

KANT ON POLITICS, RELIGION, AND SECULARISM

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1. Kant's liberal secularism

Though Kant may be considered the most prestigious Father of liberal secularism, my interpretation of his ideas about the relationships between religion and politics is that they can be profitably employed to contrast precisely that widespread form of contemporary Western secularism, which maintains that religion is a private matter that should play no role in the design of political institutions and the adoption of political decisions. According to this view, the secular liberal state, if it intends to be (as indeed it must) the common, tolerant home of all its citizens, independently of their own moral and religious commitments, must be neutral between different traditions or “comprehensive doctrines” and must be justifiable in terms not exclusively referring to any one of them. Resorting to religious faiths would bring about a discrimination among citizens and would amount to a hindrance to peaceful social coexistence. I do believe that Kant rejected this view, and that he thought religion, and Christianity in particular, to be the best support of the secular liberal society and state. Far from denying or neglecting or devaluating the public role of religion, Kant's secularism presupposes it.

The Kantian metaphor of “the apple of God's eye” is a good starting point for examining Kant's liberal secularism. It corresponds to our “fundamental human rights” which Kant defined as “innate and inalienable rights belonging necessarily to humanity”,¹ or “the sacred right of humanity”.² According to him, it is the supreme duty of a political ruler to preserve these rights, making him worthy of “the exalted epithets” of “divinely anointed” or “administrator of the divine will on earth and its representative”.³ Such epithets, as Kant wrote, “far from making the ruler of a country arrogant, would rather have to humble him in his soul if he is intelligent (as must be assumed) and make him reflect that he has taken on an office too great for a human being – namely the most sacred office that God has on earth, that of trustee of the right of human beings – and that he must

¹ *Peace*, 8: 350n.

² *Enlightenment*, 8: 39.

³ *Peace*, 8: 353n.

always be concerned about having in some way offended against this ‘apple of God’s eye’”.⁴ Kant also claimed that “the greatest problem for the human species, the solution of which nature compels him to seek, is that of attaining a civil society which can administer justice universally”.⁵

Let us consider some possible implications of this outlook. If political rulers must in the first place safeguard fundamental human rights; if these rights are “innate”, that is, in Kant’s words, “not so much laws given by a state already established as rather principles in accordance with which alone the establishment of a state is possible;”⁶ and if innate rights are ‘the apple of God’s eye’, and therefore are not of man’s making but somehow stemming from God’s intentions and design, then we might conclude that rulers have at least the following three fundamental obligations:

- (a) Political rulers should care about religion and consider it a guide or source of inspiration for their own policies;
- (b) Political rulers should preserve religion especially in order to safeguard fundamental rights;
- (b) Political rulers should promote above others that religion which deems man a creature endowed by God with fundamental rights.

Kant, apparently, held a quite different or opposite view. According to him,

- (a’) Political rulers must not meddle with their citizens’ religious faiths; as a consequence:
- (b’) Political rulers must not favour any religious faith; therefore:
- (c’) Political rulers must impartially respect the pluralism of religious faiths present in any given society.

For example, with regard to (a’), Kant wrote: “Rulers may authorize by civil law all vices that do not contradict the civil covenant between citizens, thus permitting any irreligious behaviour”.⁷ With regard to (b’), he sustained that “The essence of any government consists in that everyone strives for his own happiness, being allowed to this purpose to enter freely into relationship with everybody else. It is not the governments’ role to strip its private citizens of this liberty, but only to grant harmony among them according to the laws of equality and without establishing any privileges”.⁸

⁴ *ibid.*

⁵ *Idea*, 8: 22

⁶ *Saying*, 8: 290.

⁷ *Nachlass*, XIX, 6, 490, n. 7684.

⁸ *Nachlass*: XV, 2, 631–32, n. 1447.

And with regard to (c'), he upheld that "as long as [a monarch] sees to it that any true or supposed improvement is consistent with civil order, he can for the rest leave it to his subjects to do what they find it necessary to do for the sake of their salvation".⁹ Precisely for this reason, Kant praised (perhaps, even flattered) Frederic II, who "even declines the arrogant name of tolerance", because he "left each free to make use of his own reason in all matters of conscience".¹⁰ Kant, quite consistently with his positions above, also insisted upon the mutual non-interference of state and church.¹¹

Points (a')-(c') are cornerstones of contemporary secularism, the enduring part in modern Western societies of the Enlightenment's heritage. They correspond, respectively, to the independence of political institutions from religion and to the separation of state and church; to the neutrality or indifference of government in religious matters; to the impartiality of the state with respect to religious views. Did Kant – the Enlightenment philosopher *par excellence* – seriously profess (a')-(c')? Yes, he did. Why did he? He did so because, as a liberal and secular thinker, the greatest liberal and secular thinker in modern history, he believed these points to be bulwarks of citizens' freedom, "the only original right belonging to every man by virtue of his humanity".¹² Did Kant profess (a')-(c') in the sense we understand them today? No, he did not, because he praised the moral and political role of religion, above all Christianity. We might say that, according to Kant, (a)-(c) and (a')-(c') are not in contradiction or at least that they can be combined, with a few appropriate qualifications. Kant's secularism consists precisely in such an original combination.

Here I will first introduce Kant's secular ideas, comparing them with our present-day situation (§2). In my opinion, this is a typical case in which modernity conflicts with post-modernity and the best heritage of the Enlightenment goes astray. Then, I will focus on why, according to Kant, religion is necessary to both morality (§3) and politics (§§4-5). In particular, I will try to show (§6) why, in Kant's view, the liberal secular state requires a religious faith or why the political community needs to "unfurl the banner" of an ethical and religious community in order to establish and maintain itself. Finally (§7), I will examine the connection Kant established between Christianity and Western civilization and attempt an overall evaluation of Kant's project (§8).

⁹ *Enlightenment*, 8: 40.

¹⁰ *Enlightenment*, 8: 40.

¹¹ *Morals*, 6: 327ff.

¹² *Morals*, 6: 237.

My main focus here is on Kant's way of providing a secular framework for a liberal society and state. Kant's secularism – a notion he never explicitly made use of, though he constantly referred to it – has not yet been much explored. Like many of his celebrated “syntheses”, it is not alien from tensions and ambiguities that need to be examined and solved. Here I will not discuss the relevant literature although I have consulted it and profited from it. Rather, I aim both to present my own reconstruction and interpretation of Kant's secularism, trying to make it as consistent as possible, and to defend it. In my presentation (debatable like any other) I intend to contribute to Kant scholarship. In my defense I venture rather more. My view is that Kant's project deals with certain civilizational principles that are still fundamental today and, as Kant himself said, when principles are at stake and all arguments and counter-arguments have been spent, “nothing is left but *defense*”.¹³

2. Kant's modern hopes and our post-modern condition

Kant has proved to be the most influential liberal secular philosopher of modern history. His ideas, though seldom overtly embraced or even mentioned, continue in many respects to dominate Western thought. Our national constitutions and international charters refer to fundamental human rights, just as Kant conceived of them. These constitutions prescribe the separation between religion and politics, church and state, as Kant intended it. Political authorities are barred from taking care of the salvation of their citizens' souls, precisely as Kant himself recommended. And believers acting in the political square are nowadays asked to motivate their positions not in religious terms but by making use of rational arguments, not too differently from what Kant had suggested in his appeal for the “public use of reason”.

Kant has also left profound traces in Christian theology. The Bible teaches us that man was created in God's image and likeness. But the principle that each man is a *person* and as a consequence has a right to have his own moral dignity respected, depends mainly on Kant's second formulation of the categorical imperative. Similarly, Kant is the source of a line of Scriptural hermeneutics that tries to combine historical narrative with faith, saving the “essence” of the latter from the possible revisions of the former. By focusing on the inherent worth of each single person, Kant has also proved to be influential in Catholic social doctrine and in its shift toward the culture of human rights. Though, arguably, intellectual history does not proceed

¹³ *Groundwork*, 4: 459.

by jumps, it undeniably sometimes hurries, making sudden, dramatic changes. Kant is one of them: there are a “Before Kantian Era” and an “After Kantian Era” also in the field of theology.

We might thus say Kant has won on many important fronts. And yet, the most common wailing among philosophers, intellectuals, political leaders and public opinion in the West, is that Kant’s victory is not leading us where he intended. In the relations between states, we have not reached the “perpetual peace” he wished for. Within each single state, we seem unable to defeat the “bad principle” or moral disease that threatens to break it up, an occurrence Kant wished to avoid. Against his better judgement, political leaders continue to meddle with our souls, directly or indirectly and, against his enlightened hope, the fundamental, non-negotiable rights he advocated are often negotiated, if not sometimes completely denied. As a result, social cohesion and tolerance are *not* on the increase but are rather more often declining. Raised and waved as the banner of liberty and individual freedom, contemporary secularism seems to be turning against itself instead.

In truth, partly thanks to liberal secularism, we have moved from absolute and theocratic states to liberal and democratic ones, from oppressive regimes to free states, from sovereign nations to the League of Nations and the United Nations, and from despotism to constitutionalism; but if we find ourselves today still crying out loud, in several countries: “No violence in God’s name!” or “Take your hands off my God!”, it means we are not making much progress with respect to Kant’s best hopes (as well as Locke’s or Spinoza’s). On the contrary, we seem to be immersed in what may be termed the *paradox of secularism*: the more our secular, post-metaphysical, post-religious reason aims to be inclusive, the more it becomes intolerant; and the more it promises to liberate us from the tyrannies of conformism, dogmatism and superstition, the more we feel restrained in a new oppressive ideological cage.

The deep reason for this paradox is not contingent but theoretical, depending on a tension between liberalism and democracy. On the one hand, the liberal component of our constitutions calls us to respect the innate rights of mankind, “the apple of God’s eye”. On the other, the democratic component requires us to have a say in the definition, promotion and propagation of these rights, and first of all, as Kant says, “freedom, and indeed the least harmful of anything that could even be called freedom: namely, freedom to make public use of one’s reason in all matters”.¹⁴ Yet such freedom does not prove as harmless as Kant thought, because it transforms free reason into *un-*

¹⁴ *Enlightenment*, 8: 36.

limited or *independent* reason, a supreme judge not only of the ordinary policies of our rulers but also of the inalienable rights they should abide by. Hence the paradox of secularism: the more free reason is promoted the less religion becomes relevant to public life; and the more religion becomes irrelevant the more our social bonds weaken and our societies suffer a moral crisis.

Kant wanted people to enlighten themselves, since “if I have a book that understands for me, a spiritual advisor who has a conscience for me, a doctor who decides upon a regimen for me, and so forth, I need not trouble myself at all”.¹⁵ Today we consider ourselves enlightened at a higher level, perhaps even fully; but the number of instructions or Do It Yourself manuals we take for granted in the form of democratic decisions, judicial verdicts, supreme courts rulings, or in the subtle hidden way of cultural fashions, advertising slogans, uncritical attitudes, mindless expectations, increases rather than diminishing.

Kant repeatedly insisted that no theoretical knowledge of God is possible, and any attempt to found morality on God’s revealed commands, that is on a historical basis, would violate our autonomy and finally result in a lack of universality, because a faith “merely based on facts, can extend its influence no further than the tidings relevant to a judgment on its credibility can reach”.¹⁶ Nowadays we consider God as a private issue and moral autonomy as the hallmark of our freedom, happiness and welfare, but by so doing we fall into the spires of relativism, not universalism, and our chances for a peaceful life in trans-cultural communities that respect the rights of man are getting slimmer.

Kant thought that religion “is an inner disposition lying wholly beyond the civil power’s sphere of influence”, and that “as institutions for public *divine worship* on the part of the people, to whose opinion or conviction they owe their origin, churches become a true need of a state, the need for a people to regard themselves as subjects of a supreme *invisible* power to which they must pay homage and which can often come into very unequal (*sehr ungleichen*) conflict with the civil power”.¹⁷ Such conflict is no longer unequal nowadays; democracies claim power over churches, and churches are not a “need of state” at all. Conflict between political power and religious faiths, however, is not disappearing.

Kant was very much in favour of the separation between church and state. “It is absurd – he wrote – that next to the supreme civil power there must also be an independent power in ecclesiastical matters, uttering unappealable external

¹⁵ *Enlightenment*, 8: 35.

¹⁶ *Religion*, 6: 103.

¹⁷ *Morals*, 6: 327.

judgements, claiming to possess the administration of positive laws not issuing from sovereign powers and representing in conclusion a state in the state”.¹⁸ Today we take the “wall of separation” between church and state as a dogma of our democracies, but the conflict between religion and politics nonetheless is often simmering under the ashes, and sometimes abruptly surfacing.

Finally, Kant wrote that “if Christianity should ever come to the point where it ceased to be worthy of love (which could very well transpire if instead of its gentle spirit it were armed with commanding authority), then, because there is no neutrality in moral things (still less a coalition between opposed principles) a disinclination and resistance to it would become the ruling mode of thought among people; ... but then, because Christianity, though supposedly *destined* to be the world religion, would not be *favoured* by fate to become it, *the* (perverted) *end of all things*, in a moral respect, would arrive”.¹⁹ Today Christianity is no longer armed with political authority (or is much less so), but hostility against it is nonetheless growing in Western countries, increasing the risk of a crisis of civilization, if not of a final countdown.

The questions are: has Kant’s secularism won but was it mistaken? Was Kant’s Enlightenment project well founded, but was it disseminated with unintended, undesirable and perhaps unnecessary consequences? This is my – our – present day quandary.

3. Moral reason and God

Firstly, what is secularism? In popular and political parlance, secularism is a rather vague though widespread ideology upholding separation between church and state and independence of politics from religion, and demanding individual freedom in the choice of lifestyles, regardless of religious limitations. Philosophically speaking, secularism may be set in more precise terms. It may be defined as the doctrine maintaining that reason is *self-sufficient* in any field of application. This is why Kant may be taken as the Father of liberal secularism, because he is the thinker who, more than any other, insisted upon the moral autonomy of man and the self-sufficiency of human reason.

From the vantage point of our definition, moral (practical) reason is the possible basis for ethics, and politics (in its broadest sense: institutions, charters, laws, public decisions) needs no other validating foundation or justification than that which can be argued in terms of political or public reason. For example, asserting that political liberalism is “free-standing” (Rawls) or

¹⁸ *Nachlass*, XIX, 6, 490, n. 7684.

¹⁹ *End*, 8: 339.

“self-sufficient” (Habermas), is the same as maintaining that we dispose of a tool, an organon, a procedure – provided by reason – that is sufficient to induce people to establish free, open societies and institutions, provided idiosyncrasies, local traditions, historical circumstances, cultural hindrances of any sort are lifted. From our contemporary secular point of view, religion is irrelevant to moral and political life, a mere supplement to them or even, according to a more radical version, an obstacle to be removed. In this sense, secularism aims to construe morality and politics along the lines of science, whose achievements are paradigmatically regarded as trans-culturally valid and independent from any religious presupposition, based as they are on reason alone. Coherently and typically, secularists consider religion a private affair with little or no use in the public square.

Kant’s thought apparently follows corresponding lines. As to ethics, he wrote: “so far as morality is based on the conception of the human being as one who is free but who also, just because of that, binds himself through his reason to unconditional laws, it is in need neither of the idea of another being above him in order that he recognize his duty, nor, that he observe it, of an incentive other than the law itself. . . . Hence on its own behalf morality in no way needs religion (whether objectively, as regards willing, or subjectively, as regards capability) but is rather self-sufficient by virtue of pure practical reason”.²⁰ Hence morality is secular. To act morally, agents must act according to certain universal, rational laws and not in allegiance to cultural habits, historical traditions, or the instructions of religious authorities.

The same seems to hold true of politics. Not unlike Rawls and Habermas, Kant held that the establishing of a liberal state (a “republican constitution” in his phrasing) “must initially abstract from the present obstacles which may perhaps arise not so much from what is unavoidable in human nature as rather from neglect of the true ideas in the giving of laws”.²¹ According to Kant the “universal principle of right” and the corresponding “universal law of right” which forms the basis of the liberal state and safeguards its citizens’ freedom – “so act externally that the free use of your choice can coexist with the freedom of everyone in accordance with a universal law”²² – is an imperative of reason. It needs neither to be based on any political decision, because “right must never be accommodated to politics, but politics must always be accommodated to right”,²³ nor does it re-

²⁰ *Religion*, 6: 3.

²¹ *C.P.R.*, A 316, B 373.

²² *Morals*, 6: 231.

²³ *Lie*, 8: 429.

quire validation from moral doctrines or religious faiths since, being rational, right is self-sufficient. Law and politics, therefore, are secular just like morality. As a consequence, secular political rulers must strictly apply secular right keeping their personal worldview to themselves. They may be neither despotic nor paternalistic. In a paternalistic government “the subjects, like minor children who cannot distinguish between what is truly useful or harmful to them, are constrained to behave only passively”²⁴ and therefore deprived of freedom. As for despotism, it “abrogates all the freedom of the subjects, who in that case have no rights at all”.²⁵ As Kant famously wrote, “no one can coerce me to be happy in his way (as he thinks of the welfare of other human beings)”.²⁶ That would violate the principle of right, which safeguards liberty, not happiness.

But though this is Kant’s position, it is not his *entire* view. Kant wanted morality and right founded on reason alone, but stated at the same time that religion is *necessary* to reason. Why did he believe so? In what sense? And, if moral reason and political reason are really founded on reason alone, how can they be self-sufficient? Let us examine moral (practical) reason first.

According to Kant, morality is based on the (rational) categorical imperative of duty. It is well known that, in the *Groundwork of the Metaphysics of Morals*, Kant asserts that this imperative is the only (formal) foundation of moral life and the only source and test of our moral maxims. God, apparently, has no place in the *Groundwork*; neither as a source of morality, because “we have the concept of God ... solely from the *idea* of moral perfection that reason frames a priori”,²⁷ nor as an inspiration for morality, because the fear of God “combined with dreadful representations of power and vengefulness, would have to be the foundation for a system of morals that would be directly opposed to morality”.²⁸ But in Kant’s mature thought God cannot be so easily forgone.

In the first place, the categorical imperative, while ensuring that man can be *virtuous*, does not offer him any hope of also being *happy*. “Happiness” is everybody’s ambition but, since moral duty requires our inclinations to be restrained, and since our inclinations can never be pushed aside, happiness is not of this world. Only “being worthy of happiness” is within man’s reach. But to be worthy of happiness man needs to believe in a Being who

²⁴ *Saying*, 8: 290.

²⁵ *Saying*, 8: 291.

²⁶ *Saying*, 8: 290.

²⁷ *Groundwork*, 4: 409.

²⁸ *Groundwork*, 4: 443.

penetrates his inner intentions, sees his manifest actions, predicts their consequences and, taking everything into account, rewards his efforts with a state of happiness proportional to its morality. This is the state of the “highest good”. But man cannot attain the highest good in this world because “there is not the least ground in the moral law for a necessary connection between the morality and the proportionate happiness”.²⁹ Only a being who “contains the ground of this connection” can raise man to such a state. This being cannot but be God. Hence God is necessary to morality. As Kant writes, “it is morally necessary to assume the existence of God”.³⁰

Secondly, man cannot hope to be happy by pursuing goals incompatible with those pursued by his fellow creatures. The third formulation of the categorical imperative recites: “so act as if you were by your maxims at all times a lawgiving member of the universal kingdom of ends”.³¹ A kingdom of all (compatible) ends is a “systematic union”.³² If we think of this union from the moral point of view, we have a morally perfect world in which “rational creatures have personal worth”³³ and deserve to be happy. If we think of it from the point of view of “the nature of things”, that is of our human nature, we have “the physical perfection of the world”. Our own world is not physically perfect: in it “the rational creature might certainly have a preeminent value, but its state could still be bad”.³⁴ To wit: if individual A acts according to the second formulation of the categorical imperative she certainly considers herself and any other individual B as a person. This does not imply that A is actually happy or makes B happy. And vice-versa: if A or B are actually happy this does not mean that they take each other as persons, because they may consider each other simply as a means for the satisfaction of their respective inclinations or desires. To be persons, as required by morality, and, at the same time, to be happy, as our human constitution demands, we need to combine a morally perfect world with a physically perfect one. Who can provide the combination of both worlds and their harmony thus bringing about “the best of worlds?” Only God. Hence God is essential to morality: “the objective end of God in creation was the perfection of the world and not merely the happiness of creatures: for this constitutes only the [world’s] physical perfection. A world with it alone would still be lacking in moral perfection, or the worthiness to be happy”.³⁵

²⁹ *C. Pr. R.*, 5: 124.

³⁰ *C. Pr. R.*, 5: 125.

³¹ *Groundwork*, 4: 438.

³² *Groundwork* 4: 433.

³³ *Lectures on Religion*, 28: 1099.

³⁴ *Lectures on Religion*, 28: 1100.

³⁵ *Ibid.*

It is not entirely accurate therefore to say that practical reason is self-sufficient and can do without religion. The truth is rather the contrary: “morality inevitably leads to religion”,³⁶ and the idea of the highest good, and with it the idea of God, “rises out of morality and is not its foundation:” “it is an end which to make one’s own already presupposes ethical principles”.³⁷ With this Kant maintains that the right order in morality is not the voluntaristic one: first God then our moral duties as He commands, but the intellectualistic one: first comes moral law, then God follows as its only possible author. As Kant writes in the first *Critique*, “so far as practical reason has the right to lead us, we will not hold actions to be obligatory because they are God’s commands, but will rather regard them as divine commands because we are internally obligated to them”.³⁸

Stressing his ethical voluntarism, Kant writes that “as far as its matter, i.e. object is concerned, religion does not differ in any point from morality, for it is concerned with duties as such. Its distinction from morality is a merely formal one: that reason in its legislation uses the Idea of God, which is derived from morality itself, to give morality influence on man’s will to fulfil all his duties”.³⁹ And also: “the concept of God and even the conviction of his existence can be met with only in reason, and it cannot first come to us either through inspiration or through tidings communicated to us, however great the authority behind them”.⁴⁰

Yet that God originates within practical reason because, as Kant writes, He fulfils “*the right of reason’s need*”,⁴¹ means that God is a *postulate of reason*; it does not mean that He is *made by* reason. Saying that God is *within the boundaries of* reason is not the same as saying that He is the *God of* reason. Quite to the contrary, once the idea of God is postulated or acquired, it corresponds to the standard concept of God according to religion, of a perfect, omnipotent, omniscient, merciful Being. Kant writes that “religion as the doctrine of duties *to* God lies entirely beyond the bounds of purely philosophic ethics”.⁴² But philosophic ethics is the rational, secular counterpart of religious ethics; they share the same moral codes, but with different, though convergent and equipollent, sources. Stating that morality is

³⁶ *Religion*, 6: 6; *C. Pr. R.*, 5: 129.

³⁷ *Religion*, 6: 5.

³⁸ *C.P.R.*, A 819, B 847.

³⁹ *Conflict*, 7: 36.

⁴⁰ *Thinking*, 8: 142.

⁴¹ *Thinking*, 8: 137.

⁴² *Morals*, 6: 488.

“the knowledge of all our duties as imperatives of reason” amounts to saying that religion is “the recognition of all our duties as divine commands”.⁴³ In both cases God is at work: in the latter case because He is the external authority dictating His commands, in the former because He is the inner path by which reason dictates its laws to itself. This is why it is morally necessary to assume the existence of God and to act and live “*as if*” God exists.

4. Political reason and God

Does political reason as well lead to God and religion? Is living “as if” God did exist necessary in politics too as it is in morality? Apparently, it is not, because the rational principle of right seems adequate and sufficient by itself to perform the essential political functions. But in this case, too, appearances are deceiving.

The first and “greatest problem”⁴⁴ of political reason is the foundation of the liberal state, or, in Kant’s terminology, of a “republican constitution”. The process deals with the safeguard of those fundamental human rights (“the apple of God’s eye”), the protection of which is the liberal political authorities’ main duty. The greatest problem amounts to this: “how it is to be arranged that in a society, however large, harmony in accordance with the principles of freedom and equality is maintained (namely by means of a representative system)”.⁴⁵ Or else: “given a multitude of rational beings all of whom need universal laws for their preservation but each of whom is inclined covertly to exempt himself from them, so to order this multitude and establish their constitution that, although in their private dispositions they strive against one another, these yet so check one another that in their public conduct the result is the same as if they had no such evil dispositions”.⁴⁶

This problem can be solved by establishing a constitution conforming with the principle of right, because “the *republican* constitution is the only one that is completely compatible with the right of human beings”.⁴⁷ Since the principle of right is rational, a priori, the problem of the republican constitution is, from a theoretical point of view, easily soluble: “the problem of establishing a state, no matter how it may sound, is *soluble* even for a nation of devils (if only they have understanding)”.⁴⁸ Things are different, how-

⁴³ *Religion*, 6: 153; *C. Pr. R.*, 5: 129.

⁴⁴ *Idea*, 8: 22.

⁴⁵ *Lie*, 8: 429.

⁴⁶ *Peace*, 8: 366.

⁴⁷ *Ibid.*

⁴⁸ *Ibid.*

ever, in actual practice, and the concrete application of the principle of right is far from easy: “the *republican* constitution . . . is the most difficult one to establish and even more to maintain, so much so that many assert it would have to be a state of angels”.⁴⁹ Why is it so?

As we previously observed, in the first *Critique*⁵⁰ Kant had maintained that the obstacles to establishing a republican constitution “arise not so much from what is unavoidable in human nature”. But the problem lies precisely here! The most serious obstacle to the republican constitution, as Kant came to discover especially in *Religion within the boundaries of mere reason*, derives from human nature. The fact is that men are *not* angels: they actually are devils. Thanks to right and the coercive power of the state, each man “is constrained to become a good citizen even if not a morally good human being”,⁵¹ and in virtue of this coercion “within each state [malevolence] is veiled by the coercion of civil laws, for the citizen’s inclination to violence against one another is powerfully counteracted by a greater force, namely that of the government”.⁵² But hidden malevolence is none the less still malevolence. If the force of the state were always contrasted by the inclination of citizens to abuse or harm each another, if one state always inclined to attack the other, a never ending condition of tension and conflict would result in which no state, let alone a liberal state, would be conceivable, and no peace, let alone a “perpetual peace”, could ever be achieved. In a similar scenario, even “the word *right* would never be uttered by states wanting to attack one another, unless merely to make fun of it”.⁵³

This is precisely the tragic human condition we are immersed in. Like all liberal thinkers, Kant had a negative moral and theological anthropology not too different from Augustine’s. According to it, men are fallen angels, living a condition of “unsociable sociability”.⁵⁴ “The character of the species, as it is known from the experience of all ages and by all peoples, is this: that, taken collectively (the human race as one whole) it is a multitude of persons, existing successively and side by side, who cannot *do without* being together peacefully and yet cannot *avoid* constantly being objectionable to one another”.⁵⁵ It is so, indeed necessarily, because men are affected by an

⁴⁹ *Ibid.*

⁵⁰ A 316, B 373.

⁵¹ *Ibid.*

⁵² *Peace*, 8: 375n.

⁵³ *Peace*, 8: 355.

⁵⁴ *Idea*, 8: 20.

⁵⁵ *Anthropology*, 7: 331.

obscure sickness called by Augustine “original sin” and by Kant “radical evil” or “bad principle”, so deeply rooted in human nature that “it is also not to be extirpated through human forces”.⁵⁶ Although this evil is ontological, it has a social source, it is triggered by the social environment, and produces social effects: “envy, addiction to power, avarice, and the malignant inclinations associated with these, assail his nature, which on its own is undemanding, *as soon as he is among human beings*. Nor is it necessary to assume that these are sunk into evil and are examples that lead him astray: it suffices that they are there, that they surround him, and that they are human beings, and they will mutually corrupt each other’s moral disposition and make one another evil”.⁵⁷

Man, in this position, is doomed to relapse into an ethical state of nature akin to a condition of moral anarchy in which “the good principle, which resides in each human being, is necessarily attacked by the evil which is found in him”.⁵⁸ This is something “the natural human being ought to endeavour to leave behind as soon as possible”.⁵⁹ But can he really? And how?

The principle of right is not enough to answer the purpose, because it restrains external freedom only and not inner dispositions. Likewise, the laws of morality are insufficient, because they refer to individual, internal states of mind, and not to social, public states of affairs. In fact, both *political* coercion on the side of the state, to prevent citizens from harming each other, and *spiritual* conviction on the side of citizens, to fight against the radical evil individually affecting them, are necessary to achieve the goal of a liberal constitution, if it can be achieved at all.

Again, how can it be? Only if citizens feel they have “a duty *sui generis*, not of human beings toward human beings but of the human race toward itself”⁶⁰ can moral anarchy be prevented and the good principle defeat the evil one. “Inasmuch as we can see, the dominion of the good principle is not otherwise attainable, so far as human beings can work toward it, than through the setting up and the diffusion of a society in accordance with, and for the sake of, the laws of virtue – a society which reason makes it a task and a duty of the entire human race to establish in its full scope”.⁶¹ Such duty is a “banner of virtue” that reason must unfurl as a “rallying point

⁵⁶ *Religion*, 6: 37.

⁵⁷ *Religion*, 6: 93–94.

⁵⁸ *Religion*, 6: 97.

⁵⁹ *Ibid.*

⁶⁰ *Ibid.*

⁶¹ *Religion*, 6: 94.

for those who love the good”, “in addition to prescribing laws to each individual human being”.⁶² It takes the form of a social duty, opposite and alike the social evil it is called to cure: the duty to build up a “union of persons into a whole”,⁶³ or, according to the many different but equivalent expressions Kant uses, an “association of human beings merely under the laws of virtue”, an “ethical society”, an “ethico-civil society”, an “ethical state”, a “kingdom of virtue”.⁶⁴

As no duty can exist without a corresponding imperative of reason, and as the duty in question is *sui generis*, the imperative must also be *sui generis*. Although Kant does not formulate it in these terms, we might call it the *religious-political categorical imperative* and express it along the lines of the third formulation of the moral categorical imperative: ‘so act as if you were always through your maxims a member of an actual ethical community’, or ‘so act as if you were always subject to public laws of virtue’. Independently of its formulations, it is important to stress that this special imperative of duty is both political and religious.

It is political, because it bids men to pursue “a good common to all”⁶⁵ by fighting the bad principle that would transform their social and political life into a strife of everybody against everybody else, bringing about an Hobbesian state in an *already* existing political community. “The ethical state of nature [is] a *public* feuding between the principles of virtue and a state of inner immorality”,⁶⁶ which means it arises *within* an already formed political community. As Kant writes: “in an already existing political community all the political citizens are, as such, still in the ethical state of nature”.⁶⁷

But the special imperative of duty is also religious, because it orders men to refer to God to avert and remedy their public feuding. Kant says that this imperative “differs entirely from all moral laws (which concern what we know to reside within our power)”,⁶⁸ and that it “differs from all others in kind and in principle”. Being another imperative, it “will need the presupposition of another idea”.⁶⁹ Which idea does it require? It requires the religious idea of “a higher moral being through whose universal organization

⁶² *Ibid.*

⁶³ *Religion*, 6: 97.

⁶⁴ *Religion*, 6: 94–95.

⁶⁵ *Religion*, 6: 97.

⁶⁶ *Religion*, 6: 98.

⁶⁷ *Religion*, 6: 95.

⁶⁸ *Ibid.*

⁶⁹ *Religion*, 6: 98.

the forces of single individuals, insufficient on their own, are united for a common effect”.⁷⁰ That is to say: “an ethical community is conceivable only as a people under divine commands, i.e. a *people of God*, and indeed in accordance with the laws of virtue”.⁷¹ Since an ethical community is necessary for the survival of the political community, God is necessary to politics. As a consequence, political reason, just like moral reason, leads to religion.

5. Rational religion and ecclesiastical faiths

What kind of God and religion is necessary to politics or political reason? As is well known, according to Kant “there is only *one* (true) *religion*; but there can be several kinds of faith”.⁷² The former is a “purely rational faith”,⁷³ i.e. a “religion *within the boundaries* of mere reason”, the latter are “historical”, “statutory”, “ecclesiastical” faiths. In a similar way, God is a pure idea of reason and, according to popular faith, a source of revelation. Should we then conclude that political reason merely requires pure rational religion and the pure idea of God, while it neglects and bypasses ecclesiastical faiths and a personal God?

This is what Kant hoped for. He in fact wrote, “*in the end* religion will gradually be freed of all empirical grounds of determination, of all statutes that rest on history and unite human beings provisionally for the promotion of the good through the intermediary of an ecclesiastical faith. Thus *at last* the pure faith of religion will rule over all, ‘so that God may be all in all’”.⁷⁴ Kant proved to be so optimistic about this process of “gradual purification”, as he also called it,⁷⁵ that he believed that “enlightened Catholics and Protestants, while still holding to their own dogmas, could thus look upon each other as brothers in faith, in expectation (and striving towards this end) that, with the government’s favour, time will gradually bring the formalities of faith closer to the dignity of their end”.⁷⁶

Unfortunately, such optimism is ill-founded, as Kant himself found out. Although he spoke of a “gradual transition of ecclesiastical faith toward the exclusive dominion of pure religious faith in the coming of the Kingdom of God”,⁷⁷ he contended that ecclesiastical faith “attaches itself (*affiziert*) to

⁷⁰ *Ibid.*

⁷¹ *Religion*, 6: 99.

⁷² *Religion*, 6: 107; *Peace*, 8: 367n.

⁷³ *Religion*, 6: 104.

⁷⁴ *Religion*, 6: 121.

⁷⁵ *Conflict*, 7: 42.

⁷⁶ *Conflict*, 7: 52.

⁷⁷ *Religion*, 6: 115.

pure religion”,⁷⁸ that it is a “vehicle”⁷⁹ or “a mere vehicle”⁸⁰ or a “still indispensable shell”.⁸¹ There are compelling reasons for this.

Pure rational religion cannot merely be an abstract doctrine referring to an abstract God worshipped in an abstract way in abstract temples. Pure rational religion does not warm up men’s hearts as it ought to if they are to feel the duty *sui generis*. Kant was an admirer of the French Revolution but not to the point of approving of the cult of Goddess Reason. “No doctrine exclusively based on reason would seem to the people to make an unalterable norm; they demand a divine revelation, hence a historical authentication of its authority through the deduction of its origin”.⁸² If God is to be intended as “one who knows the heart”⁸³ and rewards and punishes, and if His commands are to be considered as our duties, the duties we living creatures ought to follow here and now, then He needs to manifest himself and we need to give Him a face and a voice. It is not only a question of “a peculiar weakness of human nature”,⁸⁴ or of “the unavoidable limitation of human reason”,⁸⁵ it is rather a question of “natural need”.⁸⁶

Rational religion in man truly “hides inside him and depends on moral dispositions”.⁸⁷ But it is a well known a fact too that by their very nature human beings, made of blood and flesh, need somewhat more than rational religion: “the ordinary human being will every time understand by it his own ecclesiastical faith, which is the one that falls within the grasp of his senses”. (*ibid.*) People need “something that *the senses can hold on to*”.⁸⁸ “Unless certain statutory ordinances – which, however, have standing (authority) as law – are added to the natural laws which reason alone can recognize, what constitutes a special duty of human beings and a means to their higher end is still lacking, namely their permanent union in a visible church”.⁸⁹ This means that no rational faith can exist without ecclesiastical faith, just like nothing may be carried in absence of a vehicle, or like each step implies

⁷⁸ *Religion*, 6: 115.

⁷⁹ *Religion*, 6: 106.

⁸⁰ *Religion*, 6: 116.

⁸¹ *Religion*, 6: 135n.

⁸² *Religion*, 6: 112.

⁸³ *Religion*, 6: 99.

⁸⁴ *Religion*, 6: 103.

⁸⁵ *Religion*, 6: 115.

⁸⁶ *Religion*, 6: 109.

⁸⁷ *Religion*, 6: 108.

⁸⁸ *Religion*, 6: 109.

⁸⁹ *Religion*, 6: 158.

and requires a previous one: “ecclesiastical faith naturally precedes pure religious faith: there were temples ... before churches...; priests before ministers... and for the most part they still come first in the rank and value accorded to them by the crowd at large”.⁹⁰

We may then conclude that rational religion alone is not sufficient for pursuing a moral life and creating an ethical community, ecclesiastical faiths are required as well and are indispensable. They may be considered the *specific* forms of rational religion ethical communities have historically availed themselves of. By implication, ecclesiastical faiths are the *historical* (not all and not always necessarily successful) ways and means of preserving the political community engaged in its own development.

Though historical ecclesiastical faiths are many, no single one is theologically better than the other. They are equivalent in their meeting of the basic human spiritual need for divine assistance, as well as in the worship of their Gods. “Whether the devout individual makes his statutory visit at *church* or undertakes a pilgrimage to the sanctuaries in Loreto or Palestine; whether he takes his formulas of prayer to the heavenly with his *lips*, or by means of a *prayer-wheel*, ... it is all the same and of equal worth”.⁹¹ In this respect Christians, Muslims, Jews, Hindus, etc. are on the same foot because they all provide “reinterpretations” of revelation.⁹² However, ecclesiastical faiths are not equivalent, neither ethically, with respect to the morality they inspire and convey, nor politically, with respect to the welfare they favour and promote in society. There is therefore a scale for ranking and assessing them. Before examining this scale, we still need to address some questions regarding the relationship between ethical communities (with their ecclesiastical faiths) and the political community.

6. Ethical community, political community and the secular state

The first objection to the discussion and analysis in the last paragraphs is that it gives too much emphasis to the political role of religions. Kant’s problem in *Religion* – so the objection sounds – was not political but religious, as Kant scholars usually consider. After discovering the bad principle, Kant turned to examine the resulting struggle between bad and good principles, aiming to find a solution to the problem of individual salvation and of the rational founding of religion and churches because, as he wrote, “the

⁹⁰ *Religion*, 6: 106.

⁹¹ *Religion*, 6: 173.

⁹² *Religion*, 6: 111.

idea of a people of God cannot be realized (by human organization) except in the form of a church".⁹³

The objection is well founded. Nonetheless, it is true that Kant links the religious problem with the political one especially in Part three of *Religion* (as well as in *Conflict*). The religious problem is: how can man triumph over the bad principle he is ontologically affected by? Or: "how it is possible that a naturally evil human being should make himself into a good human being? ... How can an evil tree bear good fruit?"⁹⁴ The political problem is: how can man overcome the negative condition he is socially immersed in? Or: "how could one expect to construct something completely straight from such crooked wood?"⁹⁵

The answer to the first question is: by becoming "morally good (pleasing to God)",⁹⁶ namely by a sort of conversion. "A 'new man' can come to light only through a kind of rebirth, as it were a new creation and a change of heart".⁹⁷ The answer to the second question is: by the "wish of all well-disposed human beings"⁹⁸ to produce a political community and, within it, an ethical community in accordance with God's commands. Clearly, the state can neither impose individual conversion nor good social dispositions, only the idea of God is capable of doing so. Thus the idea of God performs both functions, individual and religious, social and political. No individual salvation, no ethical community, and therefore no stable political community are conceivable in the absence of the belief in God. Religion – rational religion accompanied by an appropriate ecclesiastical faith – is essential to man's salvation as well as to society's welfare.

A second, more serious objection drives straight to the core of Kant's secularism. How can a state be secular if we consider its own survival to depend on religion (and not only on the principle of right)? Kant does not explicitly deal with this question, but we may try to provide an answer to it by examining the relationship between the political and ethical communities he had in mind. Three points are worth examining.

First. The two communities are *distinct*. Each of them has "a form and constitution essentially distinct from those of the other".⁹⁹ Their differences

⁹³ *Religion*, 6: 100.

⁹⁴ *Religion*, 6: 44–45.

⁹⁵ *Religion*, 6: 100.

⁹⁶ *Religion*, 6: 47.

⁹⁷ *Ibid.*

⁹⁸ *Religion*, 6: 101.

⁹⁹ *Religion*, 6: 94.

are deep and unmistakable. The political community is coercive, whereas an ethical community is not: “the citizen of the political community remains, as for the latter’s lawgiving authority, totally free: he may wish to enter with his fellow citizens into an ethical union over and above the political one, or rather remain in a natural state of this sort”.¹⁰⁰ Moreover, the political community, affecting all citizens, is general, an ethical community is “particular” or “partial”,¹⁰¹ as it involves only its faithful. Finally, the political community takes the form of a state of citizens, an ethical community takes the form of a church of servants: “the idea of a people of God cannot be realized (by human organization) except in the form of a church”.¹⁰²

Second. The two communities are *autonomous*. Neither of them can impose itself over the other. On the one hand, the political community cannot dictate its own rules to an ethical community, because citizens have the right to join or not to join an ethical community, and “it would be a contradiction (*in adjecto*) for the political community to compel its citizens to enter into an ethical community, since the latter entails freedom from coercion in its very concept”.¹⁰³ Nor can political rulers limit the public use of reason in matters religious, “for otherwise the *laity* would be forcing the *clerics*”.¹⁰⁴ Religious freedom, including the freedom to criticize religious faiths, is to be respected. “Woe to the legislator who would want to bring about through coercion a polity directed to ethical ends!”¹⁰⁵ On the other hand, an ethical community can not dictate its own rules to the political community either, because that would produce a “theocracy”, an “aristocratic government [of priests]:” in both cases the outcome would be a violation of the principle of right and a loss of citizens’ freedom.

Third. The two communities are *interlinked*. They cannot proceed separately, alien to each other. An ethical community cannot but be involved in the already established political community within which it arises. The political community cannot but be interested in an ethical community which is part and parcel of its citizens’ life.

The conclusion we may draw is that each one of the two communities has a stake in the other. The political community, on the one hand, profits in having a strong ethical community because its formation and very sur-

¹⁰⁰ *Ibid.*

¹⁰¹ *Ibid.*

¹⁰² *Religion*, 6: 100.

¹⁰³ *Religion*, 6: 95.

¹⁰⁴ *Religion*, 6: 113.

¹⁰⁵ *Religion*, 6: 96.

vival depend in good measure on the growth of the latter. An ethical community, on the other hand, has an interest in the political community because it pursues and possibly achieves its goals in its bosom. Not unlike Augustine, who thought of the City of God and the City of man as intermingled (*intermixtae*), Kant states that, between political and ethical community, there is interplay. And, again similarly to Augustine, who thought that the City of God avails itself (*utitur*) of the City of man, and that the latter profits from the former, Kant thinks that the political community calls for the ethical one. Indeed he writes, “it belongs to the character of our species that, in striving toward a civil constitution, it also needs a discipline by religion, so that what cannot be achieved by *external* constraint can be brought about by *internal* constraint (the constraint of conscience)”.¹⁰⁶

Does this infringe upon Kant’s idea of the secular state? In a way, it does *not*, because the relationship Kant envisages between the political and ethical communities refers to *civil society* or “civil constitution”, it does not involve political institutions. Church and state are, as they should be, separate, autonomous bodies. Both of them have to keep within certain limits. The state has the right to request that “nothing be included in this [ethical] constitution which contradicts the duty of its members as citizens of the state”.¹⁰⁷ And believers, “insofar as an ethical community must rest on *public* laws and have a constitution based on them, must ... not allow the political power to command them how to order (or not order) such a constitution internally”.¹⁰⁸ The separation of church and state at the institutional level does not imply a corresponding separation between religion (ethical community) and politics (political community) at the level of civil society. “Every political community may indeed wish to have available a dominion over minds, according to the laws of virtue; for where its means of coercion do not reach, since a human judge cannot penetrate into the depths of other human beings, there the dispositions to virtue would bring about the required result”.¹⁰⁹ Of course, to wish does not mean imposing, but it does not imply neutrality either. It involves educating, demanding and striving for “the required result”, i.e. the creation and diffusion of appropriate “dispositions to virtue”, i.e. (self) “constraint of conscience”, and a “discipline by religion”. If civil society does not fight for building an ethical community, if it does not feel the duty for its formation, if it does not perceive itself

¹⁰⁶ *Anthropology*, 7: 333n.

¹⁰⁷ *Religion*, 6: 96.

¹⁰⁸ *Ibid.*

¹⁰⁹ *Religion*, 6: 96.

as submitted to divine commands and does not live as if God did exist, then public feuding would last indefinitely and no political community could be possible or, if already existing, could ever be stable.

However, from a different perspective, Kant's position on the relationship between the ethical and political communities *does* infringe the principles of the secular state in the version we maintain today. The distinction between civil and institutional levels does not easily work in actual practice. Not only does Kant endorse the idea that people in civil society are not allowed to steer clear of the bid to create an ethical community because, in his words, "human beings are not permitted to remain idle in the undertaking and let Providence have free rein, as if each could go after his private moral affairs",¹¹⁰ Kant argues, too, that the state is not allowed to remain passive.

Clearly, the state cannot adopt or champion any specific ecclesiastical faith or religious doctrine, because that would amount to a violation of the autonomy of political reason or of the liberty to "the public use of reason". But the state is not a mere combination of people under the rule of law nor is it just a "belonging (*patrimonium*)".¹¹¹ The state is indeed a "moral person".¹¹² As a consequence, it cannot be indifferent or neutral or independent or impartial towards the religions of its citizens, their ecclesiastic faiths and their churches, from which its own "person" depends. Quite to the contrary, the state is forced to elect religion, at least in its universal, non-partisan form of pure rational religion, as its own foundation or source or "discipline". Kant reached rather explicitly this conclusion when he faced the problem of atheism and the issue of religious pluralism.

As for atheism, Kant professes that an atheist "robs his fellow-men of an efficacious means whereby duties to one another are protected by a higher hand, and everyone is determined to the fulfilment of duty without enforcement by others".¹¹³ As this is harmful for society, "the state is authorized to forbid such corrupting affirmations of a paradox".¹¹⁴ A state that *forbids* opinions in religious matters is clearly not religiously neutral.

As for pluralism, the situation is the following. There is only one pure rational religion, while ecclesiastical faiths are numerous. Pluralism, or "sec-tarianism", as Kant names it, is both a spontaneous and a natural fact: it is spontaneous, because "as soon as ecclesiastical faith begins to speak with

¹¹⁰ *Religion*, 6: 100.

¹¹¹ *Peace*, 8: 344.

¹¹² *Ibid.*

¹¹³ *Vigilantius*, 27: 531.

¹¹⁴ *Ibid.*

authority on its own and forgets that it must be rectified by pure religious faith, sectarianism sets in".¹¹⁵ It is natural because, as we have seen, whatever the faith they profess, men need symbols and cults. The question is: besides being a fact, is pluralism a *good* thing?

Kant believes it is *not*. He argues that "on the subject of sectarianism (which, as in Protestantism, goes so far as to multiply churches) we are accustomed to say that it is desirable for many kinds of religion (properly speaking, kinds of ecclesiastical faiths) to exist in a state. And this is, in fact, desirable to the extent that it is a good sign – a sign, namely, that the people are allowed freedom of belief. But it is only the government that is to be commended here".¹¹⁶ However, for pluralism to be desirable "in fact" does not imply that it is also desirable "in itself". Quite the contrary. Kant writes that "*in itself* such a public state of affairs in religion is not a good thing *unless* the principle underlying it is of such a nature as to bring with it universal agreement on the essential maxims of belief, as the concept of [rational] religion requires".¹¹⁷ In other words: religious pluralism is good *provided* there be the fullest agreement in civil society about the "essential maxims of belief" and the minimum of disagreement about the "non essentials".¹¹⁸

Kant's preoccupation in this context is clearly political and typically liberal. If in civil society there were no agreement on rational religion – the "essential maxims" – the political community would not have the discipline to aspire for a civil constitution and, as a consequence, the state either could not be established or it would risk disintegration. As Kant writes, "the natural principles of morality [are] the *mainstay* on which the government must be able to count if it wants to trust the people".¹¹⁹ Of course, "it is not the government's business to concern itself with the future happiness of the subjects and show them the way to it",¹²⁰ but it *is* the government's business to have good citizens: "the government's purpose with regard to ecclesiastical faith can be only to have, through this means too, subjects who are tractable and morally good".¹²¹ Although "ecclesiastical faith must remain open to gradual purification until it coincides with religious faith ... it comes under the protection of the Government, which watches over public unity and peace".¹²²

¹¹⁵ *Conflict*, 7: 51.

¹¹⁶ *Conflict*, 7: 52.

¹¹⁷ *Ibid.*

¹¹⁸ *Ibid.*

¹¹⁹ *Conflict*, 7: 60.

¹²⁰ *Conflict*, 7: 59.

¹²¹ *Conflict*, 7: 60.

¹²² *Conflict*, 7: 42.

The state must then take a decision. It cannot endorse a specific religion: if it “chooses to enjoin orthodox statutory doctrines and means of grace, it can fare very badly”, because “it is an easy thing for a human being to accept these statutes, and far easier for the evil-minded than for the good”.¹²³ Since “in religious matters the only thing that can interest the state is: to what doctrines it must bind teachers of religion in order to have useful citizens, good soldiers, and, in general, faithful subjects”,¹²⁴ the state cannot but choose to favour “the teaching of the church [that is] directed straight to morality”, because that church follower believes he “must answer to a future judge for any evil he has done that he cannot repair”,¹²⁵ and that expectation consequently leads him to conduct a better moral life and makes him a better citizen. For the state, choosing the ideas of a specific church means *adopting* a religion or a religious-like creed as its own “banner”. The liberal secular state is liberal to the extent of respecting all religions but it cannot be so secular as to dispense itself of that kind of religion on which its own existence and survival depend. State religion is a state’s necessity.

To conclude. Religion is necessary to morality, morality (the effort to defeat the socially destructive bad principle) is necessary to civil society, a civil society made morally responsible by the development of an ethical community in the form of a church is necessary to the liberal state. Without God, religion and the church, the state would either turn into an aggregation of people fighting each other, and therefore not a state at all, or else it would merely develop into a coercive, therefore illiberal, police community.

7. Christianity and Western civilization

The question now is: precisely *which* God, religion, and church? Kant answers this question quite firmly and unequivocally. It is the *Christian* God, religion, and church that secure moral reason and political reason, personal morality and social discipline, the foundation of an ethical community and the mainstay of the liberal state. Morality and liberal politics are the essential touchstones of religions. Kant was so convinced of this that he denied Judaism the proper nature of a religion, with the argument that Judaism does not so much aim at an ethical community but a political one. “Strictly speaking Judaism is not a religion at all but simply the union of a number of individuals who, since they belong to a particular stock, established themselves into a community under purely political laws, hence not into a church”.¹²⁶ In Kant’s interpretation

¹²³ *Ibid.*

¹²⁴ *Conflict*, 7: 60n.

¹²⁵ *Ibid.*

¹²⁶ *Religion*, 6: 125.

only the Christian God can play the role of a true ethical community, by performing its task of serving the political community.

Considered from the point of view of scientific reason, “the transcendental and single determinate concept of God that merely speculative reason gives us is in the most precise sense *deistic*, i.e. ... the idea of something on which all empirical reality grounds its highest and necessary unity”.¹²⁷ But considered from the prospect of moral and political reason, the concept of God cannot but be *theistic*, in the sense of Somebody (not “something”), a Person (not just a Supreme Being) who rewards and punishes our intentions and actions. This does not imply we have cognitive proof of the existence of God, because proving as much would be impossible. Fortunately, proving the existence of God is not required. All we need is that the idea of the existence of God is neither contradictory nor empirically or theoretically falsifiable. Kant writes, “the *minimum* of cognition (it is possible that there is a God) must alone suffice for what can be made the duty of every human being”.¹²⁸ From science’s standpoint a personal God is something that may or may not exist; for morality He *must* exist. “Must” is to be understood in the sense of moral certainty: “I will inexorably believe in the existence of God and a future life, and I am sure that nothing can make these beliefs unstable, since my moral principles themselves, which I cannot renounce without becoming contemptible in my own eyes, would thereby be subverted”.¹²⁹

The fact that Kant’s personal God is the Christian one follows from his choice of Christianity as the religion best fitted to morality and politics. Amidst the several kinds of ecclesiastical faiths, “Christianity, as far as we know, is the most adequate”.¹³⁰

Kant bases this claim on three main reasons.

First. Christian religion matches perfectly with practical reason. “The doctrine of Christianity ... gives ... a concept of the highest good (of the kingdom of God) which alone satisfies the strictest demand of practical reason”.¹³¹ Morality aims at a state of happiness proportional to our good intentions and actions, but such a state cannot be bestowed upon men merely by abiding by the moral law. “The Christian doctrine of morals now supplements this lack (of the second indispensable component of the highest good) by representing the world in which rational beings devote themselves with their whole soul

¹²⁷ *C. P. R.*, A 675, B 703.

¹²⁸ *Religion*, 6: 154n.

¹²⁹ *C. P. R.* A 828, B 856.

¹³⁰ *Conflict*, 7: 36.

¹³¹ *C. Pr. R.*, 5: 127–28.

to the moral law as a *kingdom of God*, in which nature and morals come into harmony, foreign to each of them of itself, through a holy author who makes the derived highest good possible”.¹³² Kant is so firm in his idea of Christianity as the religion best matching the principle of practical reason (autonomy), that he both praises Christianity with respect to Judaism: “the new faith ... was to contain a religion valid for the world and not for one single people”,¹³³ and interprets Christianity in a way clearly at odds with the standard teachings of the Christian doctrine itself. Kant in fact writes, “nevertheless, the Christian principle of *morals* itself is not theological (and so heteronomy); it is instead autonomy of pure practical reason by itself, since it does not make cognition of God and his will the basis of these laws but only of the attainment of the highest good subject to the condition of observing these laws, and since it places even the proper incentive to observing them not in the results wished for but in the representation of duty alone, faithful observance of which alone constitutes worthiness to acquire the latter”.¹³⁴ Or: “Christianity’s true first purpose was none other than the introduction of a pure religious faith, over which there can be no dissension of opinions”.¹³⁵

Second. Christian religion matches natural religion. Again twisting Christian traditional teachings to his own advantage, Kant views “Christian religion as natural religion”¹³⁶ and Christ as “a teacher [who] was the first to advocate a pure and compelling religion, ... [who] did so publicly and even in defiance of a dominant ecclesiastical faith ... [and who] made this universal religion of reason the supreme and indispensable condition of each and every religious faith”.¹³⁷ In short, Christ is “the person who can be revered, not indeed as the *founder* of the *religion* which, free from every dogma, is inscribed in the heart of all human beings (for there is nothing arbitrary in the origin of this religion), but as the founder of the first true church”.¹³⁸ This is why “we cannot begin the universal history of the church ... anywhere but from the origin of Christianity, which, as a total abandonment of the Judaism in which it originated, grounded on an entirely new principle, effected a total revolution in doctrines of faith”.¹³⁹

¹³² *C. Pr. R.*, 5: 128.

¹³³ *Religion*, 6: 127.

¹³⁴ *C. Pr. R.*, 5: 129.

¹³⁵ *Religion*, 6: 131.

¹³⁶ *Religion*, 6: 157.

¹³⁷ *Religion*, 6: 158.

¹³⁸ *Religion*, 6: 159.

¹³⁹ *Religion*, 6: 127.

Third. Christianity is a source of civilization, i.e. European civilization. Kant writes: “we have reason to say that ‘the Kingdom of God is come into us’, even if only the principle of the gradual transition from ecclesiastical faith to the universal religion of reason, and so to a (divine) ethical state on earth, has put in roots universally and, somewhere, also in *public*”.¹⁴⁰ ‘Somewhere’, but where? Where has the universal religion of reason most resembling Christianity put down roots and expressed itself in public? The answer is: in Europe. Europe is not a mere historical entity or geographical expression. It is a civilization: “I may call European a nation only if it exclusively admits legal coercion, therefore restrictions of liberty, only by universally valid rules”.¹⁴¹ Europe is a continent with a mission: “if one starts from *Greek* history – as that through which every other older or contemporaneous history has been kept or at least accredited – if one follows their influence on the formation or malformation down to the present time its influence on the education or miseducation of the state of the *Roman* nation which swallowed up the Greek state, and the latter’s influence on the *barbarians* who in turn destroyed the former, down to the present time, and also adds to this *episodically* the political history of other nations, or the knowledge about them that has gradually reached us through these same enlightened nations – then one will discover a regular course of improvement of state constitutions in our part of the world (which will probably someday give laws to all the others)”.¹⁴² “Progress must come from Europe”,¹⁴³ because this is the place where “the principles of its [the Kingdom of God] constitution begin to become public”.¹⁴⁴

This is why civilization originated in Europe and Christianity is destined to be the world religion. The process has experienced several drawbacks. Here, “in the West, faith erected a throne of its own independent of secular power”.¹⁴⁵ Here, Christianity “could justify the outcry, *tantum religio potuit suadere malorum!*”¹⁴⁶ Yet this is the place, too, where “reason ... has accepted the principle of reasonable moderation”,¹⁴⁷ the principle that the sacred narrative “should at all times be taught and expounded in the interest of morality”,¹⁴⁸ and that “it is the duty of the rulers not to hinder the public

¹⁴⁰ *Religion*, 6: 122.

¹⁴¹ *Nachlass*, XV, 2, 773, n. 1497.

¹⁴² *Idea*, 8: 29.

¹⁴³ *Nachlass*, XV, 2, 781, n. 1499.

¹⁴⁴ *Religion*, 6: 151.

¹⁴⁵ *Religion*, 6: 131.

¹⁴⁶ *Ibid.*

¹⁴⁷ *Religion*, 6: 132.

¹⁴⁸ *Ibid.*

diffusion of these principles”.¹⁴⁹ A government that “prohibits *the public declaration* of one’s religious opinions while not hindering anyone from *thinking* in secret whatever he sees fit” is “doing violence to conscience”.¹⁵⁰ This is to be avoided. Enlightened rulers in enlightened times have different duties and must follow different policies: they should never “conspire to hinder such a free development of the divine predispositions to the world’s highest good, or even promote its hindrance”, because that would “hamper, perhaps for a long time to come, or indeed even set back the advance in goodness envisaged by the world’s government, even though no human power or institution could ever abolish it entirely”.¹⁵¹ Enlightenment is not fully achieved but it is marching.

Christian Europe is a footstep in this forward march. When the “gradual purification” of ecclesiastical faiths and the “gradual transition” to universal pure religion is accomplished, when the “discipline by religion” is accepted and the “essential maxims of belief” are widely recognized as a creed and practised as a custom, even “the degrading distinction between *laity* and *clergy* ceases”.¹⁵² That will be the time when finally “equality springs from true freedom, yet without anarchy, for each indeed obeys the law (not the statutory one) which he has prescribed to himself, yet must regard it at the same time as the will of the world ruler as revealed to him through reason, and this ruler invisibly binds all together, under a common government, in a state inadequately represented and prepared for in the past through the visible church”.¹⁵³ That day Europe, the West, without dispensing with its liberal secular state, but rather with the determination and need to strengthen it, will unfurl a Christian banner as a public rallying point for its civilizing mission.

8. Kant’s project and prophecy

Kant’s philosophy of religion and politics is a minefield of endless conflicting interpretations mainly because his thought on these issues and many others is a battlefield of conflicting positions. Undeniably, his many grandiose, astonishing, and epoch-making syntheses and combinations – between empiricism and rationalism, reason and faith, law and morality, liberalism and religion, human corruption and hope, history and salvation –

¹⁴⁹ *Religion*, 6: 133.

¹⁵⁰ *Religion*, 6: 133n.

¹⁵¹ *Religion*, 6: 134.

¹⁵² *Religion*, 6: 122.

¹⁵³ *Ibid.*

leave room to quite a few apparent inconsistencies, tensions, ambiguities, unsettled questions. Kant scholars are right in denouncing the several limits of Kant's arguments and claims. Sometimes he seems to want to reconcile what cannot possibly be reconciled. To limit ourselves to the arguments developed in our paper, there is a clear tension between advocating the self-sufficiency of moral reason and stating that, without admitting the existence of God, "the rules of conduct have no motive power",¹⁵⁴ or between declaring that the problem of founding a republican constitution can be solved by reason alone and admitting that it also needs a "discipline by religion".

This is not to say that coherent interpretations of Kant's thought are never possible. In some cases they actually are, in others they are not, in still others they are, provided some adjustments are made here and there. To provide such coherent interpretations is the Kant scholars' task. In my view, there is an additional one. An effort should be made not only to solve, but to understand Kant's tensions within his overall project. This is especially important for the questions we have examined.

Kant was both a philosopher of the Enlightenment and a Christian thinker. As an exponent of the Enlightenment he tried to give the (still to be born) European liberal state a secular face, mindful as he was of the illiberal and sometimes tragic consequences of theocracy, religious wars, despotism, absolutism, paternalism, censorship, and lack of liberty. As an admirer of Christianity, although not a devout Christian himself, he tried to save its core values of freedom and salvation. As an Enlightenment philosopher he aimed to protect fundamental human rights, above all the first and utmost, liberty. As a Christian thinker, he bound these rights to the concept of the human person, its dignity, its worthiness of respect, its end-in-itselfness, and therefore its holy, God-like nature.

The Enlightenment ideal and the Christian message arise from two different perspectives, the earthly and the heavenly. According to the former, man is a master (and in some radical versions, the only master) of his own life *in this world*; according to the latter, man is a limited creature incapable of his own salvation *in the other world*. Although apparently incompatible, the two outlooks can intersect (or may be stretched so as to intersect) on one single point: that human reason – independently of whether it is considered a gift of God, as Christianity asserts, or a fact of nature, as Enlightenment claims – can improve man's condition. Kant examines this intersecting point and tries to make reason tally with faith, human power

¹⁵⁴ Collins, 27: 312.

with human destiny, man's limits with man's hopes. He is aware such convergence has no horizon in this world, but is also confident that improvements are within our reach if only we take them dutifully and we make our best efforts to achieve them. In this sense, Kant's was a project of moral, social, political, and religious reform. It was a grandiose, revolutionary Christian project, the rationalized and secularized version of a Christian reformation before Christianity in Europe was doomed to fade away.

For Kant, morality, law, politics, and religion are elements of one single tradition and culture that needs to be vindicated or transcendently, rationally, "deduced". They are members of the same family, parts of the same living organism. What reason regards as an autonomous duty corresponds to what Christianity considers a divine command; the goal of pure rational religion tallies with the purest preachings of Christ; the needs of the state with its ethical community coincide with the promises of the Christian God with his universal church; the categorical imperative has Christian contents; pure rational religion is a Christian religion without revelation, hierarchies, priests, dogmas, authentic interpretations; the ethical community is a union under Christian command; the liberal state wants Christian principles and values. Even scientific knowledge with its postulate of a rational order of nature presupposes a Christian Lawgiver. This is why Kant (like Locke before him) removed atheists from his liberal state: a dogmatic atheist "loses the above-mentioned supports in the fulfilment of our duties, and it is undeniable that to that extent he cannot be regarded as a good citizen, and damages the obligating power of the laws, which this idea makes effective".¹⁵⁵ And this is also why Kant proclaimed Europe, and the West, as the centre of civilization: because in the West law, morality, politics, science, and religion are bound together within, and converge towards, a single point, the Christian tradition and culture.

Did Kant's project succeed? If his arguments are tenable and defensible, as I believe they are, he did. But just as important or even more important than his arguments, are his concerns and worries. When he famously wrote that he had "to deny knowledge in order to make room for faith"¹⁵⁶ he knew what he meant. He meant that a civilization based on science alone would destroy itself, exactly like a society based on faith alone would give rise to fanaticism.

Kant proclaimed the autonomy of reason and strived for its self-sufficiency. But he opposed a transformation of the autonomy and self-suffi-

¹⁵⁵ *Vigilantius*, 27: 531.

¹⁵⁶ *C. P. R.*, B XXX.

ciency of reason into the *independence* of reason. In his view, to confide in the independence of reason would turn reason against itself, give rise to yet another kind of atheism, finally destroying our freedom and, along with it, our best hope for a liberal, disciplined, peaceful, cosmopolitan society.

Kant was so gripped by this hope and so concerned about its fulfilment that he launched a warning that sounds like a prophecy. He wrote: “because, however, human reason always strives for freedom, when it first breaks its fetters the first use it makes of its long unaccustomed freedom has to degenerate into a misuse and a presumptuous trust in the independence of its faculties from all limitations, leading to a persuasion of the sole authority of speculative reason which assumes nothing except what it can justify by *objective* grounds and dogmatic conviction; everything else it boldly repudiates. Now the maxim of reason’s independence of its *own need* (of doing without rational faith) is *unbelief*. This ... *unbelief of reason*, a precarious state of the human mind, which first takes from moral laws all their force as incentives to the heart, and over time all their authority ... occasions the way of thinking one calls *libertinism*, i.e. the *principle* of recognizing no duty at all”.¹⁵⁷ It is because of this unbelief of reason and libertinism – just the state of moral anarchy the political community aims to avoid in its formation – that “the authorities get mixed up in the game, so that even civil arrangements may not fall into the greatest disorder; and since they regard the most efficient and emphatic means as the best, this does away with even the freedom to think, and subjects thinking, like other trades, to the country’s rules and regulations. And so freedom in thinking finally destroys itself if it tries to proceed in independence of the laws of reason”.¹⁵⁸

Unlimited freedom is no freedom, and liberty with no dependence can go astray. “Friends of the human race and of what is holiest to it!” – Kant’s pleading and prophecy continues – “accept what appears to you most worthy of belief after careful and sincere examination, whether of fact or rational grounds; only do not dispute that prerogative of reason which makes it the highest good on earth, the prerogative of being the final touchstone of truth. Failing here, you will become unworthy of this freedom, and you will surely forfeit it too”.¹⁵⁹

The arrogance of reason may initially produce the euphoria of reason, soon followed by the slumber of reason. More than two centuries later, Kant’s

¹⁵⁷ *Thinking*, 8: 146.

¹⁵⁸ *Ibid.*

¹⁵⁹ *Ibid.*

prophecy seems to have come true in European history. In new times of libertinism of reason, fanaticism is arising again, political authorities, on the pretext of avoiding that “civil arrangements may fall into the greatest disorder”, continue to “get mixed up in the game”, and our civilization is at risk.

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