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KANT A CHRISTIAN? A REPLY TO PALMQUIST

Anthony N. Perovich, Jr.

Stephen Palmquist has suggested that the alternative perspectives that constitute the Critical system allow for the acceptance of Christian doctrine and experience as traditionally understood, even though Kant tends to emphasize a moral interpretation. In fact, however, Kant can provide only a practical justification and indeed only a practical interpretation for much that is essential to Christianity; in several key cases he can acknowledge none but the moral standpoint. I conclude with some reflections on how a Kantian who wishes to be a Christian as well might supplement the Critical philosophy in order to make this possible.

The interpreter of Kant finds it difficult to avoid raising questions about the historical and logical relations that hold between the Critical philosophy and the traditional doctrines of Christianity. Kant's Lutheran and specifically Pietist background informs all his mature works (however completely he may have separated himself from that heritage in some respects), and his attempt in *Religion Within the Limits of Reason Alone* to render Christian teachings philosophically excites curiosity about its success. In a recent issue of *Faith and Philosophy*, Stephen Palmquist has addressed the logical question and concluded that Kant's religious views are thoroughly consistent with the tenets of Christianity.¹ Indeed, Palmquist considers us compelled "to view Kant as having developed a radically Christian philosophy" (p. 73).

We are able to appreciate the compatibility of Christianity and the Critical philosophy, in Palmquist's view, by coming to understand the set of complementary standpoints that he calls Kant's "System of Perspectives." It is the discovery and development of this system that constitute the fundamental Critical undertaking and accomplishment: "Kant's main goal is not (as commonly supposed) to establish a particular set of transcendental 'principles'. . . . [Rather] his main purpose must be to delineate the *pattern* of thinking which the philosopher must adopt in order to construct a coherent philosophical system."² Each particular pattern of thinking, or perspective, offers "a way of looking at a certain question or set of questions: it acts as a context or a set of assumptions on the basis of which such questions can be answered" (p. 67). Because there are a number of such standpoints, an important task for Kant consists in distinguishing them one from another and in determining their relationships: "the general goal which motivates all his Critical endeav-

ors is to elucidate the difference between various human perspectives and to demonstrate how they can work together in a single, coherent, systematic explanation of human experience" (p. 67).

The mistake that interpreters of Kant have made, according to Palmquist, has been to ignore how these perspectives "work together." Theological doctrines and religious experience may in fact be explained in the light of a number of standpoints; Kant's views appear opposed to Christian teachings only when one erroneously supposes that his explicit accounts of doctrine or experience offer the only interpretations that the Critical philosophy can countenance. By recognizing that the different perspectives are not mutually exclusive but rather can present alternative *yet compatible* explanations of the same phenomena, we come to see that the typical Critical religious pronouncements are not at odds with those made from the traditionally Christian point of view; rather, while both consider the very same theological doctrines and religious experiences, they do so from different perspectives, and these perspectives are not only equally legitimate, they in fact both contribute to a systematic, coherent, and comprehensive understanding of religious matters.

Palmquist is undoubtedly correct in stressing the importance of appreciating the different perspectives that together constitute the Critical system (as well as in emphasizing that Kant's attitude toward the project of proving God's existence need not be thought to conflict with the teachings of Scripture regarding our knowledge of God (pp. 68-71)). Moreover, I think he has raised an important question about what it means to be both a Kantian and a Christian. Nevertheless, what he says about the legitimacy of different perspectives on religious topics is demonstrably wrong as an interpretation of Kant's views. In what follows, I shall show that Critical religious views do not admit of the reading Palmquist offers, try to situate the disallowance of alternative perspectives within a Kantian context which indisputably recognizes other occasions when different perspectives are permitted, and conclude with some reflections on what is required if one is to be a Christian who is also a Kantian.

I

It is true, Palmquist admits, that Kant's religious views are typically couched in moral language; nevertheless, a properly Critical stance acknowledges the possibility of other perspectives on these matters as well: "Throughout his works Kant's comments are usually purposefully limited to the practical standpoint, so that he often ends up explaining (theoretical) theological doctrines or (empirical) religious experiences in practical (i.e., moral) terms. However, he never claims that the practical standpoint is the *only* legitimate context for interpreting such doctrines or experiences" (p. 72). Rather, viewed from the general vantage supplied by his "System of

Perspectives," Kant aims at integrating that moral standpoint into a broader, synoptic framework.

According to Palmquist, Kant's openness and flexibility are (or should be) evident in his attitudes toward both religious experience and theological doctrine. However, even if we turn to the examples that Palmquist provides or that his discussion suggests, we find in Kant anything but the accommodating breadth of vision that the "System of Perspectives" leads us to expect.

Kant's attitude toward prayer is supposedly an example of how religious phenomena admit of multiple interpretations: "When, for instance, he analyzes the practical value of prayer as an inner stimulus, intended 'to induce in us a moral disposition,' he is not precluding the legitimacy of also regarding the immediate *experience* of prayer as a form of communion with God" (p. 72). Yet Kant's authoritative Critical treatment of prayer clearly rules out the acceptability of such complementary levels of understanding. He distinguishes between the spirit of prayer and the letter of it; the former is a disposition to act as if one were in God's service, the latter consists in stated wishes directed toward God.³ These are for Kant kinds of prayer, in fact the two sorts that he recognizes. The former might not be acknowledged to be prayer at all by many Christians; the latter, which is what Palmquist understands by prayer (or as close as Kant gets to it), falls away as a result of proper moral development and has value *only* for the quickening of our disposition to behave morally.⁴ And while Palmquist believes that Kant holds open the possibility that such prayer may be viewed as communion with God, Kant's own characterization hardly suggests such an interpretation: although ostensibly involved in speaking with God, verbal prayer involves nothing more than "conversing within and really *with oneself*."⁵

Kant's alleged openness to the supernatural is cited as further evidence of the flexibility of his system.

Kant was admittedly highly suspicious of extremes such as religious "fanaticism" and "clericalism." But this should not blind us to the fact that he always kept an open mind with regard to the possibility of an irrational (or arational) experience of the supernatural, such as that in which he shows considerable interest in his much neglected *Dreams of a Spirit-Seer* (1766). Kant's rejection of such extremes does not entail a rejection of a balanced attitude towards the possibility of supernatural experiences (p. 72).⁶

But this "open mind" is quite simply not displayed in the Critical writings. That we lack a capacity for intellectual intuition, at least in this life, is, of course, a constant for Kant's teaching, a constant that restricts our experience to the sensible. Supposed supersensible insights of mystics are sometimes dismissed as "monstrosities."⁷ And the Critical attitude toward the supernatural is a good deal more hostile than Palmquist purports to discover in the *Dreams of a Spirit-Seer*. Swedenborg's alleged second sight and intercourse

with the realm of spirits are the immediate reference points for that text; however its rather scoffing tone is interpreted, Kant's statements in the *Critical of Pure Reason* leave no doubt about the official Critical position regarding ghosts, clairvoyance, and ESP:

A substance which would be permanently present in space, but without filling it (like that mode of existence intermediate between matter and thinking being which some would seek to introduce), or a special ultimate mental power of *intuitively* anticipating the future (and not merely inferring it), or lastly a power of standing in community of thought with other men, however distant they may be—are *concepts the possibility of which is altogether groundless, as they cannot be based on experience and its known laws . . .*⁸

The fact is that Kant took the interconnected whole of human experience to be necessarily *sensible* (as well as regular, in the sense of necessarily conforming to *natural* laws of the sort that scientific investigation discovers); not only does he rule out the alternative (supersensible and supernatural) sorts of experience for which Palmquist apparently believes he finds a place, he often enough rules them out quite emphatically.

The case of theological *doctrine* is precisely the same as that of religious or supernatural *experience*. Palmquist similarly claims that, while Kant frequently offers a practical explanation for particular theological doctrines, one should not conclude that other accounts (more in keeping with the Christian tradition) are thereby ruled out. And once again, the Critical texts preclude Palmquist's interpretation; the "openness" and "balance" he purports to find in the mature Kant are quite simply not there.

Take, for example, Kant's discussion of the Trinity. The doctrine of the Trinity is "a *mystery*, i.e., something *holy* which may indeed be *known* by each single individual but cannot be *made known* publicly, that is, shared universally."⁹ When expanded, this amounts to saying that God's tri-unity is morally intelligible to us—we understand the moral relation of God to the human race by regarding Him as holy Legislator, benevolent Ruler, and righteous Judge—but is also theoretically unfathomable. God in Himself transcends all our concepts: from a practical perspective He is to be regarded as a tri-unity, but "apart from this context we can know nothing about Him."¹⁰ The notion of God's trinitarian character offers *no* theoretical knowledge of Him, indeed it does not even offer an intelligible theoretical conception of Him. The moral perspective provides the only legitimate context for interpreting the doctrine of the Trinity because it cannot even be understood from any other.¹¹

Palmquist attempts to make the Critical philosophy amenable to the Christian standpoint by suggesting that the moral interpretations of those doctrines offered by Kant are not thought by him to exclude other, more traditional interpretations. Such a reading, however, conflicts with Kant's texts on every

page. To see how to be a Kantian Christian requires more than Palmquist's evident generosity; one must have a better understanding of the interrelations of the Critical perspectives, and one must be willing to use this knowledge as the basis for suggested revisions in the system of transcendental idealism.

II

. . . a rational being must regard himself as intelligence (and not from the side of his lower powers), as belonging to the world of understanding and not to that of the senses. Thus he has two standpoints from which he can consider himself and recognize the laws of the employment of his powers and consequently of all his actions: first, as belonging to the world of sense, under laws of nature (heteronomy), and, second, as belonging to the intelligible world under laws which, independent of nature, are not empirical but founded only on reason.¹²

In a passage like this one we encounter what is necessary for the operation of a Kantian system of perspectives: an object or objects¹³ on which one has perspectives, and modes of access to those objects which determine the character of the perspectives. Now we of course encounter the sensible world via the cognitive apparatus whose workings Kant describes in the first *Critique*. The intelligible world is closed to us except for what the practical perspective discloses: we are justified in believing about things in themselves—and this holds for our beliefs about God as for all our beliefs about the denizens of the intelligible world—nothing beyond what our commitment to morality necessitates.

Morality commits us to two different sorts of beliefs about God, those about Him as He is in Himself, and those about Him as He is for us as moral beings. The former serve to determine His nature, the latter merely offer conceptions of Him beneficial for the regulation of our behavior. The effort to construe the latter theoretically is fruitless, for they are conceptually opaque viewed from the theoretical perspective.¹⁴ Of the first sort, the belief in God's existence is an example: it is a postulate of pure practical reason, a theoretical proposition that can, however, be justified only on practical grounds. Examples of the second sort include many beliefs that are distinctively Christian rather than simply theistic, not only the belief in God's tri-unity that has already been mentioned, but beliefs such as those regarding atonement and election as well. It is worse than unsettling for Palmquist's interpretation to discover that many key Christian doctrines, while capable of a practical reading, nevertheless prove to be "unsuited to man's powers of comprehension" and lead to contradiction when regarded theoretically.¹⁵ It is, I say, worse than unsettling: it is fatal.

Kant thus finds himself committed to the following three claims:

- (1) *Interpreted from a perspective other than the practical*, experiences thought by Christians to possess particular religious significance do not in fact do so. (Petitionary prayer consists in talking to oneself.)

- (2) *Interpreted from a perspective other than the practical*, doctrines thought by Christians to express fundamental religious truths are entirely opaque. (The doctrine of Trinity is utterly impenetrable conceptually.)
- (3) However, such experiences and doctrines do admit of a practical interpretation that renders the former significant and the latter understandable.

Pace Palmquist, the significance of (3) for Kant resides in the fact that the practical interpretations to which reference is there made offer the only link the Critical philosophy permits to many teachings of traditional Christianity; however tenuous the connection of these interpretations to their more robust Christian sources, they are all Kant's position allows him; to belittle or abandon them is to forsake any connection whatsoever. The texts will simply not permit one to pretend, as Palmquist does, that other perspectives (e.g., the theoretical) are legitimate but unemphasized. As Christianity teaches us about the supersensible, not only do the statements about it allow only a practical *justification* or none at all, many characteristically Christian statements about it allow only a practical *interpretation* or none at all.

Nevertheless, Palmquist has raised an interesting question about Critical philosophy understood broadly: if orthodox Christianity is incompatible with Kant's texts, what modifications might be recommended to a Kantian philosopher who wished to accommodate himself to the Christian religion?

First of all, it should be noted that intellectual space must be made not only for Christian ideas but also for Christian history. Despite Palmquist's sanguine remarks to the contrary (p. 73), it seems clear that Kant's conceptual scheme is going to have difficulty admitting the possibility of miraculous events and in particular of the resurrection. Yet this need not bother the Kantian Christian unduly: philosophical and scientific developments since Kant's day have made it fairly clear that the Principles of the Transcendental Analytic are not acceptable as they stand in any case, and the need for any viable new set of Principles to be at least consistent with Christian history is one that the Kantian can probably satisfy as easily as any of the others occasioned by intellectual developments of the past two centuries. What is crucial to a Kantian position, after all, would seem to be the doctrine that our categories structure our experience, and surely not that the categories be identical with the ones Kant claimed to discover in the Metaphysical Deduction. It must seem to contemporary Kantians (or to a good many of them) that there are indefinitely many alternative conceptual schemes that are capable of organizing our perceptual world; the task of finding among them one that is able to address scientific, philosophical, and Christian concerns should not prove beyond achievement.

However, the status of Christian doctrine still remains problematic for the Kantian, and on at least two grounds. First, even granting that there may be

alternative conceptual schemes, the Kantian may still wish to endorse, for any such scheme, the distinction between what we can think and what we can know. If the latter is limited to the sensible realm, and if what can be rationally believed in the realm of the former is limited to what can be practically justified, then the Kantian who would also be a Christian believer faces severe difficulties: insofar as doctrine concerns the supersensible, it is not capable of being known, and there is no reason to think that, interpreted theoretically, very much of it would lend itself to practical justification. Second, not only do many Christian doctrines deal with the supersensible, of those that do some central ones, as we have seen, *cannot* be understood theoretically. Kant finds these beyond our conceptual grasp, and it is doubtful that any conceptual scheme that might be substituted for the original set of categories will be of any help here.

Evidently, the practical perspective of the Critical philosophy is insufficient for making the Christian faith intelligible, let alone for grounding it. The Kantian need not abandon his commitment to practical foundations of religion, but he must supplement them if he would also be a Christian. What is wanted, then, is a way of grasping Christian truths that enables us to escape the difficulties mentioned above and yet that does as little damage as possible to the Critical approach to religion. Four desiderata might be mentioned as criteria to be satisfied by any admissible supplement:

- (1) The spirit of the Critical philosophy must not be violated, and analyses of empirical experience, morality, art, etc., in the Kantian style must not be impaired.
- (2) Access to the supersensible beyond the inferences legitimated by morality must be assured, yet (in keeping with (1)) the means must not be of the rational sort exposed by Kant as dialectical inferences in the second half of the first *Critique*.
- (3) In fact the mode of access must transcend the limits imposed by the conceptual, if the Christian mysteries are to be regained as doctrine.
- (4) The access to the supersensible must issue in something like knowledge; if the absence of conceptual involvement (by (3)) means that neither knowledge nor experience in the technical Kantian senses is to be understood here, still something akin to Kantian theoretical cognition—something that permits more than the practical interpretation and justification to which Kant limits us regarding so many religious claims—must result.

Now I would suggest that, put this way, the supplement to the Critical philosophy that the Kantian who would be a Christian is seeking, or at any rate a significant component of it, is to be found in the intuition of the Divine to which Christian mystics have laid claim for the better part of two millenia. Such an intuition purports to offer a non-conceptual cognition of the super-

sensible, thus satisfying criteria (2) through (4). To be sure, Kant himself recognizes no such capacity in us: intellectual intuition, Kant's model of the Divine mode of knowing, which shares some—though not all—characteristics with mystical intuition, is regularly denied by him to humans, and the best Kant can suggest about the mystics is that they have correctly described but mistakenly anticipated the cognitive condition of the afterlife. However, the difficulty with the first criterion goes beyond the mere fact that Kant does not recognize a human ability to intuit the supersensible (in this life); one might suggest that Kant *cannot* acknowledge such a capacity in us: mystical union might be thought to endanger autonomy, and the conditions of the unity of consciousness might be considered incapable of satisfaction once a non-spatio-temporal mystical intuition has been admitted. These issues assuredly deserve attention; I shall say here only that I am confident that nothing essential to Kantianism is sacrificed or rendered inconsequent by the recognition of mysticism as a legitimate cognitive mode.

Of course, the suggestion here is not that mystical intuition alone will lead a thinker to recognizably Christian doctrine; the variety of religions with which the mystical life has been successfully intertwined might make such a claim implausible to many. Rather, what I recommend is that the Kantian, who believes that reason alone leads to practical analogues of so many Christian beliefs, employ these practical teachings along with the intuitions of the mystics as two points from which to “triangulate” Christian doctrine. For example, a trinitarian teaching that possessed significance for practical but not for theoretical reason might provide the context within which mystical experience could supply the lack and render that teaching significant in a sense akin to the theoretical after all.¹⁶

The advantage of this approach, of course, is that we are able to navigate the philosophical shoals on which Palmquist's reading foundered: reference to mystical experience enables the Kantian philosopher to preserve an appropriately critical stance toward religion without succumbing to reductivism, as beyond the moral interpretation of doctrine grounds are now provided for granting Christian teachings a theoretical status as well. Palmquist is correct in recognizing that to view the Critical philosophy as plausibly Christian, doctrine must not be interpreted exclusively from the practical perspective. While he is wrong in failing to perceive that Kant allows himself no other interpretation for some of the crucial articles of Christian faith, there is reason to believe that his aim is one that, fortunately for the Kantian who wants to consider himself a Christian, can nevertheless be carried through without compromise in either the philosophical or the religious sphere.

Hope College and the National Endowment for the Humanities

NOTES

1. Stephen Palmquist, "Immanuel Kant: A Christian Philosopher?" *Faith and Philosophy*, vol. 6 (1989), pp. 65-75. Further references to this article will be by way of page numbers enclosed in parentheses and included in the body of the text.

2. Stephen Palmquist, "Knowledge and Experience: An Examination of the Four Reflective 'Perspectives' in Kant's Critical Philosophy," *Kant-Studien*, vol. 78 (1987), p. 196.

3. Immanuel Kant, *Religion Within the Limits of Reason Alone*, trans. Theodore M. Greene and Hoyt H. Hudson (New York: Harper & Row, Publishers, Inc., 1960), p. 183; Immanuel Kant, *Gesammelte Schriften* (hereafter, *GS*) (Berlin: Walter de Gruyter (and predecessors) 1902 —), vol. 6, p. 194.

4. *Ibid.*, pp. 184-85; *GS*, vol. 6, pp. 195-96.

5. *Ibid.*, p. 185 (italics in original); *GS*, vol. 6, p. 197.

6. A protest really must be entered regarding Palmquist's efforts to demonstrate the breadth and openness of Critical views by appeal to quasi-Critical and pre-Critical writings such as the *Lectures on Ethics* and the *Dreams of a Spirit-Seer* (which in any case is hardly an unambiguous support for his claims). His use of the *Opus Postumum* is almost as worrisome.

7. What Kant seems to find "monstrous" in the reports of some mystics is the alleged "fusion" with God. (See Immanuel Kant, *Critique of Practical Reason and Other Writings in Moral Philosophy*, trans. and ed. Lewis White Beck (New York and London: Garland Publishing, Inc., 1976); *GS*, vol. 5, pp. 120-21; also see vol. 8, p. 335.) Presumably such a result is to be avoided as undercutting human autonomy. More modest mystical claims Kant seems prepared to grant, but only when relegated to the life to come; see vol. 28. 2, 2, pp. 1267-68.

8. Immanuel Kant, *Critique of Pure Reason*, trans. Norman Kemp Smith (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1968), A 222-3/B 270 (latter italics mine). Cf. Kant, *Prolegomena*, sec. 35; *GS*, vol. 4, p. 317.

9. Kant, *Religion*, p. 129; *GS*, vol. 6, p. 137. The "General Observation" to Book III of the *Religion* contains Kant's chief discussion of religious mysteries and makes transparent his view that numerous Christian doctrines are intelligible from the practical standpoint and from none other. See *Religion*, pp. 129-38; *GS*, vol. 6, pp. 137-47.

10. *Ibid.*, p. 131; *GS*, vol. 6, p. 139.

11. It is, of course, true that in considering the doctrine of the Trinity a mystery, Christianity has traditionally allied itself with Kant's view that it exceeds our conceptual grasp. However, the traditional position affirms precisely what Kant denies: the notion of God as Trinity yields a conception that is theoretically correct, or has an element of theoretical correctness about it. However dim and imperfect this conception may be, it is superior to all other conceptions not because of its affinities to some description of God's moral relationship to us but because it dimly and imperfectly expresses a theoretical truth about God Himself.

12. Kant, *Critique of Practical Reason and Other Writings*, p. 107; *GS*, vol. 4, p. 452.

13. Whether Kant's system calls for just one world toward which we adopt different points of view or more than one is a vexed issue; Kant is notorious for seeming to suggest now the one position, now the other. The interpretive issue is irrelevant when the discussion concerns God and does not affect the problems that arise with Palmquist's account.

14. When Kant says, "Now we can with justice require of every mystery offered for belief that we *understand* what it is supposed to mean," he means (as he in fact says in his discussion of the mystery of the Trinity) that understanding occurs here, but only in the practical context; mysteries thwart any effort at theoretical understanding. See *Religion*, p. 135n; *GS*, vol 6, p. 144n.

15. See Kant, *Religion*, pp. 133-34; *GS*, vol. 6, pp. 142-43.

16. I have in mind, of course, those experiences in which Christian mystics have encountered God as triune. On their own, such experiences might not be recognized as revelatory of God's nature, but Kant's moral perspective could furnish precisely the framework within which such recognition could occur.