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RELIGION, ETHICAL COMMUNITY AND THE STRUGGLE AGAINST EVIL

Allen Wood

This paper deals with the motivation behind Kant's conception of "religion" as "the recognition of all our duties as divine commands". It argues that in order to understand this motivation, we must grasp Kant's conception of radical evil as social in origin, and the response to it as equally social – the creation of a voluntary, universal "ethical community". Kant's historical model for this community is a religious community (especially the Christian church), though Kant regards traditional churches or religious communities as suitable to their moral vocation only if they undergo Enlightenment reform. The paper concludes with a plea for the Enlightenment view of religion, and an indictment of the common failure to understand it correctly.

Religion and subjectivity. In Part Four of *Religion Within the Boundaries of Mere Reason*, Kant states his more or less official definition of 'religion': "Religion is (subjectively considered) the recognition of all our duties as divine commands" (Ak 6:153; cf. 6:443).¹ To be religious, for Kant, is to view all one's duties as commands issued to one by God. Kant's wording of this definition, apparently restricting the definition to religion "subjectively considered", might suggest that there could be another, "objective" way of considering religion, and this "objective religion" might have a different definition. But in fact Kant never offers a definition of that sort. In fact, Kant had already put forward this same official definition in Part Three in the following words: "Religion is the moral disposition (*Gesinnung*) to observe all duties as [God's] commands" (Ak 6:105). There is no suggestion here that this is a definition only of one kind of religion, to which another kind might be opposed. Instead, there is only a further emphasis on the subjectivity of all religion (as consisting in a special kind of "moral disposition"). A reasonable (and I think correct) inference from these facts is that Kant, like Kierkegaard, regards all religion as entirely a matter of "subjectivity". It has to do with one's way of regarding one's duties, and with one's moral disposition or attitude in fulfilling duties.

Religiousness, then, is solely a matter of a person's subjective attitude toward the moral life. A moral agent is religious if she associates her moral duties with the thought that they are commanded by God, and observes her duties in that spirit. She might do this, for instance, by thinking about the moral life in terms of her personal relationship with God. Thus she might think of her moral transgressions as troubling that relationship, and

her resolve to do better in the future as an attempt to repair that relationship, by giving God a reason to forgive her. This clearly is the way Kant represents the moral life of the individual in Part Two of the Religion, which dealt with "the battle of the good against the evil principle for dominion over the human being" by invoking Kantian interpretations of the traditional Christian doctrine of justification (Ak 6:66-84).

The idea that religion for Kant is an entirely "subjective" matter may, however, also give rise to the thought that he regards it as an entirely optional matter whether one regards one's duties as divine commands. This is certainly true in the sense that Kant, as a strongly convinced political liberal about all religious matters, thinks that it would be a basic violation of right to compel anyone to regard them in this way, as when people are forced to participate in religious services or make confession of a religious creed. It would be even more repugnant if they were forcibly made to think about their moral duties as commands of God.

But the "subjectivity" of religion for Kant might also be taken to imply Kant regards it as in general a matter of moral indifference whether one thinks about one's moral life religiously or not: that there is nothing in rational morality itself that might justify or even provide strong moral reasons for looking at one's moral life in a religious light. It might also be interpreted to mean that for Kant religion is entirely an individual matter – that "religion" has to do solely with the way people, when they happen to be so disposed, choose to think privately about their personal duties. On this account, Kant's conception of religion would be both "liberal" and "Protestant" in the extreme – it would consist solely a matter of the wholly optional private thoughts and feelings individuals might have about their duties. Nothing people might do outwardly or collectively could have anything distinctively "religious" about it, since for religion to have that sort of existence would be to make it into something "objective", which would be foreign or even inimical to the nature of religion as Kant conceives it. The interpretation might be reinforced by noting that Kant found formal religious creeds morally objectionable and regarded religious services as "counterfeit service of God"; he himself always refused on principle to participate in religious services of any kind, even when such participation was (at least an informal) component of his duties as rector of the University of Königsberg. It might lead to the further thought that Kant's insistence on the "subjectivity" of religion might really represent a desire on his part to exclude religion altogether from human life, and certainly to exclude it from the collective or shared life of human society.

It is my purpose in this paper to show that the interpretation of Kant's conception of religion described in the last paragraph is mistaken. By this I do not mean only that it is exaggerated or one-sided, but rather that it is fundamentally wrong. It is a basic and not a marginal misinterpretation of Kantian ethics to regard religion even as incidental to rational morality (much less as morally superfluous or undesirable). It is the very reverse of the truth to interpret Kant's emphasis on the "subjectivity" of religion and his insistence that religious activities must always be voluntary, never coerced, to mean that he regards religion as properly a private rather than a public thing. Probably the deepest error of all is to think that because

Kant disapproved of creeds and traditional religious rituals, he must have regarded public or organized religion as of doubtful or negative value. For this is to impose on an eighteenth century thinker our twentieth century prejudices about what religion is, then letting these prejudices constrain what we take that thinker's options consist in, and consequently forcing on him a choice he would not have made. It is rather like saying of the ancient Israelites (as some of their shortsighted contemporaries might have said) that because they disapproved of the worship of idols, they must therefore have been atheists.

Why should my duties be regarded as God's commands? The right place to begin our inquiry, I think, is with the question: *Why* does Kant think moral agents might choose subjectively to regard their duties as divine commands? Obviously this *cannot* be because this way of regarding them plays any role in determining the *ground* of obligation. For Kant is emphatic that "theological morality" (or divine command theory) cannot give us a satisfactory account of the categorical obligation attaching to duty. Taken in one way, divine command theory is a theory of heteronomy, which must rest obligation on a contingent volition (e.g. of our love or our fear of God), thus undermining the categorical character of obligation (Ak 4:443, 5:40-41). On a more sympathetic interpretation of divine command theory, this theory regards God's commands as obligatory because it is contained in our rational concept of God that God has a perfect will, hence that he necessarily wills all and only that which is in itself right (i.e. categorically obligatory). But of course this still does not explain why God's perfect volitions should have to us the determinate character of *commands*. Even if we solved that problem, however, we would still need an account of what categorical obligation consists in; only a theory of autonomy of the will, and not divine command theory, will suffice for a satisfactory account of obligation.

For this reason, thinking of our duties as divine commands cannot play a role in the proper *motivation* for doing our duty. On the contrary, the only pure motive for doing our duties is the motive of duty itself, or, as Kant restates this motive in the *Groundwork*, the worth of rational nature in the person of the finite rational being to whom we owe the duty (Ak 4:427-429). God himself, as a being with a pure will, must will that we should perform our duties from this motive rather than, say, from fear of his power or hope of his favor; for either of these motives would compromise the autonomy of our will, something a good God could not will that we do.

Just as little could the thought that our duties are divine commands play any role in determining the *content* of duties. For he holds that we have no special duties to God (Ak 6:443-444). Nor could our acquaintance with duty come from any special divine revelation. We can have no empirical acquaintance with any being corresponding to our concept of God, since this concept is an idea of reason to which no experience could ever be adequate. Instead, things must work just the other way round; our only possible acquaintance with what God wills or commands must come from our rational awareness of the content of duty, and the thought that God, as a supremely perfect being, must necessarily will that our duties be performed.

Kant does not even think that we have to believe that there really is a God who wills that we perform our duties. Even a religious person, who regards her duties as divine commands, need not be certain that her duties are in fact commanded by God. For religion, Kant says, "no assertoric knowledge (even of God's existence) is required, [but] only a problematic assumption (hypothesis) as regards speculation about the supreme cause of things;" the "faith" that is strictly indispensable to religion "needs merely the *idea of God*...only the minimum cognition (it is possible that there is a God) has to be objectively sufficient" (Ak 6:153-154). To be religious, then, I do not even have to believe in the existence of God. Religion requires that I have duties, that I have a concept of God (as a *possible* supreme cause of things), and that my awareness of duty is subjectively enlivened by the thought that if there is a God, then my duties are God's commands. We are still trying to find out, however, why Kant thought that a moral agent – even one who is agnostic about God's existence — might have a good reason subjectively to regard her duties as divine commands.

Kant's most explicit answer to our question consists in appealing to our pursuit of the highest good (*summum bonum*), and our need to conceive this pursuit in relation to the will of God. The highest good requires, namely, a correspondence of happiness to worthiness to be happy, and Kant famously maintains that we can conceive of such a correspondence only by supposing that the world is governed by a being that is omniscient (so as to know our worthiness to be happy), omnipotent (so as to be able to grant happiness in proportion to worthiness) and perfectly good (so that it wills, both justly and benevolently, that beings who have made themselves worthy of happiness should partake in it). Accordingly, Kant answers our question as follows: "[Our duties] must be regarded as commands of the supreme being because we can hope for the highest good... only from a morally perfect...will, and therefore we can hope to attain only through harmony with this will" (Ak 5:129).

This answer, however, is highly unsatisfactory, or at least incomplete, and for at least three reasons. First, it seems to appeal to Kant's moral arguments for believing in the existence of God (as the sole way of conceiving the possible reality of the highest good); it therefore fails to explain why Kant might suppose that even someone who is agnostic about God's existence might nevertheless regard her duties as divine commands. Second, although we may hope to attain the highest good only if our will is in harmony with God's will, it has not yet been explained why we should think of this harmony specifically as our obedience to commands issued by God's will. Third, even if we ignore these problems, however, the answer is still incomplete in that it merely shifts our attention to another big question we may have about Kantian ethics: Why in any case do we have to regard the highest good as a necessary object of our pursuit?

This is also the point at which to articulate another worry we may have about Kant's entire account of religion, as we have seen it so far. This account seems legalistic in a way that is probably unappealing to most of us, and may even seem inconsistent with certain parts of Kant's own doctrines. As an object of religious attitudes, God seems to be conceived exclusively as a moral legislator, a powerful holy being who issues commands.

As religious people, our subjective attitude toward God seems to be that of the subject of a cosmic monarch, to whose will we are supposed to conform in order to attain the highest good (that is, to obtain the happiness of which our conduct has made us worthy). It must be admitted, of course, that this way of representing God, as a cosmic lawgiver, and of our love to him, as obedience to his commands, is quite traditional – it is basic to much theology in both the medieval and early modern periods. Yet Kant's theory of moral obligation as grounded on autonomy seemed attractive precisely because it distanced itself from this picture, repudiating the divine command moralist's conception of obligation as based on cringing obedience to the orders of a cosmic despot and regarding moral agents instead as self-governing rational beings, who are bound to the moral law by their sense of their own dignity as self-legislators.

My thesis will be that there is a solution to all these problems, consisting in the fundamental role played in Kant's conception of religion by the idea of an *ethical community*.

Evil and sociability. But our route to this solution must take yet another apparent detour, through Kant's doctrine of the radical evil in human nature. Kant holds that two sorts of incentives present themselves to the human will: incentives of inclination, referring to our natural desires, and incentives of reason, referring to our dignity as self-governing rational agents; the latter incentives always have rational priority over the former, especially when these rational incentives take the form of categorically valid moral imperatives. Yet Kant also holds that we find in human beings an innate propensity to invert the rational order of these incentives, preferring incentives of inclination over those of reason, choosing the satisfaction of empirical desires over the rational commands of duty (Ak 6:36-39). The human being, in his view, is an *animal rationabilis*, an animal capable of reason, but not an *animal rationale*, a being in which this capacity is typically exercised successfully (Ak 7:321-322).

Kant calls this propensity the "radical" evil in human nature, because it lies at the root of all the particular evil we do. It shows itself not only directly in the form of "depravity" – the direct preference of natural desires over rational principles – but also in the two lesser degrees of "fragility" (the tendency not to abide by good maxims we have adopted) and "impurity" (the need for empirical incentives in order to do what reason commands) (Ak 6:29-30). It shows itself in the "bestial" vices of gluttony, drunkenness and wildness (Ak 6:26-27) and in the crude vices of brutality and cruelty toward other human beings (Ak 6:33), but also equally, or perhaps to an even greater extent, in the better concealed "civilized" vices, engendered by jealousy and rivalry between human beings, such as envy, deceitfulness, ingratitude, and malicious gloating over the misfortunes of others (Ak 6:27, 33-34).

Since the incentives that we tend to prefer to moral ones come from our natural inclinations, it might be thought that in the struggle between good and evil, the enemy for Kant is natural desire as such. But this would certainly not follow, since evil on Kant's account of it does not lie in either the fact or the particular content of natural inclinations but rather in our tendency to give them greater motivational weight than they rationally

deserve. Kant sees things this way too, since he is quite explicit, moreover, in maintaining that natural inclinations are in themselves good. He takes the Stoics to task for viewing the moral struggle as a contest between reason and natural desire: "Those valiant men mistook their enemy, who is not to be sought in the natural inclinations, which merely lack discipline and openly display themselves unconcealed to everyone's consciousness, but is rather as it were an invisible enemy, one who hides behind reason and is hence all the more dangerous" (Ak 6:57).

Kant distinguishes three "predispositions" in human nature: (1) "animality," the source of our natural desires relating to the survival of the individual and the species, and to our sociability; (2) "humanity," the ground of our capacity to set ends according to reason and to take the sum of our inclinations as a comprehensive end under the name of "happiness"; and (3) "personality," the ability to give and obey laws through reason alone, hence the ground of our moral accountability (Ak 6:26). All are in themselves good, but two of them are also incapable of being the source of evil. Personality cannot be, since for it the moral law alone is an incentive, and animality, though it can have vices "grafted onto it", cannot be the source of these vices because it has to do solely with instinctive desires, not with comparison between incentives and the choice of one over another, in which evil consists. The source of evil, therefore, must lie in our predisposition to humanity, which contains "a self-love which is physical and yet involves comparison (for which reason is required)" (Ak 6:27). The reason involved in our humanity is "comparative," however, not only in the way it treats desires (uniting them into a comprehensive end of happiness, and choosing to satisfy one rather than another) but also in the way it regards the *self* of the rational being who makes such choices and pursues happiness: "that is, only in comparison with others does one judge oneself happy or unhappy. Out of this self-love originates the inclination to *gain worth in the opinion of others*" (Ak 6:27). Originally, and innocently, this is merely a desire to be equal to others, but our anxiety that others may seek an ascendancy over us turns it gradually into "an unjust desire to acquire superiority for oneself over others. Upon this, namely, upon *jealousy* and *rivalry*, can be grafted the greatest vices of secret or open hostility to all whom we consider alien to us" (Ak 6:27). Our desire to be happy, therefore – to form the idea of a comprehensive good, encompassing all our inclinations – is a product of rational humanity, not of animal nature; and fundamentally its rationale is to assist us in comparing ourselves to others, where the comparison is motivated by a competitive desire to be worth more than they are, in their eyes and therefore in our own.

Kant thinks nature uses this natural antagonism between human beings to prod us to develop the faculties of our species (Ak 6:27). This Kant calls our "unsociable sociability" (Ak 8:20-22). It makes us sociable creatures, insofar as we need the comparison with others, and their opinion of our self-worth, as a measure of our own well-being, but at the same time it is an unsociable tendency, since it leads us to seek an unjust superiority over others who, as rational beings, are really our equals. From a moral standpoint, therefore, unsociable sociability is identical to a propensity to evil. For the moral law tells us in effect that all human beings are of

equal worth as ends in themselves (Ak 4:429), and that we must adopt only those ends that can be brought into harmony with others in a "realm" of ends (Ak 4:432). But owing to our natural propensity to seek superiority over others, we tend to treat our own inclinations as having greater worth than those of others; we have, in other words, a propensity to "self-conceit", that is to claim a pre-eminent worth for ourselves prior to our conformity to the moral law, and thus to treat our own inclinations as if they were legislative in place of the moral law of reason (Ak 5:73-74).

Evil for Kant is therefore a product of human reason under the natural conditions of its full development, which are found in the social condition. The radical evil in human nature is an inevitable accompaniment of the development of our rational faculties in society. Kant regards this fact as crucial in determining the way we must struggle against evil:

"The human being is in this perilous state through his own fault; hence he is bound at least to apply as much force as he can muster in order to extricate himself from it. But how? That is the question. – If he searches for the causes and circumstances that draw him into this danger and keep him there, he can easily convince himself that they do not come his way from his own raw nature, so far as he exists in isolation, but rather from the human beings to whom he stands in relation or association. It is not the instigation of nature that arouses what should properly be called the *passions*, which wreak such great devastation in his originally good predisposition. His needs are but limited and his state of mind in providing for them moderate and tranquil. He is poor (or considers himself so) only to the extent that he is anxious that other human beings will consider him poor and despise him for it. 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* (Ak 6:93-94).

The need for ethical community. The source of evil, Kant concludes, is *social*. The struggle against it, he concludes, if it is to be effective, must therefore also be social.² Kant thinks that if we imagine the struggle against evil individualistically, in the form of isolated individuals each struggling heroically against his own inclinations and his own propensity to evil, then we are only concocting a recipe for the ignominious defeat of morality. Kant makes this anti-individualistic point about the struggle against evil both repeatedly and emphatically; it is central to the argument of the last two books of the *Religion*, and it is the note on which he chooses to end his textbook on anthropology with which whose publication he ended his career. Hence it could, literally and without exaggeration, also be called Kant's *last word* about the human condition as a whole:

"If no means could be found to establish a union which has for its end the prevention of this evil and the promotion of the good in the human being, [then] however much the individual human being might do to escape from the dominion of this evil, he would still be held in incessant danger of relapsing into it" (Ak 6:94).

"The highest good cannot be achieved merely by the exertion of the single individual toward his own moral perfection, but instead requires a union of such individuals into a whole working toward the same end – a system of well-disposed human beings, in which and through whose unity alone the highest moral good can come to pass" (Ak 6:97-98).

"In working against the [evil] propensity [in human nature]... our will is in general good, but the accomplishment of what we will is made more difficult by the fact that the attainment of the end can be expected not through the free agreement of *individuals*, but only through the progressive organization of citizens of the earth into and toward the species as a system that is cosmopolitically combined" (Ak 7:333).

We need, however, to understand a little more clearly why Kant thinks an ethical community is needed in the struggle against the evil in human nature. His reason is apparently that the origin of evil is social, and therefore the struggle against it must take the form of a certain kind of society. But taken in one quite natural way, the form of that argument is not at all convincing. For if we were to decide that all evil in human nature is due to hatred or greed, it would not therefore be natural or reasonable to conclude that what we require to combat evil is some special form of hatred or greed. Looking at the matter this way, if we decide that evil is social in its origin, then the most natural inference from this might be that the struggle against it should take the form of self-isolation (the solution of the hermit). The hermit's attitude, however, is one that Kant utterly rejects, calling it "negative misanthropy" a "flight from humanity" (Ak 27:672). Even if such a person wishes others well, his "timidity" or "anthropophobia" (*Leutescheuen, Anthropophobie*) is contrary to the duties of love which we have toward other human beings (Ak 6:450).

The point of Kant's argument that the struggle against evil requires a moral community can be seen more clearly if we think about his account of evil in greater detail; and this will also give us a clearer indication of the nature of the community that is needed. Our unsociable sociability is evil because, seeking superiority to others through competing with them for such goods as money, honor and power, we set ends that are not only contrary to the ends others actually set, but are also in conflict with the very possibility of a system of ends that might unite all rational beings on the basis of mutual respect for their equal dignity as ends in themselves. Directly to combat this tendency consists in adopting ends that do in fact agree (or even coincide) with the ends of other human beings, and that do so by directly fulfilling the idea of a "realm" in which all ends form an organic unity or mutually supporting system. Such a system would constitute a "community" (*Gemeinschaft*) of ends in the technical metaphysical sense of that term (as it is used, for example, in the Table of Categories, KrV A80/B106). That is, between the ends of rational beings there would be a *reciprocity*, so that the pursuit of each end would advance the pursuit of others, and human ends would constitute a self-organizing whole, com-

bined into a unity like the parts of a living organism. That is what Kant means, at the end of the *Anthropology*, when he speaks of "the progressive organization of citizens of the earth into and toward the species as a system that is cosmopolitically combined" (Ak 7:333). The kind of society we need in order to struggle against evil is one that "progressively organizes" all human beings so that they gradually become a cosmopolitan community of this kind. In the *Religion*, Kant's name for this sort of society is "ethical community" (*ethisches gemeines Wesen*) (Ak 6:94).

Several things follow directly from the fundamental nature of ethical community. First, such a community cannot be conceived on the model of a juridical commonwealth or political state, whose function is to protect the right of human beings through coercion. A juridical community or political state determines which actions we may rightfully perform, and it protects the right by guaranteeing their performance through the use of external force. The state's rightful power extends only to compelling me by force to restrict my actions so that they are consistent with everyone else's freedom according to universal law (Ak 6:230). A juridical community cannot determine the ends set by human beings, because setting ends is an act of freedom; and for it to attempt to do so would even be contrary to the right it is supposed to protect. The closest the state could come to making me adopt an end would be to compel me to perform actions that serve the ends adopted by someone else (i.e. the state's despotic ruler); and to do that would be contrary to the right of the state, since it would violate my right as a free and rational being. It follows that membership and participation in an ethical community must always be entirely voluntary, never subject to external compulsion of any kind (Ak 6:94-95).

Second, since the aim of ethical community is the combination of all human beings into a single system or realm of ends, the ethical community cannot be subject to any sort of limitation as to its extent, as by restricting it to people who live in a certain geographical area or belong to a specific race or heredity. For the same reason, it may not bind itself to any specific practices or creeds that would exclude part of the human race from belonging to it.

This means, thirdly, that it can recognize only ends and motivations that are ethical (deriving from laws of reason, which are in their concept freely yet universally binding). And that entails, fourthly, that the constitution of this community (the principles of its union) must be unchangeable, which requires at the same time that the rules of its administration must remain completely flexible and open to constant modification in order to reflect the free, rational judgment of its members and in order to enable it to pursue the end of progressively including more and more of the human race, since its members of necessity include in principle all rational beings without exception.

Kant organizes these four features of the ethical community in accordance with the four headings of his table of categories (KrV A80/B106):

Quantity (of the community itself): *Unity*, guaranteed by the universality of its extent

Quality (of the incentives motivating membership in it): *Purity*, depending solely on moral incentives of reason

Relation (between its members): *Freedom*, admitting no coercive government either by a juridical state or by a class of officials within the ethical community itself

Modality: *Unchangeableness* (of its constitution), but freedom and openness of its mode of administration (Ak 6:101-102).

Ethical community and religion. We are now in a position to use Kant's conception of ethical community to solve the problems about his concept of religion that earlier perplexed us.

We wondered, to begin with, why Kant thinks that we should regard our duties as divine commands. The answer to this lies in a thesis he holds about the ethical community, namely, that it is best conceived as "a people of God" under pure moral laws of virtue (Ak 6:99). Kant distinguishes the *legislator* of a law, the one who issues a command and may attach positive or negative sanctions to it, from the law's *author*, the one whose will imposes the obligation to obey it. In these terms, Kant thinks only the idea of the rational will of every rational being as such can be conceived as its *author* (Ak 4: 431, 448); but that if the moral law is to be regarded as a public law, binding on an actual community of human beings, then God's will is the only one fittingly regarded as its *legislator* (Ak 6:227; 6:99). For (as required by the "quality" criterion of the ethical community) only this will is *pure* or holy, and universal in its extent. In the case of a juridical community, it is permissible and even necessary to think of the combined will of the citizens as the legislator; but a fallible and contingently restricted will of this kind would be inappropriate for a moral community. We should regard our duties as divine commands, therefore, because (and to the extent that) we ought to view ourselves as members of an ethical community, whose legislator is God.

The ethical community must be open even to agnostics, because Kant holds that no satisfactory theoretical proofs either of the existence or the nonexistence of a Deity can ever be given, and if membership in the moral community is to be truly universal, it has to extend at least to all those whose beliefs fall within the range of belief consistent with the state of the possible theoretical evidence. Moreover, even an agnostic is capable of forming the concept of God, and of recognizing the will of such a being as an appropriate legislator for the moral law when it is regarded as the law of a living human community. Thinking of the moral law as commanded by a (possible or actual) God whose free, moral sovereignty unites people in a universal human society is the best way for me to think of moral laws as having public recognition, and myself as belonging with others to an ethical community which is united by that recognition.

We were also puzzled by the fact that Kant links our conception of duties as divine commands to our pursuit of the highest good (*summum bonum*), as the sum-total of all moral ends. We wondered why Kant thinks we need to regard ourselves as pursuing such an all-encompassing, universal end, at all, and also what role this pursuit was supposed to play in religion (the subjective recognition of all duties as divine commands). Now we see that what is fundamental to the ethical community is the fact that human beings should pursue in common a set of ends that are systemati-

cally united into a “cosmopolitical combination” or “realm”, that is, an organic unity. When we try to think of this organic unity of all rational ends as a single end, what we are thinking of is just the highest good (*sum-mum bonum*). Kant thinks we are bound to be assailed by doubts concerning the real possibility of ever achieving this end, but that we have an answer to such doubts in the form of a faith in God as a supreme legislator and governor of the world, through whose highest knowledge, absolute power and perfect will the highest good is possible. Kant’s conception of the highest good as perfect morality or virtue combined with happiness proportionate to it is, admittedly, very abstract. But this is because it is merely the general idea of the unity of all ends on which all rational beings can agree. Even agnostics can join in pursuit of it, and hopes for its achievement even provide them with subjective or moral grounds for believing in God (though such moral arguments constitute no theoretical evidence in favor of such belief).

Our worry that Kant’s conception of religion is uncomfortably legalistic can also be addressed. Kant conceives religion this way because, following much theological tradition, he thinks of God as a moral legislator, and of the ethical community as like a political community in being bound together by public recognition of a common legislation. But he is very clear that the ethical community differs decisively from any political community in that membership in it must be wholly free and voluntary, and the only incentives to obey its laws must be purely moral, not externally coercive. For this reason, there is no room in the moral community as Kant conceives it for a religious hierarchy of any kind, or even any form of government (whether monarchical, aristocratic or democratic) (Ak 6:991-100).

“It could best of all be likened to the constitution of a household (a family) under a common though invisible moral father, whose holy son, who knows the father’s will and yet stands in blood relation with all the members of the family, takes his father’s place by making the other members better acquainted with his will; these therefore honor the father in him and thus enter into a free, universal and enduring union of hearts” (Ak 6:102).

Though Kant does not make this explicit, it is arguable that an even better analogy for the ethical community in Kantian ethical theory than the family would be *friendship*. For in friendship, people achieve trust and intimacy with one another through sharing their ends, and friends (according to Kant) even abandon the private end of their own happiness for the sake of a common or shared end in which the happiness of the friends is swallowed up (Ak 6: 469-473, 27:423). Friendship and religion also have this in common: friendship and the ethical community are the only non-judicial social relationships into which Kant says we have an ethical duty to enter.³

The ethical community and the church. Kant’s conception of the ethical community is obviously modeled on organized religion, and especially on the Christian church. More than this, Kant believes that (owing to a certain weakness of human nature) it is impossible for people directly to form a pure ethical community, but they must rather reach such a community

through "ecclesiastical faiths" which are originally very different in spirit and conduct from pure religious faith, and approximate to a genuine ethical community only through a long process of historical progress, enlightenment and reform.

Ecclesiastical faiths are typically based on a scriptural authority, guarded and interpreted by special scholars and a priestly hierarchy (Ak 6:100-103). Their "priestcraft" (*Pfaffentum*) rules over people's minds by a variety of ignominious means – superstitious fears, enthusiastic pretensions to mystical insight or empirical divine revelation, fetishistic attempts to invoke divine favor or aid through petitionary prayers or other forms of pretended magic and sorcery, and the "counterfeit service" (*Afterdienst*) of God through all sorts of morally indifferent rites and statutory observances (A 6:151-202). Kant looks forward to a time when the kernel of true religion will outgrow this empirical shell, lay aside its superstitious and fetishistic trappings, abolish "the humiliating distinction between laity and clergy", and approach the condition of a genuine ethical community, which (in Kant's view) it is the appointed historical task for organized religion someday to become (Ak 6:115-137).

Since Kant's fundamental conception of the human condition is that we are a species of rational beings destined to struggle in history against our innate propensity to evil, and since for Kant the ethical community is conceived as the indispensable focal point for this struggle, it is virtually impossible to overestimate the importance of organized religion in Kant's scheme of things. We also miss one of the main conceptions of Kantian ethics if we fail to appreciate how vital ethical community is to its conception of the moral life. Kantian ethics is fundamentally misconceived when it portrayed only as a morality of cold duty and dessicated individuals struggling stoically against their natural desires. We take a step in the right direction when, with John Rawls, we see it "not as a morality of austere command but an ethic of mutual respect and self-esteem."⁴ But we still miss the heart of it if we do not appreciate that the fundamental ideal of Kantian ethics is that of a universal community of free beings in which all are recognized and treated as equals and all work together toward human dignity and happiness as a single shared or collective end.

The Enlightenment view of religion – and what it means that we fail to understand it. Kant therefore is the first to admit (or even to proclaim) that the ethical community which grounds his conception of religion is very different from organized religion as it has ever existed. But here it will be instructive to compare Kant's conception of organized religion and its role in human history with his conception of the political state and its historical role. Kant's model in the real world for the community whose task it is to protect the right of persons is the juridical community or political state. He recognizes that no existing state comes very close to fulfilling the rational idea of a juridical community, and in fact that most states are themselves among the chief perpetrators of injustice and violators of human rights. But he hopes that as people become more enlightened, existing states will shed the defects that now make them unjust, and over time that they will gradually come to approximate that idea. For Kant, the only political constitution that is really consistent with the idea of right is a

republican one (Ak 8:349-350 and note). Most states in his time, including the one in which he lived, were fundamentally different from this. But he thinks that even a state whose constitution is not republican can come to govern in the spirit of a republic, and over time it may even evolve into a republican form of government. Kant looks forward to the time when there will be a wide consensus among the members of the human race that no state can be legitimate unless it fully protects the rights of its citizens, and that the only truly satisfactory political constitution is a republican one. Looking back over the last two hundred years, I think we must admit that Kant's political hopes were not unreasonable; indeed, I think we have to be impressed with them as not only remarkably prescient, but even as hopes that decent people everywhere have come to share.

Analogously, Kant's model in the real world for the ethical community is the church, or organized religion. Organized religion is to our historical hopes for the moral improvement of the human race what the political state is to our hope to live with other human beings on terms of safety, peace, freedom and justice. Yet perhaps it is hard for us to take the analogy seriously, because political institutions and our demands on them have evolved in the direction Kant had hoped they would, whereas religious institutions have not. On the contrary, nineteenth and twentieth century religion has often seen itself as engaged in a battle to preserve reverence for tradition, ethnic diversity and a sense of the transcendent and mysterious in human life against enlightenment rationalism, universalist and humanist morality, and a liberal, cosmopolitan society, that it blames for the rootlessness, disorder and moral degeneracy of modern life.

But we must not forget that the Enlightenment, especially in Germany, was much more a religious than a political movement, and a movement that it regarded as coming from *within* religion, not as a secularism arrayed against it. Until we are able to recapture the perspective on history and religion represented by Enlightenment thinkers such as Kant, we will be unable to understand what the Enlightenment was; we will be unable to grasp what its true aims were, and we will be unable to estimate, or even properly to see at all, the extent of its successes and failures – or, as I would prefer to put it, we will be unable to see how far humanity in the last two centuries has been impoverished by its failure to realize the ideals of the Enlightenment.

There are many in our century who have celebrated the failure of the Enlightenment view of religion, regarding it as shallow and unspiritual, and complacent in the thought that religious thinking and practice has left it behind forever. In the past twenty years, there have also been many who celebrate the failure of socialism in a similar spirit. Sometimes these rejoicers are even the same people, as well they should be, since the historical hopes whose defeat they are welcoming have a great deal in common. As someone who still cherishes those hopes, I confess I am torn between pitying and being furious with those who are quick to bury them, but I am uncertain whether either attitude is healthy. I am entirely certain, however, that the future of the human race will be bleak indeed as long as it is left in the hands of people who think as they do.

NOTES

1. Kant's writings will be cited according to volume:page number in *Kants Schriften*, Ausgabe der königliche preussischen Akademie der Wissenschaften (Berlin: Walter de Gruyter, 1902-), abbreviated as 'Ak'. Volume:page numbers from the Academy Edition are now customarily given in English translations, in particular those found in the Cambridge Edition of the Writings of Immanuel Kant. The one exception to this, both in this paper and in the Cambridge Edition, is the *Critique of Pure Reason*, which will be cited by A/B page numbers (and abbreviated as 'KrV').

2. This "social" interpretation of Kant's doctrine of radical evil and the response to it can also be found in Sharon Anderson-Gold, "God and Community: An Inquiry into the Religious Implications of the Highest Good," in P. Rossi and M. Wreen (eds.) *Kant's Philosophy of Religion Reconsidered* (Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press, 1991), pp. 113-131.

3. See Allen Wood, *Kant's Ethical Thought* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1999), Chapter 9, § 4.3.

4. John Rawls, *A Theory of Justice* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1971), p. 256.