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INTRODUCTION: ON DEFENDING KANT AT THE AAR

Andrew Chignell

I briefly describe the unusually contentious author-meets-critics session that was the origin of the book symposium below. I then try to situate the present symposium within broader contemporary scholarship on Kant.

It took a long lifetime for Kant to wash his philosophical
cloak of many stains and prejudices. But now [in his
Religion book] he has wantonly slobbered on it with the
stain of radical evil, just so that Christians, too, might be
enticed to kiss its hem.

— Goethe, letter to Herder of June 7, 1793

The following book symposium began its life as a panel at the 2009 meeting of the American Academy of Religion. The panel was organized and sponsored by the Society of Christian Philosophers at AAR (“SCP@AAR” for short) and so it is fitting that the final results would appear in the SCP’s flagship journal. In what follows, I’ll briefly describe the SCP@AAR project and how this symposium arose from it. I’ll move on to discuss some of the strengths of the book under discussion, and situate the exchange within recent work on Kant’s philosophy.

I

SCP@AAR aims to sponsor sessions on themes that will (a) appeal to the 10,000 or so biblical and religion scholars who come to AAR/SBL¹ meetings, and (b) showcase the kind of philosophy of religion that is typical of SCP regional conferences, SCP meetings at the APA, and *Faith and Philosophy* itself. The hope is that such cross-pollination will help overcome cultural and sociological differences between “APA” and “AAR” philosophers

¹The annual AAR meeting is usually held conjunctively with the annual meeting of the Society of Biblical Literature (SBL). Thus, SCP@AAR tries to offer sessions of philosophical substance that would be of interest to biblical scholars as well (e.g., on hermeneutics, the authority of scripture, and so forth). The sessions are meant, in the words of another member of the organizing committee, as “a kind of interdisciplinary invitation for scholars across a number of fields in Religious Studies to find resources and wisdom in philosophy of religion.”



of religion, and that the remaining methodological differences will seem like less of a barrier to discussion than they have in the past.²

James K. A. Smith and I were on the committee that put together the SCP@AAR panel in 2009, but it was Smith who initially suggested that we run a panel on a new book by Chris L. Firestone and Nathan Jacobs—*In Defense of Kant's Religion*.³ The book seemed likely to maximize crossover appeal for a number of reasons: it is part of the Indiana Press Philosophy of Religion series edited by Merold Westphal; it features a foreword by Nicholas Wolterstorff as well as lengthy discussions of Philip Quinn, John Hare, and Allen Wood; the authors are active in both AAR and APA circles; and one of them (Jacobs) is actually a trained theologian.

Maximizing crossover appeal was crucial this time around, because the infamous 2007 SCP@AAR panel was still fresh in many AAR-going minds. That session had devolved into uncomfortable methodological sparring, and concluded with a prominent theologian suggesting that (analytic) philosophers of religion suffer from a kind of willful naïveté or backwardness, as well as an inability to be genuinely inclusive. Her final remark was something along the following lines (this is not a direct quotation, but rather my memory of the gist, as confirmed with numerous attendees afterwards):

Look around the room and you'll see why the SCP has a mixed reputation at the AAR. This is just your typical "Christian philosophy" crowd transplanted from the APA: apart from Marilyn McCord Adams and one or two other women, it's a bunch of male, analytic, bearded, and probably theologically-conservative philosophers. Most of you don't read modern theology or biblical scholarship—in effect ignoring the advances in those disciplines over the last sixty years. Most of you seem ignorant of the entire postmodern movement and the way it radically problematizes your appeals to reason, the *a priori*, "perfect being theology," and epistemic warrant. And yet you presume to come to AAR meetings in order to teach us "sloppy" theologians how to think about God!

This remark was delivered half in jest and half in provocation, but it was clear that the underlying sentiment is widespread among AAR members. That is why the idea of sponsoring a panel on Kant's philosophy of religion seemed like a stroke of genius: for Kant's work tends to be held in highest esteem by people in Religious Studies, Theology, and Philosophy alike.⁴ Rightly or wrongly, most religionists will view the first *Critique* as the origin

²For more discussion of these differences, see William Wainwright, ed. *God, Philosophy, and Academic Culture: A Discussion between Scholars in the AAR and the APA* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1996).

³It would hardly have done for me to suggest this topic, since Kant is my own area of specialization as well! Once the decision was made, however, I was happy to chair the panel and write this introduction.

⁴In light of the theologian's critique cited above, it is perhaps worth noting that another advantage of the book is that at least one of the two authors (*viz.*, Jacobs) does not have a beard.

of important arguments against natural theology and an influential kind of anti-realism, the second *Critique* as the source of proto-pragmatist “moral proofs,” and *Religion* as the source of the program—developed by the great German theologians of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries—to isolate the rational essence of historical religion and render it in the language of universalizable morals.

Another consideration in favor of the proposal was that Kant scholars in one methodological tradition are often unfamiliar with work by those in other traditions—even *when they work on the same texts*. Thus many analytically-trained Kant scholars will not have read Gilles Deleuze’s book on the first *Critique*—a commentary that is seminal in Continental and literary circles. A great virtue of *In Defense of Kant’s Religion* (hereafter “IDKR”) is that it ranges skillfully across many of these boundaries. Firestone and Jacobs survey work by commentators in Religious Studies (Keith Ward, Vincent McCarthy, Adina Davidovich, Gordon Michalson), by analytic philosophers of religion (Philip Quinn, Nicholas Wolterstorff, John Hare), and by more traditional historians of philosophy (Allen Wood, Stephen Palmquist, Jacqueline Mariña), all the while writing in a manner that is accessible to all.

The goal for the AAR meeting, then, was to pair our authors with critics from at least some of the relevant scholarly subcultures. At the time, Pamela Sue Anderson was working on her book *Kant and Theology*,⁵ and was thus an ideal candidate. George di Giovanni is the translator of Kant’s *Religion* for Cambridge Press and a distinguished historian of German philosophy and religious thought. And Stephen Palmquist is the editor and translator of Kant’s *Religion* for Hackett, as well as a prolific Kantian and comparative scholar in the Chinese context.⁶ Although the panel expected Palmquist to have strong sympathies with Firestone and Jacobs, given their past projects together,⁷ we were curious to hear what he would make of their new variation on the common theme.

As it turned out, there was *at least* as much controversy at our Kant panel as there was at the 2007 meeting, though for somewhat different reasons. Anderson came out fiercely opposed to Firestone and Jacobs’s talk of our ability to have “pure cognition” of the divine “prototype of humanity.” Professor di Giovanni likened IDKR’s authors to members of the rearguard nineteenth-century Jena school: backward-looking Christian theologians who wanted to appropriate, and thereby disfigure, the critical philosophy for their own apologetical purposes. And far from being the

⁵Co-authored with Jordan Bell (New York: Continuum Press, 2010).

⁶See for instance the recent edition of the *Journal of Chinese Philosophy* on “Kant and China: New Dimensions.” Palmquist guest-edited the volume and also contributed a piece called “Architectonic Reasoning and Interpretation in Kant and the *Yijing*,” *Journal of Chinese Philosophy* 38:4 (December 2011), 569–584.

⁷Firestone studied with Palmquist at some point during graduate school, and the two of them edited and collaborated with Jacobs on the 2006 book *Kant and the New Philosophy of Religion* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2006).

friendliest critic, Palmquist delivered such a stinging series of objections that one could detect more than a little hurt feeling in the full-throated replies that ensued (see below).

Despite these rhetorical fireworks, the session was also very productive in laying out the stark differences between so-called “traditional” interpreters of Kant’s *Religion* (including Anderson and di Giovanni) and “new wave” interpreters (including Palmquist, Jacobs, and Firestone). It also revealed some new and significant disagreements amongst the new wavers themselves.⁸ Given all of this, and the sponsorship by SCP@AAR, it seemed worth submitting the proceedings to *Faith and Philosophy*. Before doing so, however, Firestone and Jacobs asked Gordon Michalson to add a contribution in the hopes that he would be as enthusiastic in his review as he had apparently been in earlier correspondence. Michalson agreed to the task, but the paper he later sent in also ended up registering more by way of opposition than sympathy. Thus Firestone and Jacobs had to go on the defensive once again. Fortunately, defense is something at which they are by now quite practiced; it is up to the reader to judge whether their original defense of Kant, as well as their defense of that defense below, is ultimately a success.

II

Since most of the critics below focus on weaknesses rather than strengths, it seems worth highlighting, in the rest of this introduction, some of *IDKR*’s virtues. These virtues make it worthy not only of a panel discussion and a published symposium, in my view, but also of ongoing attention by people interested in Kant’s religious thought—even those who disagree with the book’s central theses.

(1) First, Firestone and Jacobs start off with a very helpful three-chapter overview of recent trends among English-language commentators.⁹ It is framed, somewhat campily, as a courtroom drama: Kant and his *Religion* book are in the dock while various witnesses come forward with charges of incoherence, instability, invalidity, and so on.¹⁰ This allows the authors to lay out the conundrums in Kant’s *Religion* relatively well, at least in the first two chapters. In the third chapter—devoted to Michalson’s work—the metaphor strains: Michalson is depicted as the “star witness in the case against *Religion*” (4) who bursts into the courtroom to deliver a long-winded

⁸The reference to them as “new wavers” originates in Keith Yandell, “Who is the True Kant?,” *Philosophia Christi* 9:1 (2007), 81–97.

⁹The German-language discussion is completely neglected, unfortunately. There is also a series of recent French commentaries that would have been worth including in the literature review (but, on the other hand, life is short and Kant scholarship is exceedingly long). Michael Despland provides a nice survey of the French developments in his Foreword to *Kant and the New Philosophy of Religion*.

¹⁰One figure even appears in two different incarnations—“early Wood” and “late Wood.” This reflects the fact that Allen W. Wood’s views about Kant’s religious thought have evolved since their original presentation in *Kant’s Moral Religion* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1970).

“indictment” of Kant, and the reader is left with the sense that his decades-long and very nuanced interaction with Kant’s thought is being flattened out a bit. Still, Michalson’s critique has been very influential, especially in Religious Studies circles, and the third chapter of *IDKR* provides a useful (if somewhat cartoonish) synopsis for those who have not read his work. The first three chapters alone, then—together with the extensive footnotes and Selected Bibliography—will make the book valuable to those seeking an overview of the field.

(2) Second, Firestone and Jacobs go on to provide a four-chapter “defense” of *Religion*: it progressively lays out Kant’s argument in each of the four “pieces” (*Stücke*) of *Religion* while showing whether and how he might respond to charges brought against him by contemporary accusers. This linear, stepwise structure makes *IDKR* an excellent companion for people reading *Religion* for the first time. But the book also fills a gap in the scholarly literature: Allen Wood’s classic *Kant’s Moral Religion* is still widely used as a companion, but it is now over forty years old and does not go section-by-section in the way that *IDKR* does. Although there is now some competition in the area, and more on the way,¹¹ my sense is that the readable and provocative character of *IDKR* will make it a popular choice in courses on *Religion* for years to come.

(3) Third, Firestone and Jacobs are not reluctant to make eye-popping claims, as long as they believe they have the texts to back them. That makes for interesting reading, though it can also be a dangerous scholarly strategy: the middling reception they receive in the papers below indicates that some experts, at least, were not happy with various details (regarding, especially, their talk of the “pure cognition” of theological truth).¹² Anderson, di Giovanni, and Michalson all accuse our authors of mangling Kant’s views in an effort to return to the pre-critical theological tradition that Kant was putatively aiming to overthrow. For them it is *IDKR*, and

¹¹Palmquist is now writing a commentary of his own on *Religion*, Lawrence Pasternack is working on a *Routledge Guide*, Gordon Michalson is editing a *Cambridge Critical Guide* and, in Germany, Otfried Höffe has just edited a group commentary on *Religion* for the “Klassiker Auglegen” series. See *Immanuel Kant: Die Religion innerhalb der Grenzen der blossen Vernunft*, ed. Otfried Höffe (Berlin: Akademie Verlag, 2010).

¹²My own sense is that this is largely a terminological issue. No one doubts that Kant thinks we can have analytic knowledge of some sort regarding the contents of our concepts. This presumably holds for concepts of things-in-themselves as well—i.e., concepts such as God, the soul, and the freedom of the will. Firestone and Jacobs emphasize a few passages in which Kant seems to refer to such awareness as “pure cognition” but, as Anderson points out, this is in tension with Kant’s usual way of employing “cognition” (*Erkenntnis*)—i.e., as a state or activity that involves intuition of some sort. If Firestone and Jacobs had spoken instead about pure “thinking” (*Denken*), I think they could have had some of what they wanted by way of theological/moral content without raising these hackles. If what they wanted from “pure cognition,” however, was supposed to be *synthetic* judgments, then they might have avoided controversy by making use of one of the notions of justified belief (*Glaube*) in Kant. For an account of why such belief can’t count as cognition or knowledge, see Chignell, “Real Repugnance and Belief about Things-in-themselves,” in *Kant’s Moral Metaphysics*, ed. James Krueger and Benjamin Lipscomb (Berlin: Walter de Gruyter, 2010), 177–210. For the distinction between “thought” and “cognition,” see *Critique of Pure Reason* Bxxiv, note.

not Kant himself, that ends up “slobbering” too much Christian doctrine on the otherwise pure cloak of the critical philosophy.¹³ Firestone/Jacobs fiercely disavow this in their replies below, and emphasize how *unorthodox* and *unchristian* their Kant really is.

The main reason they cite for regarding Kant this way relates to another of *IDKR*'s eye-popping claims: namely, that Kant is not referring to Jesus of Nazareth in the first three books of *Religion* when he speaks of the perfect “prototype of humanity” who “comes down from heaven” to point humanity to the moral truth. Rather, according to Firestone and Jacobs, Kant is referring to a kind of Neo-Platonic universal—an idea in the divine mind—that we can encounter in “pure cognition” and then use as a model for the moral life. This is a bold claim indeed, and it was presumably what Wolterstorff had in mind when he wrote, in the Foreword, that the view propounded in *IDKR* is “strange, so strange that many of us will wonder whether this could really be what Kant had in mind” (xii). But, as Wolterstorff points out, Firestone/Jacobs cite a surprising number of texts that seem to count in favor of their view, and there are few that count decisively against it (though see Palmquist’s essay below). Either way, my sense is that if there is one doctrine for which *IDKR* will be remembered, this is it.¹⁴

(4) Finally, *IDKR* is a contribution to the overall effort among a new generation of Kant scholars to read the great German philosopher as more metaphysically serious—more like a kind of rationalist, really—than has been fashionable in recent decades. Advocates of this new “metaphysical Kant” would respond to Wolterstorff’s question—“Is it possible and desirable for theologians to recover from Kant?”¹⁵—by suggesting that it would be desirable for theologians (and everyone else, too) to recover from a certain *reading* of Kant. In other words, such metaphysical readers encourage us to retrieve the sense that transcendental idealism is a genuine *idealism*, and that the noumenal world, for Kant, is not just the empirical world considered apart from the “epistemic conditions” under which we happen to perceive it.¹⁶

¹³The image of a cloak that is “slobbered on” or “soiled” (*beschlabbert*) is from a letter of Goethe’s—see the epigraph above.

¹⁴Jacobs defended an earlier version of this view in “Kant’s Prototypical Theology: Transcendental Incarnation as a Rational Foundation for God-Talk,” in Palmquist and Firestone, *Kant and the New Philosophy of Religion*, 124–140.

¹⁵Nicholas Wolterstorff, “Is it Possible and Desirable for Theologians to Recover from Kant?,” *Modern Theology* 14:1 (1998), 1–18. For a partial response to Wolterstorff, see Chignell, “As Kant has Shown . . . : Analytic Theology and the Critical Philosophy,” in *Analytic Theology*, ed. Oliver Crisp and Michael Rea (New York: Oxford, 2009), 117–135.

¹⁶The trend over the last few decades has been either to reject the idealism altogether and claim that Kant was merely focused on laying out the “epistemic conditions” (Henry Allison’s phrase) under which we experience things, or to admit that Kant was indeed an idealist about empirical objects but try to focus on other, more palatable aspects of his view (this is the strategy employed by P. F. Strawson and Paul Guyer). Note that this is orthogonal to the “one world/two world” issue. A metaphysical reading of the sort I’m describing can be either one-world or two-world and still construe Kant as an idealist about

Clearly, much of that story remains to be written, but thanks to this book and the discussion it has provoked, Firestone and Jacobs will probably be a part of it.

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the empirical world. For a one-world but still “metaphysical” reading, see Tobias Rosefeldt, “Dinge an sich und sekundäre Qualitäten,” in *Kant in der Gegenwart*, ed. J. Stolzenberg (Berlin: Walter de Gruyter, 2007), 167–209, and Lucy Allais, “Kant’s Idealism and the Secondary Quality Analogy,” *Journal of the History of Philosophy* 45:3 (2007), 459–84.