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IN DEFENSE OF NOT DEFENDING KANT'S *RELIGION*

Gordon E. Michalson, Jr.

This essay underscores the significant contribution Firestone and Jacobs make through the very thorough way their book surveys the wide range of recent scholarship bearing on Kant's *Religion*. The essay then argues, however, that the complex scaffolding designed to summarize and categorize the varied responses to Kant has the effect of muting the authors' own very bold interpretive stance. This point is particularly true with respect to their account of the compatibility of Kant's *Religion* with the Christian tradition. In addition, the essay suggests that the judicial metaphor of "defense" is overplayed, forcing certain interpretations of Kant into potentially misleading positions for the sake of the interpretive scheme.

I

In a comment only a professor would make, theologian Hans Frei once said that Kant's *Religion within the Boundaries of Mere Reason* "is a book I would pack for a long stay on a desert island."¹ The obvious implication is that Kant's book is a virtually inexhaustible source of interpretive possibilities to which one can return again and again, always discovering something fresh, new, and stimulating.

Interpretive developments associated with Kant's *Religion* in recent decades amply reinforce Frei's underlying point. In particular, since the publication of Allen Wood's *Kant's Moral Religion* in 1970,² the world of English-speaking Kant scholarship has witnessed an impressive stream of individual works of interpretation of Kant's religious thought, several anthologies of penetrating essays, countless journal articles, and two new translations of *Religion* itself. Perhaps the outstanding feature of the resulting dialogue is the wide range of viewpoints and the resulting absence of any clear interpretive consensus forming around one reading of *Religion*. Such a record suggests that Kant's book is indeed an invitation to open-ended debate, sustained by multiple interpretive interests.

¹Hans W. Frei, *Types of Christian Theology*, ed. George Hunsinger and William C. Placher (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 1992), 58.

²Allen W. Wood, *Kant's Moral Religion* (Ithaca and London: Cornell University Press, 1970). Wood's most recent contribution to the matters at hand is "Kant and the Intelligibility of Evil" in *Kant's Anatomy of Evil* ed. Sharon Anderson-Gold and Pablo Muchnik (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2010), 144–172.

Amidst these complexities, Chris Firestone and Nathan Jacobs have rendered the enormous service of identifying, clarifying, and evaluating a broad spectrum of these interpretative responses to Kant's *Religion*. They undertake this already large task with the ultimate aim of advancing an ambitious interpretive program of their own. Whatever additional judgments one might make about *In Defense of Kant's Religion*,³ the book's value as a way of accessing and comparing varied interpretations of *Religion* is beyond question. It is just the sort of book one wants to put in the hands of students who are grappling with interpretive issues associated with Kant's religious thought.

More importantly, Firestone and Jacobs integrate their taxonomy of interpretive approaches to Kant's text with their own sustained emphasis on at least three important points: the unity and argumentative coherence of *Religion*, the book's consistency with the critical philosophy overall, and, finally, its general compatibility with a Christian theological result. The authors promote these important themes largely through the systematic development of resources in the critical philosophy and in *Religion* itself, including Kant's notion of pure cognition, the two "experiments" Kant mentions in the Second Edition Preface of *Religion*, and his account of the moral disposition. They make the case that these features of Kant's argument are present at the earliest stages of *Religion* and are crucial to keep in mind throughout in order to understand the text as a coherent work of philosophy of religion (6–7).⁴ Competently pursuing this ambitious agenda, Firestone and Jacobs have themselves added profitably to the range of interpretive options coming under a student's scrutiny. The fact that, by my reading of their book, the authors believe that their approach eliminates or otherwise domesticates the most serious problems raised by other interpretations of Kant's *Religion* simply underscores the ambition of their project. Coupled with this point is the fact that Firestone and Jacobs sustain welcome attention on Kant's text itself, requiring those who may disagree with them to do the same.

In what follows, I want to structure my discussion in terms of a reservation about *IDKR* that is perhaps really an indirect way of promoting my admiration for a cardinal feature of the authors' position. There is a layered quality associated with their own positive assessment of Kant's *Religion*, with some aspects of their position—such as their argument on behalf of the unity of the book—more specialized and technical in nature than others and of likely interest to fewer readers. But I think the feature

³Chris L. Firestone and Nathan Jacobs, *In Defense of Kant's Religion* (Bloomington and Indianapolis: Indiana University Press, 2008). Hereafter referred to as *IDKR*, with page numbers indicated in brackets within my text.

⁴The authors' interest in understanding *Religion* in terms of its connections with the critical philosophy as a whole finds an interesting parallel in Pablo Muchnik's recent effort to display the "systematic" importance within Kant's overall philosophy of his theory of radical evil. Muchnik, *Kant's Theory of Evil: An Essay on the Dangers of Self-Love and the Apriority of History* (Lanham, MD.: Lexington Books, 2009).

of their book that is at once the broadest and most arresting is their insistence that, correctly understood, "the content of Kant's arguments begins to look remarkably Christian" (5). To their credit, Firestone and Jacobs acknowledge that the relationship between *Religion* and Christianity is, in their words, "a mixed bag" (5). They also insist that their primary focus is on defending "the internal coherence of *Religion*" rather than on "commending its desirability for Christianity" (6). Still, the authors clearly view Kant's work as broadly compatible with Christianity and as a constructive moment in the history of modern Christian thought. Whatever their interpretive priorities may be, Firestone and Jacobs have an obvious stake in this presumed compatibility. By my reading of their book, this feature is the most significant way in which they stand over against much contemporary interpretation of Kant.

My reservation is that the authors underplay this aspect of their view of Kant's *Religion* for the sake of other matters that are less significant. Indeed, their provocative interpretive thrust regarding Kant's relation to Christianity is considerably obscured by the organizational complexities of *IDKR*. Notwithstanding the very real value associated with the canvassing of so many interpretive options, I find that the ultimate effect of so much organizational scaffolding is to detract from the interpretive interests characterizing the book's boldest elements. Since the authors' aims are so provocative and interesting in and of themselves, they deserve a bolder presentation unencumbered by an organizational scheme that threatens to distract.

Embedded in this general reservation is the related fact that, as one whose own work figures prominently in *IDKR*, I do not always recognize my own position, insofar as I am depicted as the "star witness in the case against *Religion*" without ever having viewed my own efforts in a prosecutorial mode (4). This point leaves me wondering if there is perhaps a second sense in which the organizational tactics of the book create unnecessary distraction, as commentators canvassed in the book (or those sympathetic to them) focus on re-stating their own interpretive accounts rather than on facing squarely what Firestone and Jacobs have to say about Kant and Christianity. Certainly I find this tempting in my own case, as I surely never thought of myself as promoting a view against which Kant needs "defending." Rather, my intention has always been to locate key issues in his thought that help us understand why he is so important for grasping the trajectory of modern religious thought in the West. Put more colloquially, I thought I was laying out in greater detail the case I've always made for Kant's importance in the undergraduate survey course on modern religious thought that I've regularly taught since 1975. As one might sense from that originating context, my aim in part was to explain to restless students why we absolutely had to read this dry and difficult author before moving on to the more engaging writers of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries who had attracted the students to the course in the first place. I always viewed myself as the one making the case *for* Kant, not as the one prosecuting him.

Perhaps ultimately at issue here is the extent to which the motif of a “defense” of Kant has been deployed as a means of categorizing interpreters of *Religion*. While I certainly appreciate the tactical advantages provided by such an approach, the motif ultimately seems overdone, with too much diverse material forced into boxes for the sake of the scheme. Once again, a possible effect is to distract readers from the authors’ own bold interpretive stance, leaving commentators responding to just about everything but what the authors take most seriously. In what follows, then, let me try to expand on these very general observations.

II

While some contrast with alternative approaches to *Religion* is obviously in order as a strategy for highlighting what is distinctive about these authors’ views, the engagement with so many other interpreters is on such a scale that it threatens to take on a life of its own. We are introduced to a general breakdown between interpretive trends that are “principally negative toward religion and theology” and those trends that “affirm” religion and theology, with the former deemed the more “traditional” approach (1–2). In turn, these two broad categories result in further breakdowns among interpreters along lines suggested by the key problems concerning the “metaphysical motives behind *Religion*” and *Religion*’s “philosophical character.” These issues are then carefully explored by working through in detail those interpreters supposedly hostile to or otherwise critical of Kant’s efforts, followed by similar accounts of interpreters speaking up in “defense” of Kant. Two long chapters (chaps. 1–2) devoted to these themes are then followed by a chapter focusing on “seven core objections” to the “coherence” of *Religion* evidently raised by my own work. The remaining five chapters are then structured in ways that layer and commingle all of the interpretive options previously surveyed as the means of promoting the authors’ own constructive viewpoint—their “defense.”

This is a lot of balls to have in the air, particularly as a means, finally, of promoting a specific interpretive option. Perhaps inevitably, the sheer thoroughness of the authors’ account of alternative positions turns into an invitation to distraction from their own main points. The fact that virtually none of the panel discussion devoted to *IDKR* at the 2009 meeting of the American Academy of Religion was devoted to Firestone and Jacobs’s own constructive interpretation of *Religion* in Chapters 4–8 is suggestive of the element of distraction. As I have indicated, their primary aim is to underscore the argumentative coherence of *Religion*, with the latent associated aim of arguing its theological relevance as well. The canvassing of interpretive options is instrumental toward these ends. The element of distraction thus introduced by what is simply intended to be the set-up for the authors’ ultimate intention is the downside to the impressive comprehensiveness of their dissection of the secondary literature. In short, Firestone and Jacobs may provide their readers too many excuses to react to matters other than the ones they take most seriously.

A good way to expand on this point is to ask: to what degree do the truly arresting features of the Firestone/Jacobs view of *Religion* depend for their clear depiction on the book's complicated scaffolding? My answer is: for the most part, not much.

An example would be the astute analysis in Chapter 7 of the relationship between an "individual" and a "corporate" account of moral regeneration. In very general terms, this issue concerns the extent to which Kant's postulate of the immortality of the soul in the *Critique of Practical Reason* has been supplemented or perhaps even surpassed by his concept of the "ethical community" or commonwealth in *Religion*. That way of putting the matter illuminates the difference between an account of the perfection of virtue that is strictly individual in nature (the "duration" involved in Kant's account of the immortality of the soul) and an account that is social or interpersonal in nature (the development within history of the ethical community).

In both cases, the thorny issue of moral conversion is at issue. Against the background of the desperate situation confronting the moral agent in the grip of a freely-chosen evil disposition—an evil, that is, that is "radical"—Kant's depiction of moral conversion is as important for his overall position as it is complex in its rendering. In recent years, several interpreters have made an interesting case for the broader social frame of reference that the ethical community offers for understanding "progress" toward moral conversion and moral conversion itself.⁵ The implication is that corporate endeavor somehow succeeds in offsetting the debility associated with radical evil and becomes the locus of a rationally-based moral "hope."⁶ Kant's own explicit suggestion that God is the "lawgiver" of the ethical community⁷—an idea that Jerome Schneewind describes as Kant's "astonishing claim" that we and God are moral partners⁸—underscores the interesting shift potentially at stake as we move from a personal/individual to a corporate/social context for considering moral conversion.⁹ This approach implies an emerging fresh solution to the problem of moral conversion.

⁵E.g., Sharon Anderson-Gold, *Unnecessary Evil: History and Moral Progress in the Philosophy of Immanuel Kant* (New York: State University of New York Press, 2001); Peter Byrne, *The Moral Interpretation of Religion* (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Eerdmann, 1998); Philip J. Rossi, S.J., *The Social Authority of Reason: Kant's Critique, Radical Evil, and the Destiny of Humankind* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 2005).

⁶This is the flip side of the question of the impact, if any, of the social dimension on the fall into radical evil, an issue that has recently been helpfully discussed by Jeanine M. Grenberg, "Social Dimensions of Kant's Conception of Radical Evil," in Anderson-Gold and Muchnik, *Kant's Anatomy*, 173–194.

⁷Immanuel Kant, *Religion within the Boundaries of Mere Reason*, in *Religion and Rational Theology*, ed. A. W. Wood and G. di Giovanni (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996), 133–134.

⁸J. B. Schneewind, *The Invention of Autonomy: A History of Modern Moral Philosophy* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998), 512.

⁹Gordon E. Michalson, Jr., "God and Kant's Ethical Commonwealth," *The Thomist* 65 (January 2001), 67–92.

As one who is generally sympathetic with this shift to the social frame of reference—viewing it as Kant’s extended commentary on his own third version of the categorical imperative (“Every rational being must act as if he, by his maxims, were at all times a legislative member in the universal realm of ends”),¹⁰ I have to concede the importance of the Firestone/Jacobs rejoinder: “Prior to suggesting that humans must band together in pursuit of moral redemption . . . Kant must first establish that moral redemption is somehow possible” despite the debilitating effects of radical evil laid out in the same book (183). In other words, the sum-of-the-parts provided by the corporate perspective leaves unanswered the question of how a moral agent achieves moral regeneration. To assume otherwise may be to avoid the real issue by changing the subject. One is reminded here of Kierkegaard’s tavern owner who sold beer for a penny less than he paid for it. When asked how he remained solvent on that basis, he replied: “It’s the big number that does it.”¹¹ Similarly, the shift from the individual to the corporate perspective may bring into view an important dimension of Kant’s concept of rational hope, but it does not finally address Kant’s *own* question concerning how “it is possible that a naturally evil human being should make himself into a good human being.”¹²

Firestone and Jacobs ultimately develop their position on the individual vs. corporate perspective in ways closely associated with their aggressively constructive view of Kant’s Christology, which is the locus of their provocative effort to read into *Religion* what they call a “prototypical theology” (154–155). In a creative move, they fold together the issue of moral conversion and the themes of atonement and grace running through the authors’ depiction in the previous chapter of Jesus as the “prototype” of a moral disposition totally pleasing to God (chap. 6). Eventually supplemented in Chapter 8 by the authors’ strikingly positive view of Book Four of *Religion*, the interpretive result includes a transposition of Kant’s allusions to the social or corporate dimension into a more significant role for ecclesiology to play than most other interpreters ascribe to Kant’s position. As these interpretive pieces fall serially into place, the authors provide a very interesting case for viewing Kant’s relation to revealed or historical religion in more positive terms than generally supposed—which is probably the sort of thing Nicholas Wolterstorff had in mind when he stated in his “Foreword” to *IDKR* that the Kant we meet in the pages of this book is a bit “strange” (xii).

In effect, then, Firestone and Jacobs have done something quite breathtaking; they have provided what can only be called a revisionist account of Kant’s view of the relation between reason and revelation. This is a

¹⁰See my discussion of this point in chaps. 4–5 of *Kant and the Problem of God* (Oxford: Blackwell Publishers, 1999).

¹¹A Kierkegaard *Anthology*, ed. Robert Bretall (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1951), 438.

¹²Kant, *Religion*, 90.

significant interpretive option warranting careful consideration by those who may disagree. My point here is not to debate its merits but simply to raise the question of whether or not the book's complex organizational design is necessary to bring this significant point into the light of day—or whether, instead, it partially obscures it. The issue, in other words, is whether or not the best parts of the book stand sufficiently free from the book's organizational imperatives to be fully appreciated. By embedding their key points in so much interpretive give-and-take, Firestone and Jacobs potentially compromise their ability to give center stage to the leading features of their own position.

This specific instance is surely a reflection of the more comprehensive issue at stake here, which concerns Firestone and Jacobs's view of Kant's relationship to Christianity in general. Here they have some invariably controversial things to say. Indeed, even if their views on this matter are secondary to their interest in the unity of *Religion*, I find their position on Kant's relation to Christianity to be the driving force associated with their most significant claims. This point comes through in their account of Book Four of *Religion* in Chapter 8, an account that is of particular interest, since, as they point out, this is "the least studied Book of *Religion*" (210). Most commentators assume that Book Four is where Kant whittles away at religious zealotry, pseudo-worship of God, and enthusiastic excess in further defense of his rather austere moral/rationalist undertaking—something of a mop-up operation that kills off the lingering targets following the work of the previous three Books. Firestone and Jacobs offer a more constructive viewpoint, linked with their fresh approach to the so-called "experiments" in terms of which Kant depicts the aims of *Religion* in the Second Edition Preface, and also with their effort to depict the "prototypical theology" emerging especially from the aggressive reading of Kant's discussion of Jesus as the moral prototype. Here, their underlying effort to show that Kant's *Religion* is "not only coherent, but also religiously and theologically affirmative" (233), stakes out the interpretive ground that in my view matters the most. Once again, I simply raise the question of whether or not so much organizational complexity is necessary to bring the authors' most substantive points into view, or if instead the complexity compromises this very effort.

III

I indicated at the outset that the element of distraction associated with *IDKR*'s organizational scheme is perhaps compounded by the imperative to force so many interpretive options into a format dictated by judicial metaphors. I surely sense this problem with respect to the way my own work is deployed in the book. Before I pursue this point, let me state unambiguously my deep appreciation for having my own attempts to write some clear things about complicated matters taken in a serious way and in such a generous spirit. On specific issues of interpretation, as well as in connection with my understanding of *Religion* taken as a whole, Firestone

and Jacobs have given me a great deal on which to reflect, including the issue of Kant's Christology and the best way to read Book Four. Still, when I find myself characterized as the "prosecution's star witness" (83) who "casts a shadow of suspicion over the argumentative specifics" of Kant's *Religion* (6), I find myself recalling Belgian surrealist René Magritte who, whenever told what the "meaning" of one of his paintings was, reportedly said: "You are more fortunate than I am."¹³

My overall sense in the current case is that a certain amount of slippage has occurred between the idea that *Kant* needs defending from what I write about *Religion* and the idea that *Firestone* and *Jacobs* need defending, due to our differing interpretive aims. They are quite right in depicting my approach to Kant's account of radical evil and moral regeneration in terms of a "nest of tangles" riddled with "inconsistencies" that ultimately lead to a set of "wobbles" in Kant's overall view of radical evil and moral recovery. As they correctly see, I argue that a pattern of wobbling emerges in connection with some truly key elements within Kant's position.

For example, Kant claims that humankind has an "original predisposition to good" but a "natural propensity to evil," that radical evil is "innate" but "brought upon us by ourselves" through our freedom, that we are morally obligated to deliver ourselves from radical evil, even though it is "inextirpable by human powers," and that we ourselves must "make ourselves" good again, but that divine aid "may be necessary" to our actually becoming good.¹⁴ To depict the cumulative effect of Kant's position in terms of "wobbling" may not be the most elegant way to address these complexities. However, the metaphor is designed to shed light, not simply on Kant's position, but on the larger transitional issues suggested by Richard Rorty's observation that "interesting philosophy is rarely an examination of the pros and cons of a thesis. Usually it is, implicitly or explicitly, a contest between an entrenched vocabulary which has become a nuisance and a half-formed new vocabulary which vaguely promises great things."¹⁵ Kant's is nothing if not "interesting philosophy," and I am simply suggesting that something like the contest depicted by Rorty is at the source of the instability in Kant's *Religion*, as Kant tries to reconcile his received biblical idiom with the emerging vocabulary of an autonomous rationality. In a rather rough sense, this is my way of understanding the cumbersome title of the book—a title that includes words like "reason" and "religion."

Now I certainly have no problem with other commentators on *Religion* wanting to smooth out the tensions in Kant's account for the sake of claiming more stability for his position than I see. But at no point do I frame my

¹³Suzi Gablik, *Magritte* (London: Thames and Hudson, 1970), 10.

¹⁴Gordon E. Michalson, Jr., *Fallen Freedom: Kant on Radical Evil and Moral Regeneration* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1990), 8.

¹⁵Richard Rorty, *Contingency, Irony, and Solidarity* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1989), 9.

own discussion in prosecutorial terms. Rather, I frame it in terms of *my own clearly stated overall interpretive aim*, which is to un-pack Kant's position as a telling indicator in the modern West's search for a "substitute for supernaturalism" in the account of transcendence and divine action. In my view, Kant's emphasis on human autonomy is his version of that very search. Put differently, I'm attempting to view Kant through the lens of a certain thought experiment, which is to consider "the history of religious thought in the West since about 1750 as an ongoing referendum on the idea of 'otherworldliness.'"¹⁶ Kant's own vote in that referendum is, in my view, particularly telling for the light it sheds on subsequent religious thought, as modern religious thinkers strive to reconcile continuity with biblical tradition with intelligibility within the context of modernity. In the end, my aim is to illustrate his influence on this challenging mediating effort and not to "malign" Kant's text "because of its supposed incoherence," as the authors put it (232).

After all, viewed historically, the element of instability in, say, Kant's account of moral regeneration—with its peculiar mixture of human and divine elements—is not *argumentatively* problematic so much as it is richly and powerfully suggestive. Far from concluding that Kant has fallen into a set of gross argumentative inconsistencies requiring a defense of his position, I argue that his position is momentarily telling for the way it indicates deep transitions within the culture, as he tries to do justice to his own preferred vocabulary of rationality and autonomy while constrained within his historical setting by biblical patterns of thinking about human destiny. "Wobbling," in his case, does not constitute what Firestone and Jacobs refer to as a "bleak state of affairs" requiring defense (105). Instead, it is an indicator of something at once deeper and far more important, requiring historical understanding rather than an interpretive straitjacket—not unlike the historical understanding that is required, say, to appreciate the French Impressionists' experiments in painting what the eye actually sees rather than what the received tradition insists they should paint. As I put the matter in *Fallen Freedom*:

Kant's problem is that the emergent new sensibility is seriously compromised by a received tradition largely antithetical to it: he is not dealing with philosophical argumentation so much as he is juggling centuries. *This is why it is not adequate to try to rehabilitate the doctrines of the Religion along purely conceptual and argumentative lines*, as contemporary analytic philosophers sometimes try to do with the doctrines of the first *Critique*.¹⁷

By contrast, Firestone and Jacobs concentrate precisely on the rehabilitation of the arguments within *Religion*, including a strenuous effort to demonstrate both their mutual consistency and their continuity with the critical philosophy as a whole. Certainly I am not totally uninterested in

¹⁶Michalson, *Fallen Freedom*, 1.

¹⁷*Ibid.*, 140, emphasis added.

the arguments themselves, and I can see instances where Firestone and Jacobs deserve a response on the terms they have laid out before us. Nonetheless, my own effort is more accurately viewed as an invitation to reflect on the wider perspective implied by my characterization of Kant as a cultural way-station between Luther and Marx within the West's ongoing referendum on supernaturalism and otherworldliness.

Perhaps another way of making this point is to draw on the difference between "argument" and "sensitivity." In depicting difficulties within *Religion*, I am not making a case for the book's failure but, rather, suggesting that the book marks a transitional moment in a change in sensitivity, not altogether unlike the change in sensitivity conveyed by my allusion to French Impressionism. From my standpoint, Firestone and Jacobs's attempts to "defend" Kant by showing both the coherence of *Religion* and its broad compatibility with traditional Christianity is rather like an art historian trying to argue for the compatibility of Manet's breakthrough with the earlier tradition of representational art. As I have put the matter elsewhere, the difference here between "argument" and "sensitivity" means that the instability affecting Kant's *Religion* is not something he "could ever have 'corrected,' but only lived through."¹⁸ Even less, then, is the instability the sort of thing against which he needs "defending." Consequently, to view my attempt at historical contextualizing as a prosecutorial gesture takes on the appearance of a co-opting gesture made for the sake of the requirements of the courtroom drama.

It should be clear by now that the chief difference between Firestone and Jacobs and me ultimately concerns the issue of Kant's relation to the trajectory of modern Christian thought. This overarching issue is more fundamental to our differences than our particular approaches to this or that individual textual issue in *Religion*. Firestone and Jacobs are also more focused on the text of *Religion* viewed as a series of arguments that, in their view, culminate in a unified account, rather than on Kant viewed as symptomatic of larger issues. I was more explicit in clarifying my contrasting aims in the book following my study of radical evil, on which Firestone and Jacobs concentrate the most attention, but the aims in both cases were roughly the same. As I put it in the subsequent book, the project was not designed as a "technical specialized work intended mainly for fellow members of the Kant guild," nor was it intended to be an "introductory text." Instead, it fell into a third category, that of studies designed "to relate Kant to some broader interpretive theme in our philosophical, religious, or cultural history."¹⁹ I viewed that book as an extension of my interest in the interplay between the human and divine, framed now in terms of Kant's supposed relationship to the liberal tradition of Protestant mediating theology.

¹⁸Ibid., 141.

¹⁹Michalson, *Kant and the Problem of God*, vii.

Once again, the aim was not to prosecute Kant but to depict his complicated role in a similarly complicated story extending far beyond the boundaries of his own thought. To the extent that my rendering of his role is inaccurate due to specific textual issues on which Firestone and Jacobs offer a compelling corrective, I am surely open to correction. I simply take issue with the notion that Kant needs "defending" from my modest efforts to clarify his place in that larger story. Nor, so far as I can tell, does my account involve any stake whatsoever in an issue of obviously considerable importance to Firestone and Jacobs, which concerns the degree of unity of the text of *Religion*.

IV

A possible implication of my reservations about the way my own work is characterized by Firestone and Jacobs is that they simply overplay the entire motif of a "defense" of Kant. I can well appreciate an attempt, say, to rehabilitate a Kantian account of a specific technical issue that has garnered criticism, such as the apparent incompatibility of claiming that radical evil is both "innate" and "freely" elected. But to structure an entire narrative in terms of the motif of "defense" can produce a tendency to give a more pejorative and adversarial edge to interpretive efforts that may have been originally intended only to reveal what might otherwise remain hidden in the text or otherwise unacknowledged for lack of a broader historical context. Given the large number of interpreters canvassed by Firestone and Jacobs, it is no doubt true in a given instance or two that the interpreter's intent is indeed to criticize Kant for a serious argumentative flaw or for a convoluted overall position. Still, when so many interpreters are invoked in order to provide content to the courtroom in which the defense is argued, there will inevitably be subtle warping effects as commentaries not designed for prosecutorial purposes are forced to conform to the framework.

Worse, the power of the judicial motif is such that it deputizes Firestone and Jacobs to remove important voices from the courtroom altogether. When a Kant interpreter as profound as Yirmiah Yovel is barred from testifying at the outset simply on the grounds that he is a "hostile witness" who is not "welcome at the hearing," (4) alarm bells invariably go off, and one gets the uneasy feeling that arguments most challenging to the authors' central aim are simply eliminated by fiat. The case of Yovel is telling, because the reason he is viewed as a "hostile witness" is *not* that he disputes the unity or coherence of *Religion*. Rather, he is expelled because Firestone and Jacobs take Yovel to be saying that Kant has nothing "positive or constructive to say about historical faith," which means that for Yovel "*Religion* is essentially 'destructive' to revealed religion" (4). One might observe that, if this serious possibility has been eliminated at the outset, then the more positive assessment of Kant's view of revealed religion embraced by Firestone and Jacobs is virtually assured. The more important point, however, is that the response to Yovel vividly brings to

the surface the authors' deep stake in a certain view of Kant's relation to Christianity, with the accompanying possibility that this issue is finally more determinative for them than the less loaded issue of the internal coherence of *Religion*.

Finally, I suppose it says something about the current case that there seems to be a long tradition of thinking that Kant needs defending. In his recent life of Kant, Manfred Kuehn reminds us of the biography of Kant rushed into print in the very year of his death by his friend and colleague, Ludwig Ernst Borowski. In partial explanation of the speed with which the biography was produced, Kuehn observes that Borowski's book "at times takes the form of a defense" of his colleague.²⁰ It was a defense against accusations of impiety driven by "Kant's reputation as an unbeliever" in his home city.²¹ Drawing on contemporary recollections, Kuehn claims that there were those who "had often heard Kant scoff at prayer and other religious practices. Organized religion filled him with ire. It was clear to anyone who knew Kant personally that he had no faith in a personal God."²² Borowski himself evidently had his own reservations about Kant's religious views—to the point where he skipped Kant's funeral—yet his biography took pains to show that Kant himself "was nothing like his work" and that "even his work, *if properly understood*, was not as detrimental to the Christian religion as it may appear."²³

In thus carrying forward the tradition of defending Kant's religious outlook, Firestone and Jacobs have implicitly made the case for the compatibility of Kant's *Religion* with Christianity in ways warranting detailed responses from those who see matters differently. I admire their achievement and look forward to the further discussions their work will inevitably generate. Yet I would still press the point that the fact that their view of *Religion* may go against the grain of much Kant scholarship is hardly the same thing as claiming that Kant needs defending. Scholars are obviously free to write the books they choose to write and not be second-guessed by their readers. At the end of the day, however, "defending" Kant simply strikes me as analogous to "defending" Shakespeare—I suppose you could do it, but the effort is rather like trying to protect Mt. Rushmore from the rain with a sheet. Regardless of the success or failure of your efforts, the monument will remain standing there in all its glory, utterly undiminished.

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²⁰Manfred Kuehn, *Kant: A Biography* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2001), 12.

²¹*Ibid.*, 3.

²²*Ibid.*

²³*Ibid.*, 12, emphasis added.