposition, which is originally good, is employed in nature, it naturally inverts the moral order of incentives and

displays an evil character. And this inversion is what makes way for the indwelling of radical evil.

Palmquist thus understands the logic of Kant's argument to endorse a kind of double-aspect understanding of the human disposition: the disposition is viewed in either its original state of innocence or its existential state of evil. Hovering between these two aspects, we find what Kant calls "the propensity to evil." The propensity to evil, like the disposition, has two dimensions—a noumenal and a phenomenal dimension. The former is the sense in which radical evil is innate, "indwelling" us, as Palmquist puts it, while the latter is the phenomenal exercise of the will, where we have "actively *chosen* [evil] even though we are essentially passive recipients of the 'indwelling' of radical evil."⁶³ While what it means to display a phenomenal propensity to evil may be clear enough, the noumenal act that gives rise to this propensity is less clear. Palmquist recognizes that Kant takes the propensity to evil to be rooted in a subjective ground for the exercise of freedom that is chosen prior to any exercise of freedom in time, and this is the "noumenal act" that gives rise to the phenomenal propensity to evil.⁶⁴ As Palmquist points out, a noumenal act, by definition, is inscrutable; thus we have no explanation of why each individual chooses evil. We can only affirm, says Palmquist, the paradoxical reality that this noumenal act is contingent and yet universal—every human contingently chooses evil.⁶⁵ Radical evil is thus "a mystery not unlike the mysteries of pure intuition and freedom, both of which Kant regards as basic facts of human nature that must simply be acknowledged, and cannot be proved or explained by reason."⁶⁶ For this reason, radical evil is the noumenal complement to the phenomenal propensity to evil, affecting the turn from the predisposition to the disposition proper and creating a situation in which each human disposition must be converted to the good.⁶⁷

Conversion, on Palmquist's reading, is not a mere intellectual acknowledgement of radical evil and of the need to change our ways. Rather, conversion is a "radical *conversion* of one's disposition," a conversion equally radical as the movement away from the predisposition to good.⁶⁸ As for the possibility of such conversion, we must hold it possible, Palmquist submits, because duty demands it. This said, conversion is not to be naively thought of as a re-turn back to the original state of human disposition. To the contrary, it is a turning toward the good in full realization of the inevitable pitfalls and failings associated with even the most radical moral striving.

Palmquist admits the presence of profound paradoxes in *Religion*. In fact, the thrust of Palmquist's argument seems to be that Kant's intent in Book One is to show that we necessarily meet with certain paradoxes from the perspective of reason alone. On the one hand, Kant believes that it must be within our power to obey the moral law and, by extension, convert our disposition back to the good. On the other hand, Kant asserts that, despite a lingering "seed of goodness," evil is "*not to be extirpated* by human forces" (6:37). This paradoxical

cal account of the human condition requires that we believe in divine aid as the only reasonable way forward. How God could provide the kind of assistance that preserves human autonomy and moral self-determination is a mystery, but mystery is part and parcel of the mysticism Palmquist sees in Kant.

Resting a philosophy of religion on mystical foundations may appear folly according to the analytic logic of Kant's detractors, but this makes perfect sense according to the synthetic logic of Kant's critical mysticism. When nature and freedom are considered simultaneously, we are driven to reflection on the question of hope in the context of felt harmony. Palmquist sees the third *Critique* as providing an insufficient account of this harmony and the religious feeling that is often associated with it. *Religion*, as a transcendental critique of the possibility of religious experience, therefore offers a way forward. Once we recognize that the human predicament is fundamentally paradoxical, a *Religion*-styled narrative of evil and redemption, based on moral fortitude and divine grace, becomes a rational answer to the question of hope. According to Palmquist's interpretation of *Religion*, both grace and moral striving are required for the hope of salvation. Grace is the theoretical means and moral striving is the practical means. They can never be thought of at the same time, however, for to do so would yield a contradiction. From the point of view of judicial reasoning, the nature of the relationship between grace and moral striving is inscrutable.⁶⁹ Mystery and inscrutability are, therefore, the hallmarks of Palmquist's interpretation of Kant's philosophy of religion. He understands them to have intellectual credibility because, for Kant, religion is rooted in the paradoxical and ineffable phenomenon of religious experience at the outer bounds of reason transcendently considered.

Witness for the Prosecution: Keith Ward

Palmquist's strategy for interpreting *Religion* emerges out of his interpretation of Kant's critical philosophy as a whole. It relies on showing a relationship between the beginning and end of Kant's career as a professional philosopher and, in this context, showing how *Religion* fits into the critical philosophy as an extension of the arguments in the second and third *Critique*. Keith Ward accepts many of the main features of this type of interpretation. His key interpretative text, entitled *The Development of Kant's View of Ethics*, moves from the pre-critical writings to the *Opus Postumum* in a way very similar to Palmquist's work. Nevertheless, Ward arrives at diametrically different conclusions than Palmquist. Ward's rendition of Kant's journey casts suspicion on the overt optimism reflected in Palmquist's testimony. Ward argues that Kant was never able to get beyond a purely formal expansion of his ethical theory and that a continuous thread of theological agnosticism, not mysticism, permeates Kant's critical writings from beginning to end. Like Palmquist, Ward grants that some optimism exists in the first *Critique* regarding the status of transcendental

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idealism and the eventual development of a critical approach to religion and theology. “[Kant] holds open,” avers Ward, “the future possibility of a final synthesis of human knowledge under necessary principles,”⁷⁰ and Ward grants that Kant’s motives behind completing the system are never far removed from his religious convictions. Unlike Palmquist, however, Ward does not think that Kant provides a feasible architectonic capable of grounding critical religious theory. Kant’s ethics and philosophy of religion are built on the shifting sands of rational and religious concepts, and from the point of view of the critical philosophy proper, no way exists to make coherent sense of Kant’s writings on religion.

In a moment, we will examine how Ward tracks the evolution of Kant’s position on ethics from “Dreams” (1766) to *Religion* (1793). An important preliminary note, however, is that this analysis is set in the context of a careful assessment of the biographical and historical origins of Kant’s thought. Ward, like McCarthy, thinks these details dramatically color Kant’s ethical theory and place it in a conceptual quagmire from which Kant was never able to escape. In the opening pages of his treatment, Ward zeros in on the tension between Kant’s Pietistic Lutheran upbringing and the philosophical rationalism of his university education. According to Ward, “A vital key to the understanding of Kant’s views is the fact that his parents were both devout members of the Pietist Church.”⁷¹ Kant’s parents had “set before him, from his earliest years, an example of simple piety at its best; and his deepest religious convictions never moved far from this idea of the religious life.”⁷² But, as Ward points out, Kant also experienced a darker side of Pietism at Protestant school. At school, Kant learned that outward piety was to be valued more than inner sincerity, that emotional intensity was more significant than moral worth, and that his sins should be his constant focus.⁷³ This experience eventually loosened the grip of religion on Kant’s intellectual life.

As Kant’s schooling continued, philosophical rationalism became another important influence on his ethical and religious thought. Kant was introduced to this intellectual pathway when he enrolled at the University of Königsberg, and it became an enticing alternative to Pietism. Christian Wolff and Martin Knutzen were important catalysts in this regard. Wolff systematized and elaborated on the work of Leibniz, and he provided the standard texts in the areas of logic and metaphysics during Kant’s formative years. Knutzen was Kant’s esteemed teacher at university. He utilized Wolff’s texts and teachings, and was influential in guiding Kant toward rationalism in his philosophical inquiries. “Knutzen himself,” Ward writes, “managed to combine Pietism and rationalism; and the combination of simple faith and rigorous intellect is very characteristic of his greatest pupil.”⁷⁴ Ward takes the mix of Pietism and rationalism to be the driving influence behind the development of Kant’s ethics, and the chief reason why Kant eventually runs into trouble in *Religion*. According to Ward, “It is plain that the combination of these two schools of thought is not

easily achievable. There is the difference of an era between the man of faith, who lives by Divine revelation and self-abnegation; and the man of the Enlightenment, for whom reason is the final judge in all matters, even those of religion.”⁷⁵

Like Palmquist, Ward begins his analysis of Kant's metaphysical motivations for writing *Religion* with “Dreams.” Unlike Palmquist, however, Ward argues that the tone and force of the language in this essay combine to launch a frontal attack on metaphysics as represented in the work of Emanuel Swedenborg, and Ward understands this attack to spill over into Kant's account of metaphysics generally considered. “Dreams” marks a time in Kant's life, argues Ward, when encounters with the metaphysical pretensions of the day came to a head, bringing into collision Pietism and rationalism in the work of Swedenborg. In the end, metaphysical speculation became the very epitome of all that is wrong with religion from the point of view of reason, and, as a result, Kant came to the conclusion that the pursuit of moral perfection was the only meaningful aim in human life. Accordingly, “One might see the main argument of the *Dreams* . . . as being to establish the independence and logical priority of morality over theoretical speculation.”⁷⁶

Ward contends that “*Dreams* marks the nadir of Kant's metaphysical interests” and the true source of Kant's turn toward morality in his later writings.⁷⁷ Metaphysics does not emerge again in the degree present in Kant's pre-critical writings until the moral theology of the second *Critique*, and there it takes a very different form. This new form erases virtually all of the robust realism of Kant's earlier and more conventional work in theology in favor of a kind of moral formalism, conducive to the transcendental nature of reason. Ward notes that the task of establishing an a priori universal science, though begun in the first *Critique*, does not receive Kant's full attention until *Groundwork of the Metaphysics of Morals* and the second *Critique*. In the meantime, Kant's theoretical philosophy puts his thought at some remove from the rational religious realism of his pre-critical work. According to Ward, the critical Kant became more of an agnostic in his religious and theological convictions, looking to formulate the rational essence of religion rather than ground the empirical dimension of religion.

All this is not to say that Ward is insensitive to the many aspects of Kant's philosophy that carry positive implications for faith. Citing Kant's *Lectures on Ethics*, for example, Ward points to how Kant explicitly affirms, “though ethics cannot depend upon metaphysical or theological belief, it necessarily gives rise to theological belief and cannot exist without it.”⁷⁸ Yet, in Ward's estimation, while clearly positive in theological intent, little of Kant's pre-critical metaphysics actually survives the Copernican revolution. In the development of Kant's ethics, Ward understands Kant to start from a position of theoretical agnosticism and gravitate gradually toward moral non-realism. Kant's rational foundations for theology correspond directly to the support they receive from

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his moral theory and the lack of support (and outright antagonism) they receive from his theoretical philosophy. For this reason, they remain merely a formal aspect of his moral development.

Ward's emphasis on the formal in morality and his conclusion that Kant's thinking on theology lacks any real metaphysical content has clear implications for the way in which Ward interprets *Religion*. Ward cannot hold that *Religion* develops Kant's moral thought in ways that excavate the rational grounds for religious faith; the development of Kant's ethics, thinks Ward, always ends up with the postulation of God as a merely formal component of morality. As Ward puts it, "The imagined supposition of a supreme moral intelligence thus helps to regulate our attitudes in specific ways, as dictated by morality itself."⁷⁹ The rest of Kant's philosophy of religion only supports these postulates, adding nothing to them that they do not already possess on their own. Moreover, there is no possible correlation between the concept of God (and immortality) and reality; the concept of God and any further dissemination of its meaning is a mere figment or fiction. Ward summarizes this way: "not only is talk of God 'empty' or purely formal—being not founded on sense perceptions—it is necessarily inapplicable to the object it attempts to conceive. So there is no question that a noumenal object might *correspond* to these ideas of reason."⁸⁰

In line with this assessment, Ward argues that *Religion* is meant simply to expound on and, in a sense, vindicate the formal nature of the moral theory. When the reality and profundity of our moral failure threatens to destabilize practical reason, religious reasoning of the kind we find in *Religion* provides us with helpful and novel moral resources. According to Ward, "the only important thing in religion is that which is common to all religions, obedience to the moral law and hope of grace to remedy man's seemingly inevitable moral deficiencies. Beyond this a man may believe what he pleases, as long as he does not regard the specific observances of his own religion as in themselves an especially pleasing service to God, or as any more than 'a means of awakening within us a godly disposition.'"⁸¹ In Ward's interpretation of Kant, moral character and obedience are at some remove from religious belief and practice. The latter serve as only a help-maid to the former. As long as religion promotes human moral striving (or at least does not lead to moral deficiency), the content of and rituals behind belief are not significant.⁸²

In this light, it is not hard to see how Ward's contextualized reading of *Religion* parallels the work of McCarthy, while yielding a blanket dismissal of interpretations such as Palmquist's. Ward's interpretation of *Religion* presents a highly critical account of Kant's position, where *Religion* is understood as a book written by a man seeking to come to terms with two opposing positions on religion and theology.⁸³ For Ward, "there remains in Kant to the end that tension of freedom and rational intelligibility, Wolffian rationalism and individualistic Pietism, from which he started."⁸⁴ Kant's chief concern in *Religion*,

under this reading, is to stabilize the moral quest by translating Christian concepts into ones that are useful for moral purposes. In Book One of *Religion*, Kant begins with the philosophical translation of the Christian doctrine of original sin:

Kant here seems to commit himself fully to the Christian doctrine of original sin; and his version of the theory retains all the paradoxes of the orthodox account. Evil is innate; but man is responsible for it. It is ineradicable, but every particular action is original and totally free; so each new evil act is an original fall from innocence. He accepts the biblical story of the Fall, treating it as a temporal allegory depicting a non-temporal, intelligible reality.⁸⁵

Kant gives the title *radical evil* to his moral translation, identifying original sin as every individual's decision to invert the moral order of incentives and subordinate the moral law to other considerations. On Ward's account, radical evil is "the existential genesis of the Fall in every man; Adam is a symbol to explain our innate evil propensity."⁸⁶ The symbol of the Fall communicates that "man was seduced and is not fundamentally corrupt."⁸⁷ This picture of a fall from a higher state assures us that, while we, as humans, bear a corrupt heart, there also lingers remnants of "a good will; and so hope remains of a return to the good."⁸⁸ The symbol of the Fall becomes, for Ward, both the sober assessment of humanity's tendency to diverge from the moral law and a glimmer of hope that a return to the good may be possible. Radical evil is thus the aperture through which the rest of Kant's translation takes place.

The tension between human corruption and moral redemption requires divine grace. Grace comes through both a fresh conversion to the good and the individual's determination to band together with others committed to being good so that moral progress can proceed. As such, grace must be thought of as something that comes only as a result of a continual, phenomenal demonstration of an inner conversion to the good; that is, grace "must be won through one's own efforts."⁸⁹ In short, one "wins" grace through conversion.

Conversion, on Ward's reading, is a continual putting off of the old self for the sake of the new; its realization is never certain, for it can only be inferred from "one's actual moral improvement in life."⁹⁰ Given this uncertainty, grace, like the Fall, becomes an important symbol for Kant's moral economy. The grace symbol assures us that the imperfect life is judged not on the basis of its inherent perfection, or even its approximation of perfection; rather, the grace symbol assures the moral convert that our moral life is judged on the basis of its overall character. Insofar as this character testifies to an inherently good disposition made to appear imperfect by ongoing phenomenal deficiencies, we can hope to find mercy. As Ward puts it, "An ever-defective but endless advance may be judged by an intellectual intuition to be perfect as a whole, because of its underlying disposition. . . . As phenomenon, man is permanently deficient;

yet, as noumenon, he is essentially holy, through a change of heart.”⁹¹ Grace is not a foreign divine influence, on Ward’s reading, but a symbol, encouraging radical and continual rededication of the will to the moral law as supreme incentive. Grace thus constitutes a formal addition to reason, occupying the same intellectual space as the other religious postulates of moral reason.

To Ward’s mind, Kant’s entire argument centers on Christian symbols and their usefulness in developing the anatomy of moral postulates. These symbols should be read not as Kant’s commendation of wishful thinking, but as necessary features of the moral philosophy. “Religious doctrines are implied in morality,” Ward contends, “in so far as they symbolize this struggle [i.e., a warfare of good and evil], its origin and its outcome, in the individual’s life.”⁹² Without employing religious symbols, the moral philosophy would be nothing more than abstract formalism. Religious symbols and aesthetic ideas, thinks Ward, share an important characteristic: “they express what is indefinable in a particular mental state in such a way that it can be communicated to others.”⁹³ When the moral law is confronted by competing sensual incentives, religious symbols are able to counteract their potentially corruptive influence. They put flesh on the internal, dispositional struggle of every man—the human will is conflicted, and symbols help to bring this struggle and the possibility of its solution into sharp relief.

To be sure, Ward’s interpretation of Kant understands symbol to depend only accidentally on history. Reason does not require empirical argumentation for the justification of symbols or necessitate that symbols be taken from a specific historical faith (e.g., Christianity). As far as our moral improvement is concerned, there is no point to considering whether Jesus ever existed, for example. The symbol of the prototype works just as well with or without the historical personage. Jesus may well be “the ‘archetype of the pure moral disposition,’ which all men must imitate in themselves”;⁹⁴ and it may be true that, in the act of conversion, the new man undergoes suffering brought on him by the sins of the old man, a suffering “the Christian story of Jesus on the Cross symbolizes.”⁹⁵ But the story (or symbol) itself does not provide anything of substance to the process; and presumably, Kant could draw religious symbols from any historical faith—even though his “European biases” likely made other religious images a non-option for him.

With this picture of *Religion* before us, we come to Ward’s testimony regarding the success of Kant’s project. The fact that the symbol of divine assistance is required for moral striving should not be taken to mean that Ward finds Kant’s understanding of grace to be coherent relative to the critical philosophy as a whole. To the contrary, Kant’s use of the grace symbol is precisely where Ward thinks Kant’s account begins to run aground. Divine assistance is “incomprehensible” from both the theoretical and practical vantage points. We could never know that God gave us assistance, and the moral philosophy itself cannot coherently be conceived to rest on such assistance

since we cannot construct maxims around what God might do. Nevertheless, on Kant's view, we need "a complete reversal of the ordering of incentives we have intelligibly chosen, a conversion of the intelligible act, so that the moral law can be re-established as sole adequate incentive of all our maxims."⁹⁶ This sets up grace as a "mystery" in *Religion*: "The basic mystery, in this sense, is that regarding what God may do to supplement our moral inabilities, to bring about the *summum bonum*."⁹⁷ For Ward, much of what we find in *Religion* is the symbolic rendering of this mystery. So, for example, "the Devil symbolises the power of one's own evil choice; Heaven and Hell symbolise the radical gulf between the pure and impure will; the Holy Spirit becomes our confidence in our own moral disposition; and Christ symbolises that moral perfection which is the final end of creation."⁹⁸ One of the rather dubious outcomes of this symbolism, however, is that the mystery of grace makes conversion unattractive. Essentially, Ward argues that the symbols of grace are so extreme they are more likely to prompt despair than to stir moral striving, and, in the end, our epistemic limitations prevent all assurance that an actual change in disposition has taken place anyway.⁹⁹

Other more serious and fundamental irregularities, specifically regarding conversion, linger just below the surface of *Religion*. Ward highlights these difficulties in a series of questions:

Suppose that at one time, T1, a man has happiness as his determining incentive; at T2 he takes the moral law as incentive; and at T3 he returns to happiness. Has he had a change of heart and back again? For Kant, man must be totally good or bad; so how does one determine the ultimate maxim—by counting empirical acts and balancing them up? And how can there be a change of heart in a timeless, unchanging intelligible world? Or how can infinite progress really be equivalent to actual perfection? Can we be sure that all men are regenerate? That the process is one-way and will be completed? If the punishment is infinite, must the new man sacrifice for eternity? And how can one man intelligibly decide both ways at once?¹⁰⁰

Such tensions create a severe instability in *Religion* and cast suspicion on the success of Kant's efforts to merge moral formalism and religious doctrine. Ward sees these tensions as having their roots in Kant's Pelagianism, which, in *Religion*, comes to rely on an inscrutable and insistent belief in God's grace and forgiveness.¹⁰¹ This uneasy juxtaposition drives the forensic analysis of atonement in Kant's philosophy of religion, where humans are charged with doing as much good as possible and hoping that God will make up the difference. In the end, however, Ward thinks one of the few intelligible things about Kant's account of grace is that it ends in contradiction—what Ward calls "the contradiction of grace and spontaneity."¹⁰² The introduction of depravity and grace into Kant's account of the human will produces "an antinomy . . . between the necessity for atonement before the evil disposition can be over-

come, and the necessity that good works should proceed from faith, if one is to hope for atonement.”¹⁰³

In addition to these internal difficulties, Ward finds a fundamental tension between Kant’s moral formalism and religious realism.¹⁰⁴ Realism in Kant’s religious convictions runs headlong into Kant’s philosophical strictures on knowledge of God and the fact that God and immortality are mere ethical postulations.¹⁰⁵ In the development of Kant’s ethics, tensions and contradictions like these rule the day. On Ward’s interpretation, “Kant’s view of ethics ends, in the *Religion* and the *Opus Postumum*, in a tangle of contradictions and antinomies, in which Kant is constantly saying what is on his own terms unsayable, and saying it in contradictory ways.”¹⁰⁶ When Kant tries to express a deeply religious ethics in radically humanistic terms, the whole project must finally end in conundrums and contradictions. Ward sums up his critique as follows:

Perhaps the main factor which does render the *Religion* in the end an unsatisfactory work is not Kant’s introduction of religious concepts into morality, but his humanistic faith in the unbounded power of pure reason, both to disclose the truth about man’s moral situation, and to overcome innate evil in its own power. It is clearer to those who stand in a different culture and age from Kant how much his basic view of ethics derives, not from a supposed eternal reason, but from a rather over-zealous Pietistic, and certainly Christian, background.¹⁰⁷

Ward finds Kant’s project in *Religion* to fail, both in its tendency to violate Kant’s own rational principles and in its internal quagmires. Ward thus testifies that the entire dilemma stems from Kant’s metaphysical and religious motives, which were never completely purified from the Pietistic religious tendencies of his youth, and only create tension with Kant’s more sober rationalist predilections.

What Ward’s testimony shows is that Kant wants to ground religion, even the Christian religion, within the confines of the critical philosophy and that Kant has a certain amount of critical resources for doing so. In this sense, Ward agrees with Palmquist. However, Kant runs into the insurmountable problem of precisely how to ground religion in reason, given the sharp and very decisive divide between phenomena and noumena in his transcendental philosophy. By Ward’s lights, Kant’s rationalistic ethics are what came to matter most to Kant’s religious worldview, and these ethics capture much, if not all, of the essence of Kant’s religious motivations. When schematized, however, this essence becomes purely formal moral postulation. Ward cannot understand Kant as a critical mystic in the same way Palmquist does because Kant is clearly a transcendental rationalist with an expressed aversion to mystical enthusiasm. Like Palmquist, Ward senses Kant’s continuing optimism throughout the first *Critique* and right through to *Religion*, but this optimism in no way alleviates the tension between rationalism and religion that characterizes Kant’s work.

Any linguistic similarities between Swedenborg's writings, the first *Critique*, and the unfinished notes on Kant's desk, simply do not tip the scales toward mysticism. Ward thus sides with McCarthy. *Religion* is an expression of the conflict between Kant's positive metaphysical motivations and his negative rationalistic predilections, and is riddled with conundrums because of it.

With this telling assessment of Kant's metaphysical motives and their consequences for the philosophy of religion before us, we turn now to consider one final testimony concerning the metaphysical motives behind *Religion*. This testimony comes on behalf of the defense and is that of the early Allen Wood, who promotes a more optimistic view of these matters. But, as we will see, Wood approaches the topics of Kant's metaphysical motivations from a vantage point quite distinct from the foregoing testimonies.

Witness for the Defense: Allen W. Wood

As an interpreter of Kant's philosophy of religion, Allen Wood has two distinct phases to his career. In his early work, which includes his highly influential books *Kant's Moral Religion* (1970) and *Kant's Rational Theology* (1977), Wood understands Kant's philosophical system as religiously and theologically affirmative in a strong sense.¹⁰⁸ Wood's general thesis is this: "Kant's argument for the rational inevitability of the idea of an *ens realissimum* is an original and well thought out one, making use of concepts that belong to the metaphysical tradition."¹⁰⁹ Wood interprets Kant as a theological realist and advocate of rational religious faith in a "living God," contending, "it would be a great mistake to see in the God of Kant's moral faith no more than an abstract, metaphysical idea. For Kant, moral faith in God is . . . the moral man's *trust in God*."¹¹⁰ For the early Wood, there is no doubt that "Kant's position is not to be described as 'deistic.'"¹¹¹ Instead, Wood describes Kant's position as "moral theism." More recently, Wood has defended a less affirmative portrait of Kant. Wood's essays "Kant's Deism" and "Rational Theology, Moral Faith, and Religion" argue that Kant's philosophy of religion and rational theology shade off into deism, and eventually yield a straightforward program "to abolish the church's hierarchical constitution."¹¹² Wood defines a deist as "a believer in a natural religion founded on unaided reason, but not in a revealed religion, a religion founded on a supernatural revelation through scripture," and then sets out to show how Kant's philosophy of religion resonates with this kind of deism on a variety of fronts.¹¹³ Considering Wood as a witness for the defense of Kant's *Religion*, we focus primarily on the early Wood.¹¹⁴ Here we find Wood's most substantial treatment of *Religion* and a consistent set of arguments that effectively counter the pessimistic, non-realist interpretation of Keith Ward. In part 2, we will return to Wood's later work in the context of developing our own interpretation (which is more in line with the early Wood) and defending it from traditional challenges.

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Despite marked differences in how their interpretations unfold, Ward and Wood begin with somewhat similar insights on the nature of God in the first *Critique*. Wood agrees with Ward that “[t]he term *idea* is borrowed by Kant quite consciously from Plato . . . [and] refers to any of several concepts formed a priori by our rational faculty, to which no possible experience can correspond.”¹¹⁵ Wood also agrees that, “since our concept of God is an idea of reason, no sensible content corresponding to it can ever be given. This concept is thus an ‘empty’ or ‘problematic’ one, a concept incapable of serving as a vehicle of (empirical) knowledge.”¹¹⁶ Kant’s epistemology, on the face of it, would thus appear to entitle us to say very little about God. Nevertheless, Wood’s understanding of Kant’s conception of God finds its own moorings in a fairly traditional and rationalistic conception of God.¹¹⁷ According to Wood, “the most proper idea of God . . . [is] as a supremely perfect being or *ens realissimum* . . . [which] comes about in the course of our attempt to conceive the conditions for the ‘thorough determination’ of things, that is, the unconditionally complete knowledge of them, or the thoroughgoing specification of the properties belonging to them.”¹¹⁸ Wood thus grants that the idea of God is a problematic one, but not an impossible one or mere figment. Even though reason presents the idea of God empty of direct sensory determination, the idea provides the principal transcendental resource for the thoroughgoing determination of things in the world and a chief resource for understanding human beings as purposeful participants in the world.

Referring to difficult principles surrounding knowledge of God in Kant’s theoretical philosophy, Wood writes:

These strictures, however, do not really apply to some predicates, such as those based on the categories, or on the “pure derivative concepts,” such as duration and change. For although such concepts are “empty” ones in their application to noumena, they are nevertheless available to us a priori as formal elements of our concept of a thing or object in general. Kant gives the name “ontological predicates” to these “a priori realities” which belong to God in virtue of the fact that they “refer to the universal attributes of a thing in general.”¹¹⁹

Wood’s point is that, even though Kant’s denial of theoretical knowledge makes literal language about God problematic from the empirical point of view, it does not mean that we are cut off from such language about God, all things considered. Belief in the existence of God, which first emerges as a problematic in the theoretical philosophy, finds rational warrant as the critical philosophy advances into its practical and judicial phases. We can get God in mind, thinks Wood, and utilize the concept as a necessary condition for a thoroughgoing transcendental determination of reason in its various employments. Practical reason and, later, judicial reason allow for the establishment of rational faith on transcendental grounds by raising the questions of the necessary conditions for

the possibility of right action and moral hope. In other words, Wood contends that the formal elements of Kant's rational subjectivity enable a transition from the empirical to the moral without relegating moral theology to the realm of theological non-realism. Theoretical reason presents the idea of God as one necessarily inherent in reason, and "Kant has only respect for our natural interest in the content of this idea and our theoretical curiosity about the existence or nonexistence of an object corresponding to it."¹²⁰

The argument for moving from theoretical to practical reason to establish belief in God (rather than the factual existence of God) is closely tied to Kant's irrefragable belief in humanity's moral disposition and the meaningfulness of the world. Wood writes, "According to Kant, we believe in God because this belief harmonizes with, and is rationally required by, our moral disposition to pursue the highest good."¹²¹ Inasmuch as human identity is wrapped up in an a priori commitment to belief in the reality of a moral disposition and commitment to living as though the world has moral order, Kant is likewise committed to a robust faith in God. As Wood puts it, "Kant was convinced that an upright moral disposition rationally required belief in a moral world, purposively ordered by a supremely wise and morally perfect being, very much along the lines of traditional theistic religions."¹²² Practical reason thus tips the scales, which were at first perfectly balanced by the theoretical philosophy, toward belief in God and makes it possible for a critical extension of transcendental theology. According to Wood, "Moral faith, in Kant's view, requires 'theism,' the belief in a 'living God,' a being endowed with knowledge and free volition, who governs the world wisely according to moral laws. . . . Transcendental theology, says Kant, is an indispensable 'propaedeutic' to a fuller theology, but remains 'idle and useless' from a moral-religious point of view unless supplemented by it."¹²³

Like Ward, Wood recognizes that there is a strong sense of theological subjectivity in Kant and that the question of the existence or nonexistence of God is an open-ended one on the basis of the first *Critique* alone. Yet, Wood submits that this appearance of agnosticism is offset by the moral argument for God's existence, which aims not at knowledge but at faith. Wood is careful to show that belief in God is rooted in transcendental recesses of the theoretical philosophy as much as it is in purely moral considerations, but moral considerations are pivotal to understanding Kant's theism as an advance beyond both non-realism and deism. Wood sums up his point this way: "Kant's justification of theism must be sought not only in the moral and existential considerations leading to practical faith, but also in the theoretical dialectic which is supposed to furnish this faith with a clear and compelling conception of its natural object."¹²⁴

Chief among these moral considerations is the connection Wood sees between moral actions and beliefs about God and immortality. Wood notes that "according to Kant, when a person announces his intentions to pursue a certain end, and undertakes a certain kind of action in pursuit of that end, he

presupposes, implies or commits himself to the belief that the end in question is at least *possible* of attainment through the action he is taking toward it.”¹²⁵ Wood uses several examples to demonstrate that there is a close connection between what one believes and one’s chosen course of action—a physician, for example, treats a patient with a view to the real possibility of alleviating pain or curing an ailment, and without an implicit belief in the possibility of a successful treatment, the physician is not really acting as a physician. Likewise, whenever we act, we presuppose a rule or maxim that aims at some achievable and final state of affairs, and, “according to Kant, there is one end, called the ‘highest good,’ which is ‘an a priori necessary object of our will and is inseparably related to the moral law.’ We cannot abandon the pursuit of this end without ceasing to obey the moral law altogether, and this end is therefore *morally* ‘necessary.’”¹²⁶ Kant’s moral argument for belief in God thus depends on the viability of human moral striving and its being closely tied to the attainability of the highest good.

Kant’s movement from purely moral considerations to a hybrid view of moral and religious considerations as the ground of rational faith hinges on the conception of the highest good. In the “Antinomy of Practical Reason,” Kant contends that “if the highest good is not possible of attainment . . . ‘then the moral law which commands that it be furthered must be fantastic, directed to empty imaginary ends, and consequently inherently false.’”¹²⁷ The highest good is the end of moral action and belief, and its possibility provides the linchpin of Wood’s understanding of the link between morality and religion. Kant’s logic here utilizes a *reductio ad absurdum practicum* argument (which Wood terms the *absurdum practicum* argument for short). The argument is based on the possibility and attainability of the highest good. Wood explains: “Suppose I deny either the existence of God or of a future life. Now if I deny either of these, I cannot conceive of the highest good as possible of attainment. But if I am to obey the moral law, then I must pursue the highest good. Thus the moral law requires me to pursue an end which I cannot conceive possible of attainment. Therefore the moral law is ‘false’ and I am under no obligation to obey it.”¹²⁸ Since the moral law is the condition for obligation and is unconditionally binding, the *absurdum practicum* argument must lead to an antinomy. Wood points out that the *reductio ad absurdum* strategy is not a logical one or one that leads to inconsistent judgments, but is practical. This kind of logic is more “personal” than logical; the main issue relates to our moral nature. For Wood, “The moral arguments . . . justify a ‘subjective’ faith, in that they are founded not on objective proof or evidence but on a personal, but rationally commanded, decision to adopt a morally upright course of life.”¹²⁹ To deny the existence of either God or immortality is to make oneself a *Bösewicht* (a scoundrel). Moral faith is thus primarily personal and subjective, rather than impersonal and objective.

Because Wood finds that God and immortality must be postulated if we

are to escape an *absurdum practicum*,¹³⁰ moral faith, on Wood's reading, is at once theoretical and practical:

[I]t is *theoretical* reason which assumes the existence of a God and a future life. But for the practical postulates to function as theoretical explanations of the possibility of the highest good, we would require more knowledge of these objects than can be given in mere transcendental concepts of them, which is all theoretical reason can give us. The postulates of God and immortality, then, must allow us to "conceive" the possibility of the highest good in some distinctly practical way, which does not involve us in theoretical claims which we would have to justify by appealing to something beyond transcendental ideas as they are given to us.¹³¹

This conceiving of the possibility of the highest good is tantamount to a theoretical commitment based on moral considerations, for as Wood points out, "in postulating the existence of a God and a future life, we make a theoretical commitment, a belief in the reality of *some* supersensible existence adequate to the possibility of the highest good, which takes a definite form only by means of the transcendental ideas of God and immortality."¹³² The idea of God, on Wood's interpretation of Kant, thus has a "practical function" as a postulate, which raises it from mere theoretical possibility to the status of the proper object of moral faith. Moral faith, however, is not merely formal faith; it involves convictions of the will with theoretical ramifications.¹³³

The role of immortality in this scheme is that moral reason needs the postulate of immortality in order to hope for a steady progression toward goodness. From a practical point of view, good actions can be intentionally pursued only under such a belief. Yet, Wood contends that a careful analysis of the first antinomy of practical reason reveals the insufficiency of the postulate of immortality in one important sense: it facilitates a pursuit of the moral life or the performance of good acts, but it does not account for the nature of our moral dispositions. In other words, the postulate of immortality solves only part of the problem, namely, the part that allows moral reason, considered on its own, to move forward unhindered. It leaves unanswered "how this endless progress (or the disposition corresponding to it) fulfills the supreme condition of the highest good. Until we know this," Wood continues, "the first antinomy of practical reason cannot be regarded as fully resolved. And because Kant does not treat this matter in the second critique, his discussion of the first antinomy at this point must be regarded as incomplete."¹³⁴ The resolution of the antinomy, on Wood's account, must wait for Kant's critical analysis of humanity's moral disposition in *Religion*.

Wood understands *Religion* to be the natural byproduct of the practical need to unpack the nature of the moral disposition and its relationship to the ideas of God and immortality as transcendental objects. Because of Kant's *absurdum practicum* argument, God and immortality are to be thought of as "immanent" in moral volition. This "way of thinking" is crucial for under-

standing the substructure of rational religious faith. Wood calls this way of thinking a “moral outlook” that practical reason commends regarding the transcendental ideas of God and immortality. Since these objects are intimately tied to moral volition and are subjectively necessary, Wood suggests that we must look to the nature of the moral agent in order to provide a robust accounting of moral faith: “If we are to discover Kant’s true conceptions of God and immortality as objects of moral faith, then, we must go beyond the transcendental ideas of God and immortality, and beyond the *absurdum practicum* argument itself, to a consideration of the function that moral belief, moral faith, fulfills immanently in the frame of mind of the moral agent.”¹³⁵ Transcendentally speaking, we are warranted in believing that God exists and that, in addition to the ontological predicate *ens realissimum*, certain things can be said of God, even if they cannot be known as objects of theoretical cognition. This realization allows Kant to move with confidence into matters of religion in pursuit of an answer to the question of how the human disposition actually fulfills the supreme condition of the highest good. Kant, in *Religion*, seeks to demonstrate “the practical possibility of the final end of morality.”¹³⁶ Without such a demonstration and belief, Wood concludes, “I would have to deny my own real nature and its eternal moral principles, I would have to cease being a rational human being.”¹³⁷

While Wood focuses much of his interpretation of *Religion* on Books One and Two, he begins by addressing Book Three. Understanding rational religious faith under the rubric of moral theism the way Wood does might tempt one to think that Book Three is the real focal point of Kant’s argument. For example, Kant could be understood as advocating in Book Three a new form of religion (viz., rational religion) meant to replace all forms of empirical religion. Wood argues, however, that “Kant is not recommending, as Auguste Comte was later to do, that men should found a *new* religion, with no other basis than an abstract philosophical one. To attempt such a thing would not only be quixotic, but would ignore the fact that men already have, albeit in an imperfect way, attempted to form moral communities of this kind.”¹³⁸ The image Kant uses is not horizontal or lateral, but one involving the motif of essence. On Wood’s assessment, “Pure religious faith is . . . not the *alternative*, the ‘opposite’ of ecclesiastical faith. Rather, it is the true and rational *essence* of ecclesiastical faith. Ecclesiastical faith is the ‘vehicle,’ the ‘conducting substance,’ of pure rational faith; it is the ‘shell’ (*Hülle*) which contains the rational kernel of pure religious faith.”¹³⁹ In Book Three, true religion has *both* pure and empirical parts. Empirical religion bases itself on some purported divine revelation, but it also contains principles that are independent of historical tradition or sacred literature. These principles “recommend themselves to men universally, and base their claim solely on moral reason.”¹⁴⁰ A central aim of *Religion*, then, is to show that “Men must ‘set free’ pure religious faith from its ‘shell’” and explicate how this can be done.¹⁴¹

Although Wood begins with Book Three, his point is not to highlight its centrality but merely to place its arguments relative to Kant's more decisive work on the human moral disposition in Books One and Two. Before moving directly into Wood's interpretation of Books One and Two, worth noting is that Wood recognizes and resists the tendency of many of Kant's interpreters to see Kant's pure religious faith as a "compromise" between Christianity and faith rooted in moral reason. Contrary to interpreters such as McCarthy and Ward, Wood suggests that "Kant makes claims of this sort because, in his view, Christianity is 'represented as coming *from the mouth of its first Teacher* not as a statutory but as a moral religion.'" ¹⁴² *Religion*, on Wood's interpretation, cannot be properly understood merely as a philosophical adaptation of Christian symbols "unless we dismiss all attempts at 'rationality' as mere 'rationalizations' or claim that history itself is a product of metaphysical 'reason.'" ¹⁴³ For this reason, the young Wood is emphatic, "we cannot assume that Kant's pure religious faith is *based* on the historical tradition from which his conception is drawn." ¹⁴⁴ Rather, we must assume that Kant's rational religion is based on Kant's rational arguments unless we are persuaded by the evidence to conclude otherwise.

Turning to Wood's interpretation of Books One and Two, we find that his analysis of Kant on human depravity and moral redemption is logically driven by the problems and resources already presented in the practical philosophy. Following this practical trajectory, Kant set out on the critical quest to understand the nature of the human disposition and its rational relationship to God and immortality. If humanity's moral disposition is to be found good, it must have a way of meeting its objective in the highest good. Kant's critical access to the issue centers around the concept of moral perfectibility: "In the *Religion*, Kant reopens the whole question of man's moral perfectibility, and attempts to give a more complete answer to this question than he did in any of his earlier works." ¹⁴⁵ The concept of man's moral perfection in the context of God, freedom, and immortality is a propaedeutic to any reasonable conception of the highest good, and it can be brought into sharp relief only on the backdrop of Kant's doctrine of radical evil. The doctrine of radical evil is not the result of some scheme to address religious topics while pacifying the religious censors, nor is it an emergent property subconsciously rooted in Kant's Pietistic religious upbringing; the doctrine of radical evil, according to Wood, is rooted in a very real problem in Kant's critical philosophy: How do I hope in the highest good when the objective end of morality is fundamentally threatened by a rebellious will?

In Book One, Kant sets out to understand the nature of the moral disposition. His conclusion is that human beings are evil by nature, but not by necessity. Key to understanding this distinction is the further distinction Kant makes between predispositions and propensities. The predispositions, on Wood's reading, comprise the heading under which human incentives for moral action fall.

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The goodness or evil of some chosen maxim “consists in its ‘form,’ in the ‘order’ or ‘subordination’; of the incentives it contains.”¹⁴⁶ Wood is clear that “if a man is to be said to be ‘by nature’ good or evil, this goodness or evil cannot consist in the predispositions bound up with the *possibility* of human nature.” The predispositions do not themselves determine the nature of the disposition—that is, whether it is good or evil. Everything hinges, for Wood, on “the actual use man makes of his capacities.”¹⁴⁷ In other words, a person’s predispositions, even the predisposition to personality (which makes one “susceptible” to the moral law as supreme incentive) are only “a condition for the possibility of being good or evil, and his possession of it cannot render him actually good or evil.”¹⁴⁸ We must make a decision with regard to the order of incentives and the supremacy of the moral law. Radical evil is “found in man’s use of his capacities through his power of free choice, his *Willkür*.”¹⁴⁹

One of the main issues of concern in Book One surrounds the nature and location of the subjective ground for the power of choice (*Willkür*). Wood recognizes the importance of Kant’s critical examination of human nature in this regard: “Kant, along with Hume, sees that moral accountability of man depends on his possession of a fixed character or disposition.”¹⁵⁰ To explain this fixed character, Wood turns toward a broad empirical analysis of maxim-making by individuals, noting that “The subjective ground or highest maxim is also ‘ultimate’ for Kant in the sense that every man can be said to have it; it can be ‘predicated of man as a species’ (though not derived from the concept of man as a species).”¹⁵¹ Kant’s aim in analyzing humanity’s moral disposition is to stake a decisive claim, rather than a vague generality about the human race. What Kant wants is a universally valid conclusion—something that is true and applicable to the human race generally. Wood makes the point this way: “When Kant says that man is evil ‘by nature,’ he does not mean to *explain* evil, but only to point out the *universality* of evil in man.”¹⁵²

At this crucial juncture in the argument, Wood’s reading of *Religion* understands Kant to be reasoning from principally empirical rather than rational considerations. On Wood’s assessment, “Kant thus looks for evidence supporting the claim that all men, without exception, exhibit a propensity to evil; and he finds such evidence in ‘the multitude of crying examples which experience of the actions of men puts before our eyes.’”¹⁵³ This issue will become a significant point of contention as we move into the indictment and defense of Kant’s *Religion*, but suffice it to say for now, Wood takes Kant’s argument for the universality of evil to be an inductive effort “to show the *universality* of evil, to show that all men, despite the many differences between them, exhibit a radical propensity to do evil.”¹⁵⁴ Whether or not this way of arguing justifies Kant’s conclusion is not clear and does not seem to be an issue of concern for Wood. He takes Kant’s unflinching acceptance of the argument as proof enough of Kant’s belief in its cogency.

Being satisfied with his conclusion that human beings are evil by nature,

Kant considers the “subjective conditions for the possibility of the development of moral good in man.”¹⁵⁵ According to Wood, a consistent interplay exists in Kant's account between the subjective conditions that define the human being and the empirical character of the human being. Our empirical character pursues the good by way of “gradual reform, a slow progress from bad to better. But goodness of will as it must be found in man's highest maxim, his supersensible moral character.”¹⁵⁶ Yet, Wood argues that this inner reform cannot be understood as a gradual reform, for the human disposition is singular and definite. As Wood puts it, “the goodness of will . . . requires not a ‘change of practices (*Sitten*),’ but rather a ‘change of heart’ establishing a *good disposition* (*Gesinnung*) as the supreme ground of our maxims.”¹⁵⁷ The human agent must undergo a revolution in disposition, which again establishes the moral law as its supreme incentive.

A key point in Wood's reading of Book Two is that, while Kant's plethora of language regarding a “conversion,” “revolution,” “change of heart,” or “transformation of one's cast of mind” carries with it the notion of temporal change, the change of heart (conversion) is in fact not temporal. Rather, such talk, by Wood's lights, refers to an inference one can make about an individual's atemporal character, involving the decision to “*break* with the evil he observes in himself by an ‘incessant counteraction’ against the evil propensity in his nature.”¹⁵⁸ The “change of heart” itself, however, is not temporal. The good disposition has an unchangeableness about it that contrasts with the empirical character, and the only assurance we have that such a break has taken place is the observance of a “gradual temporal reform.”

With Wood's account of conversion before us, we reach Kant's introduction of the concept of divine grace. Here, Wood highlights John Silber's problem with Kant's appeal to grace and atonement, to wit, that grace and atonement violate the moral law. Wood's stance on this issue is clear: “Silber says that ‘Kant could see clearly the incompatibility of forgiveness’ with his moral philosophy. But this is precisely what Kant did not ‘see.’”¹⁵⁹ Wood suggests that forgiveness (“a forgiving disposition”) is “a morally good quality in man's nature” and “that a ‘conciliatory spirit’ (*Versöhnlichkeit*) is a duty of virtue for all men.”¹⁶⁰ According to Wood, “we recognize that it is altogether *right* and *good* that men should be forgiven, that forgiveness accords with true morality, and that reason itself is on the side of mercy rather than of ‘abstract moral rectitude.’”¹⁶¹ Given that reason approves of forgiveness as good, Wood thinks we can readily attribute this same type of goodness to God—especially in the context of moral conversion. We humans may, therefore, have no “legal claim” to forgiveness, but divine forgiveness, nonetheless, is “a moral and a just verdict,” for it is a verdict based on something real and genuinely pleasing to God, namely, the good disposition.

Toward the end of Wood's interpretation of *Religion*, we find a cooperative vision of moral renewal: “Man justifies *himself* insofar as he does everything in

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his power to become good; but God, for the sake of man's disposition to holiness, forgives him the evil which is not in his power to undo, and by this justifying verdict renders the disposition equivalent to that of moral perfection which is the unconditioned component of the highest good."¹⁶² Wood moves quickly through Kant's account of atonement and analysis of punishment and justification, striking for what he calls "the postulate of divine grace." Wood states, "God's grace must be presupposed if an *absurdum practicum* is to be avoided as regards the unconditioned component of the highest good."¹⁶³ For Wood, trust in divine forgiveness is a central aspect of Kant's understanding of moral faith. Such faith is justified in *Religion* by an extension of the *absurdum practicum* argument. Divine grace is needed to resolve the first antinomy of practical reason, and therefore, it must be granted the status of a postulate of practical reason. "In faith," Wood concludes, "the moral agent places his rational trust not only in God's beneficence as world-creator and wise providence as world-ruler, but also in God's just forgiveness as the moral judge and the loving and merciful Father of mankind."¹⁶⁴ Such is the outcome of Kant's philosophical employment of practical reason, according to the early Wood, and the basis for Kant's moral theism. In light of Wood's testimony, we have reason to take pause and consider the very real possibility that Kant's metaphysical motivations may in fact be philosophically pure and conducive to a rationally responsible philosophy of religion.