Faith and Philosophy: Journal of the Society of Christian Philosophers

---

Volume 29 | Issue 2

Article 7

4-1-2012

A Response to Critics of in Defense of Kant's Religion

Chris L. Firestone

Follow this and additional works at: <https://place.asburyseminary.edu/faithandphilosophy>

Recommended Citation

Firestone, Chris L. (2012) "A Response to Critics of in Defense of Kant's Religion," *Faith and Philosophy: Journal of the Society of Christian Philosophers*: Vol. 29 : Iss. 2 , Article 7.

DOI: 10.5840/faithphil201229219

Available at: <https://place.asburyseminary.edu/faithandphilosophy/vol29/iss2/7>

This Article is brought to you for free and open access by the Journals at ePLACE: preserving, learning, and creative exchange. It has been accepted for inclusion in Faith and Philosophy: Journal of the Society of Christian Philosophers by an authorized editor of ePLACE: preserving, learning, and creative exchange.

A RESPONSE TO CRITICS OF *IN DEFENSE OF KANT'S RELIGION*

Chris L. Firestone

This essay replies to four critics of *In Defense of Kant's Religion* (IDKR). In reply to Gordon E. Michalson, Jr., I argue that the best pathway for understanding Kant's *Religion within the Boundaries of Mere Reason* (*Religion*) is to conduct close textual analysis rather than giving up the art of interpretation or allowing meta-considerations surrounding Kant's personal and political circumstances to govern one's interpretation. In response to George di Giovanni, I contend that his critique is dismissive of theologically robust readings of Kant for reasons that have very little to do with what *Religion* actually asserts. Pamela Sue Anderson's essay, I argue, reads Kant on God according to an empirically-biased stream of British interpretation which makes Kant's transcendental philosophy appear foreign to its rationalist heritage. Lastly, in response to Stephen R. Palmquist, I suggest that his reading of Kant's two experiments is done not only in a vacuum, but also according to a perspectival interpretation of Kant that goes beyond what Kant's writings actually maintain.

My thanks to Jamie Smith, Andrew Chignell, and the Society of Christian Philosophers for organizing the "Authors Meet Critics" session at the American Academy of Religion (Montreal: November, 2009). I also appreciate the work of the conference panelists in both reading *In Defense of Kant's Religion* (henceforth IDKR) and engaging it in such a spirited way. Thanks also to Gordon Michalson, whose work on Kant raised the bar for Kant interpreters by focusing on the particulars of *Religion within the Boundaries of Mere Reason* (henceforth *Religion*) and setting out a series of unresolved difficulties that must be addressed if the text is to be considered a coherent work of philosophy. He was the first interpreter of Kant to contact us after IDKR's publication. His enthusiastic endorsement of the book as "a marvel to behold" and as "a generous treatment of [his] own work" as well as his personal renown as an interpreter of Kant's *Religion* led us to invite him to contribute to this set of papers.

Gordon E. Michalson, Jr.

Kant's *Religion* contains an array of interpretive possibilities and navigating it well requires familiarity with both Kant's critical corpus and the variety of philosophical, religious, and theological concepts that inhabit

Kant's time. So challenging are these conditions that interpreters are often forced down one of three unsavory pathways when dealing with the text: (1) make a career out of interpreting *Religion*; (2) shift focus away from the text toward meta-considerations surrounding it; or (3) throw in the towel and advocate not defending the text at all. I have always understood Michalson to start down the first pathway in his early work on Kant.¹ When reading Michalson's comments on *IDKR*, however, I was surprised to find him framing his early work on Kant in a way that strikes me more like pathways two and three. Michalson writes, "my intention has always been to locate key issues in [Kant's] thought that help us understand why he is so important for grasping the trajectory of modern religious thought in the West" (183). Throughout his remarks, he distances himself from the role of critical interpreter of *Religion*, and casts himself "as the one making the case for Kant"—that is, for his significance in Western thought—"not as the one prosecuting him" (183).

Not surprisingly, this struck me as a shift in Michalson's thinking, but apparently this is how he has always thought of his work. Despite the fact that I am one of his longtime readers, I am in no position to dispute the claim. In fact, I find his critical essay to be both a flattering endorsement of many of the most constructive moments in our book and a poetic tribute to how he has come to view his own career. Concerning this second point, however, one must acknowledge that even if Michalson has never thought of his work in prosecutorial terms, others (in addition to the authors of *IDKR*) have. For example, I remember well how Peter Byrne (external examiner of my PhD dissertation and former distinguished editor of the journal *Religious Studies*) demanded two complementary revisions to my dissertation. The first was to deal directly with *Religion* in support of my thesis that Kant's philosophy is theologically affirmative; the second was to deal with Michalson's *Fallen Freedom*, since any adequate interpretation of *Religion* must deal with the myriad of objections to its coherence found there. Whatever else lay behind Byrne's demand, one thing is certain: he took Michalson's work to be the definitive statement on *Religion's* argumentative shortcomings.

I have come to agree with Byrne on this score. For my part, if I claim that an author has written a book with incoherent arguments, I am making a kind of accusation against the book. Whether Michalson thinks of himself as a prosecutor of Kant is irrelevant to the fact that the charges of incoherence he has leveled against *Religion* are an indictment of sorts. His reservation over being the star witness for the prosecution in *IDKR* is less like someone who did not see the events that precipitated an indictment, and more like the key witness who saw the events, had the courage to report them, but now does not want to get anyone into trouble or get himself

---

¹I have in mind Gordon E. Michalson, Jr., *The Historical Dimensions of a Rational Faith: The Role of History in Kant's Religious Thought* (Washington: University Press of America, 1979) and *Fallen Freedom: Kant on Radical Evil and Moral Regeneration* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1990).

anymore involved. Of course, making a career out of trying to interpret *Religion* (pathway one) makes little sense if you come to believe that the text is incoherent. So I can understand why Michalson now frames his work as definitively pursuant of pathway two and, in this essay, is now moving on to pathway three. However, it should not be missed that a shift in focus to the influence and complexity of *Religion* does not change the fact of textual inconsistencies, which Michalson so aptly identifies in his early work.

It also should not be missed, if *IDKR* is right or even just on the right track, that indeed another promising pathway is open to interpreters of *Religion*, and this fourth pathway—namely, carefully interpreting the text by following the helpful signs and roadblocks mapped out by past interpreters—is the one actually taken in *IDKR*. Michalson's comments on *IDKR*, far from precluding this possibility, seem at times to endorse it. In other words, *IDKR* stands as a testament to the fact that, until this new pathway is tried and found wanting, neither of Michalson's alternatives will do as the pathway of choice for Kant's readers. This realization sets up an interesting tension in Michalson's essay—he seems on the whole to be pulled between pathway three (no longer defending the text) and pathway four (following the interpretative lead of Firestone and Jacobs). It will be worth spending at least a little time to examine why.

From the outset of Michalson's response to *IDKR*, we find both an appreciation for the first half of the book and a general concern that it obscures something significant in our authorial motivations that we are reticent to admit. In "Part One: Perspectives on Kant's *Religion*," Jacobs and I offer a study of the secondary literature, which culminates in a detailed synopsis of Michalson's criticisms of Kant's *Religion*. Michalson commends the breadth and depth of this analysis, noting that we "have rendered the enormous service of identifying, clarifying, and evaluating a broad spectrum of these interpretive responses to Kant's *Religion*" (182). Be this as it may, there are two things that Michalson believes this scaffolding obscures—one intentionally, the other unintentionally. While we openly declare that this book is "not a Christian apologetic," Michalson suspects something lurking below the surface of our analysis. As he puts it, "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" (183). The other feature of *IDKR* he believes to be obscured revolves around key interpretive contributions in Part Two, many of which are new to the field of Kant-studies and deserving of careful consideration in their own right. Michalson thinks that at least some of these arguments are profound, but easily missed because of the complex nature of the first half of the book.

Jacobs, in his response to follow, explains in some detail the general incompatibility of Kant's philosophy with Christianity. I agree with his position, and would direct the attention of interested readers there. We

do not endorse, and believe we never have endorsed, Kant's philosophy of religion as compatible with Christianity strictly speaking. What I think is happening here is that the terms *compatibility* and *Christianity* are being used in more than one sense and confusing the issue. For example, in his essay "Who is the True Kant?," Keith Yandell does a great job of showing the incompatibility of Kant's philosophy with Christian doctrine.² Yandell does not mince words. If Kant's expressed position on Christian doctrine were the whole story, Kant's philosophy could not be considered compatible with Christianity. We agree with Yandell—Kant's specific assertions about Christian doctrine are often incompatible with Christianity.

Two aspects of Kant's position, however, indicate that there is a sense in which *compatibility* accurately describes the relationship between Kant's philosophy of religion and Christianity. First, when Kant writes of Christianity in *Religion*, he refers to what he calls "New Testament Christianity," by which he means the writings of the New Testament in isolation from historical Christian orthodoxy. Kant makes this claim in Book Four of *Religion*, as we spell out in detail in chapter 8 of *IDKR*. We argue that "New Testament Christianity" is the object of Kant's second experiment in *Religion*. Beginning with it as revealed religion, Kant "tests it . . . to sort out what, and how much, it is entitled to from one source or the other" (6:156). Kant's principal interest in Christianity is whether his core moral doctrines can be found in the New Testament; whether it contains doctrines beyond these core doctrines is irrelevant to Kant. He concludes that this experiment makes clear "(1) that Christianity in its original form bears the rational core of the pure moral doctrines as they are expounded in the first experiment [(Books One, Two and Three of *Religion*)], and (2) as such the most central Christian doctrines, propagated by Jesus, do not depend on the Jewish scriptures. Original Christianity . . . stands instead on rational insights of which all can be convinced simply by reason" (*IDKR*, 221). This conclusion is *not Firestone and Jacobs's position*, but our understanding of Kant's position. When Christianity is thought of as what Kant perceives to be the relevant core of "New Testament Christianity," he not only implies a certain compatibility with pure rational religious faith, but also defends it explicitly.

Secondly, it is important to realize that Kant's philosophy of religion is not a closed system. As I have pointed out in numerous places in my publications, the most fruitful way of approaching Kant's philosophy of religion is to consider as significant Kant's distinction between the disciplines of philosophy and theology. Kant understands philosophy to be the cognitive approach to reality constituted by the authority of reason and freedom (7:33). Theology, of course, is different. Theology is the cognitive approach to reality constituted by the authority of God's Word and Spirit (7:24). Kant goes on to advocate an ongoing conflict of perspectives between philosophy and theology. He writes, "This conflict can never

---

²Keith Yandell, "Who is the True Kant?," *Philosophia Christi* 9:1 (2007), 93–97.

end, and it is the philosophy faculty that must always be prepared to keep it going" (7:33). Kant's notion of conflict is not one of a war but of two different and distinct disciplinary perspectives that seek after one and the same common end (7:35–36). What this means is that, while Kant himself advocated a certain type of compatibility between Christian faith and transcendental philosophy, his philosophy of religion also demands a dialectical conflict with theology, since this conflict might serve to hasten and awaken philosophical insight into yet-unrealized rational truths. For Kant, this is as it should be. For the very health and vitality of philosophy requires it.³

If compatibility with Christianity does lie beneath our arguments in *IDKR*, it is these more general forms of compatibility, namely, Kant's "New Testament" understanding of Christianity as exemplifying the core doctrines of rational religion and Kant's openness to the consideration of Christian theological truth claims as possible awakeners and hasteners of rational truth. No specific compatibility can be claimed, however, at least not without first doing the hard work of analyzing each theological claim in a purely rational context, and then scrutinizing the result relative to the confessional strictures of historical Christianity. I show how this might be done, for example, with the Christian doctrine of the Trinity in *Kant and Theology at the Boundaries of Reason*.⁴ What I conclude in that work is precisely what we state in *IDKR*, namely, "The relationship between *Religion* and Christianity is, from the Christian perspective, a mixed bag" (*IDKR*, 5).

What I fear Michalson has somehow overlooked, but which we make abundantly clear, is our relentlessly textual interpretive strategy. Our sole concern in *IDKR* is textual coherence. This, to my mind, explains sufficiently the complexity of the first half of the book. Before a new interpretation such as ours can be properly understood, let alone accepted, the critical thinker must first understand the accomplishments and the limitations of the main alternatives. As we write in *IDKR*, "these interpretations and conundrums have identified promising interpretive avenues and dead ends that have been met with when navigating this classic work. Without these charts and navigational tools to mark out the rocks that have shipwrecked many interpretations, navigating the treacherous seas of Kant's philosophy of religion would be nearly impossible" (*IDKR*, 235). In other words, the survey of the secondary literature conducted in the first half of the book is not only helpful for readers trying to understand why one should go our way and not some other way, but also necessary to appreciate the cogency of the arguments to follow.

---

³For more on this point, see Chris L. Firestone, "Making Sense Out of Tradition: Theology and Conflict in Kant's Philosophy of Religion," in *Kant and the New Philosophy of Religion*, ed. Chris L. Firestone and Stephen R. Palmquist (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2006), 152.

⁴Chris L. Firestone, *Kant and Theology at the Boundaries of Reason* (Aldershot: Ashgate Publishers Ltd., 2009), chap. 7.

One final comment is in order. We contend in *IDKR* that “Defending the internal coherence of *Religion* from an expository vantage point and commending its desirability for Christianity are two entirely different matters, and we will, in this volume, focus exclusively on the former” (*IDKR*, 6). If I had to put my finger on it, I would say that the tension in Michalson’s critical essay between endorsing our interpretation and being resolute in his new pathway of not defending the text is due to imputing his own interpretive strategy to the authors of *IDKR*. Part One obscures Part Two of our book for Michalson because he assumes, first, that covert interpretive motivations exist in our authorial consciousness and, second, that these motivations steer our inquiries. The latter we deny outright, while the former is an argument from silence—a silence we happily break in order to make clear that no such motivations are at work in *IDKR*.

George di Giovanni

Di Giovanni apparently agrees with *IDKR* on many key points. He agrees that *Religion* is consistent with Kant’s critical system and that the critical system requires *Religion* “in order that it attains closure precisely as a system” (164). Kant’s *Religion*, he writes, “is required to resolve, but only subjectively, what otherwise would be an *absurdum practicum*. The early Wood and Ward said as much; so do the authors of the present book, and, if I remember correctly, so did David Strauss” (167). Despite these significant similarities in our respective understandings, di Giovanni takes there to be a fundamental difference between us and him that makes the prospect of ever agreeing, or even dialoguing meaningfully, hard for him to fathom.

It seems these differences boil down to three. First, di Giovanni thinks that the main stream of Western thought flows through Kant to the Idealists (arriving at Fichte) and that this flow should inform how we read Kant. Second, di Giovanni critiques the foundations of Kant’s arguments in *Religion* not in terms that are of central importance to the text as such, but in terms that point back to the critical philosophy proper. In other words, the three Critiques, not *Religion*, create problems for Kant. The critical philosophy is, according to di Giovanni, “obviously wrong . . . , [even though] *coherently* wrong” (164). Where Michalson understands the problem to reside in *Religion* itself, di Giovanni takes the problem to reside in the first *Critique*. The result for both, however, is an interpretive movement away from Kant’s philosophy and towards Kant’s context and influence. The third problem pertains to what di Giovanni perceives as dissonance between the first half of the first *Critique* (what atheist and agnostic interpreters take to be Kant’s “good philosophy”) and the core doctrines of rational religious faith found in their rudimentary form in the second half of the first *Critique* and more robustly in *Religion*. The former is supposedly anti-metaphysical and the latter drinks deeply from the wellsprings of Kant’s decidedly Christian place in intellectual and geographic history.

Di Giovanni makes the observation that our interpretation has historical precursors in the Jena school of theology and especially Karl Leonhard Reinhold. While we do think that Kant's philosophy of religion is more theologically affirmative than is commonly thought, I would caution that Reinhold and his followers go far beyond what Jacobs and I would ever suggest. Reinhold so believed in the cogency of Kant's position on Christianity that he tried "to persuade the public to become entirely Kantian. . . . That, he says, is the final solution to the doubts and disputes of the centuries, and the reconciliation of the head and heart of man."⁵ The only interpreter I have read in recent years who fits into the Jena mold is Stephen Palmquist. I would turn di Giovanni's attention, for example, to Palmquist's contribution to *Kant and the New Philosophy of Religion* (KNPR). There, Palmquist recommends that Kantian philosophers "join and support a religious group that conforms as closely as possible to Kant's *ideal*."⁶ By infiltrating churches, "The philosopher who attends can encourage the group to follow a more rational, enlightened course."⁷ He goes on to advocate that some may even become priests in order to carry out their work professionally and proficiently. This is so far removed from the position of Firestone and Jacobs that no resemblance can be reasonably maintained.

Nevertheless, di Giovanni is confident that our reading of *Religion* relates to at least the myth perpetuated by the Jena school. The myth is that "once critical ignorance is admitted at the level of theory, because of the subjective interests of reason, all past dogmatic metaphysics can be re-incorporated, as if from the back door, under the rubric of 'moral faith'" (167–168). Given the direction of the Jena school, I can understand why di Giovanni worries. This worry, however, does not excuse the hasty generalization the myth represents. For Kant, "critical ignorance" cuts both ways. From the point of view of Kant on knowledge, we cannot determine definitively whether or not God exists. Neither theism nor atheism presents us with sufficient theoretical grounds for belief or non-belief. But because theoretical reason allows us to get God in mind by furnishing us with a concept of God that, as Andrew Chignell puts it, enables reason "to avoid the abyss" (see my response to Anderson's essay below), we are able to make a transition to the moral, aesthetic, and teleological dimensions of reason for a more thoroughgoing determination of the matter. Understood in this way, the logic behind Kant's development of transcendental theology is really not all that hard to see. Addressing the perennial questions of duty, hope and identity decisively tips the scales in favor of belief in God. As is well known, Kant denied knowledge to make room for faith. What has been hard for interpreters of Kant to see, prior to *IDKR*,

---

⁵*Between Kant and Hegel: Lectures on German Idealism*, ed. Dieter Henrich and David S. Pacini (Harvard: President and Fellows of Harvard College, 2003), 123.

⁶Stephen R. Palmquist, "Philosophers in the Public Square: A Religious Resolution to Kant's *Conflict of the Faculties*," in Firestone and Palmquist, *Kant and the New Philosophy of Religion*, 243.

⁷Palmquist, "Philosophers in the Public Square," 244.

was just where this room for faith is and what finally inhabits it in terms of coherent, critical content. Di Giovanni, though he does not like this outcome, grants that Kant's writings leave the door open for this method of interpretation.

Putting aside the straw-man linking of our interpretation to the Jena school, di Giovanni appeals to two additional factors that he takes to militate against understanding Kant's philosophy of religion as we do, namely, "the historical context" in which di Giovanni places Kant's critical system and what he calls "the spirit in which Kant was re-introducing in the critical system the tropes of a past theology" (168). Di Giovanni's criticism of *IDKR* on these two points is difficult to refute in any direct way. For when one holds that the proper interpretation of a text is constituted not only by meta-considerations that go well beyond the immediate context, but also by the requirement that other arguments in other texts be coherent, the waters quickly become muddled. The most pertinent connection I see between Kant's understanding of the self and *Religion* is a very positive one. There is, as Søren Kierkegaard once noted, a deep-seated honesty in the later Kant—one that finally makes good on his notion of wisdom by venturing deep into the "hell of self-cognition" (6:441). Although agreeing with our basic findings, namely, that *Religion* is a coherent work of philosophy and that many places in Kant's writings could be used to support our reading, di Giovanni understands the interpretive task very differently. His challenge is based not on textual coherence but rather on arguments against Kant's overall philosophical cogency. In this sense, he really is not criticizing *IDKR* at all. Kant's arguments in *Religion*, thinks di Giovanni, are not to be taken at face value, but read as tropes of past Western, indeed Christian, thought. He asks us to believe that Kant applies them merely as a psychological salve to the end of his philosophy to help heal the wounds opened by its "real" entailments as he sees them and the perceived need to deal with these intellectual remnants.

The crux of di Giovanni's argument thus boils down to two points: (1) Kant's critical philosophy has a flawed understanding of the self and any inferences to rational religious faith based on it must also be flawed, and (2) Kant was not the kind of man who could have meant what he wrote in *Religion*. Both of these claims, however, are defended only by the same thin arguments that have been staples of the traditional interpretation in Kant-studies for the last half century. Rather than allowing the text the opportunity to speak for itself, traditional interpreters continue to read special, extra-textual considerations into Kant's *Religion* as if these considerations were constitutive hermeneutic principles. As I point out in *KNPR*, the "new wave" in Kant-studies is less focused on Kant's personality and political context, and more concerned with explicating the philosophical entailments of Kant's arguments.⁸ When you focus on Kant-the-Person

---

⁸Firestone, "Making Sense Out of Tradition," 141–142. Keith Yandell coins the terms "New Wave" and "New Wavers" in his essay "Who is the True Kant?"

or Kant-the-Politician in order to understand *Religion*, its arguments can become distorted and look forced. They appear to be either lacking in coherence or dismissible on extra-textual grounds. Approaching *Religion* from the point of view of Kant-the-Philosopher, however, makes Kant's arguments more intelligible and less easy to dismiss, as the interpretive advancements of *IDKR* show.

Perhaps the real problem stems from the fact that Kant scholars are typically uninterested in theology and do not know enough about it to make sense out of Kant's arguments in *Religion*. The theology I have in mind here is the philosophical theology of medieval Christianity. Rationalists from Leibniz to Wolff had a better grasp of this sort of theology than Kant interpreters today. What has confounded interpreters of Kant for years is that Kant's turn to the topic of religion in his late critical period draws on the rich history of Western, distinctly-Christian thought from this period, rather than working polemically against it. The myth of Kant as the metaphysical all-destroyer rests deep in the psyche of many traditional Kant scholars. Employing more theologically informed lenses when reading Kant helps us to see the theological movement from the first *Critique* to *Religion* as an unfolding and deepening, rather than as a philosophical misstep. Once Kant leaves purely moral concerns in the second *Critique* and addresses the question of human nature in Book One of *Religion*, he once again turns explicitly to theological concerns of the day. The conclusion that humanity has a corrupt moral disposition in Book One of *Religion* is the problem, and the wealth of theological resources proffered by his predecessors provides Kant in Book Two with a template for its solution.

Kant's clear emphasis in *Religion* on distinctly theological resources is the principal reason why I turned to Nathan Jacobs some eight years ago to co-write *IDKR*. His expertise as a theologian helped me understand the logic behind Kant's arguments in *Religion* and thereby address the many conundrums of *Religion* scattered in the secondary literature. We live in an age of academic specialization and it is not surprising that many philosophers today know far less theology than most philosophers in the time of Kant. Di Giovanni, early on in his critique of *IDKR*, offers a personal testimony about his theological convictions that I think is helpful to mention here: "I have no religious orthodox agenda to promote. I profess no religion. . . . If pressed, I would declare myself a Christian atheist" (164–165). In other words, di Giovanni is a self-avowed Christian in terms of formal ethics and an atheist in terms of metaphysics. One wonders, in the light of this testimony, if Kant's arguments of the latter half of the first *Critique*, extending onward to *Religion*, fail for di Giovanni simply because he is not interested in them, does not know or care to know them, or simply does not like their theological conclusions. Considering his comments carefully, what becomes clear is just how closely di Giovanni's interpretation of Kant resembles his own confessed position and how far removed it is from Kant's published position.

Di Giovanni thinks Kant's arguments are not guilty because they do not mean what they appear to mean. He happily admits that *IDKR* shows the text to be coherent and, in this sense, *IDKR* makes a valuable contribution to the literature. But, for di Giovanni, *Religion* cannot be thought of as a literary classic and a valuable contribution to philosophy of religion. At best, it is a transcendental language game that neither extends Kant's system of thought nor posits a distinct methodology for philosophical and theological engagement. Kant's arguments in *Religion* are merely misdirected tropes of past theologies that are undercut by Kant's wrongheaded philosophy of the self. My position is that, if di Giovanni wants to assert that the best secondary literature on Kant's *Religion* is really missing the point and thus that the indictment we outline in the first half of *IDKR* is somehow wrongheaded, then he should make clear his understanding of the state of the question. I, for one, would be delighted to see this in print. Perhaps it already is and I am unaware of it. Either way, we will have to agree to take up this matter at a later date.

Pamela Sue Anderson

Since the publication of P. F. Strawson's *The Bounds of Sense* (1966), Kant-studies has leaned in the direction of hyper-empiricism. The only things Kant's philosophy allows us to get in mind, think Strawsonians, are syntheses of concepts and intuitions in immediate experience by an act of judgment or compounded combinations of these judgments. This Kant-as-logical-positivist-rather-than-transcendental-rationalist approach has enabled the roots of anti-metaphysical readings of Kant to grow deeply into the soil of Kant reception in the latter half of the twentieth century. This approach has contributed much to what the editors of *KNPR* call the "traditional interpretation" of Kant. The traditional interpretation is characterized by a strict boundary line between known and unknown and the relegation of all theological statements to mere formal postulations of the moral philosophy. The traditional interpretation is pessimistic about the viability of God-talk independent of moral concerns and therefore also pessimistic about *Religion* as a significant contributor to Kant's critical philosophy. This interpretation of Kant became "the largest unified minority report" on how to interpret Kant's philosophy of religion in the twentieth century.⁹ In a forthcoming essay, I argue that this interpretation ultimately promotes non-realist interpretations of Kant on God and religious faith and is traceable to distinctly British interpretive innovations far removed from the actual nature of Kant's philosophical program.¹⁰

I mention this as background to my rejoinder to Anderson's essay in view of the way she goes about critiquing *IDKR*. It seems to me that the

---

⁹See "Editors' Introduction," in Firestone and Palmquist, *Kant and the New Philosophy of Religion*.

¹⁰Chris L. Firestone, "The Illegitimate Son: Kant and Theological Non-Realism" in *The Persistence of the Sacred in Modern Thought*, ed. Chris L. Firestone and Nathan A. Jacobs (Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame Press, 2012), chap. 10.

essence of her two main criticisms are the same and traceable to a common source. Just as Peter Byrne, Don Cupitt and Keith Ward understand Kant's philosophy in strongly empiricist terms—namely, that without knowledge of God, faith in God requiring knowledge of the existence of God is impossible—so too does Anderson.¹¹ For Anderson, belief in God is possible for Kant, but only belief in the idea of God as a “moral postulate.” By moral postulate, she means merely a non-real, nominal term that only makes sense insofar as it makes free obedience to the moral law rationally viable.

Needless to say, Jacobs and I understand Kant's philosophy and its proper reception in the history of Western thought very differently than its more empirically-minded interpreters. One thing we think that Anderson fails to take into account is that, for Kant, bare reason participates in being itself. The rationalists before Kant and the idealists after him understood this point. The orders of being and knowing, for those of the continental rationalist tradition, are not distinct; rather they are logically co-dependent, though they differ in how we may think about them. In this sense, the transcendental boundaries of reason have a kind of thickness for Kant that Anderson, in emphasizing Kant's debt to empiricism, fails to acknowledge and appreciate. This is evidenced not only in her two basic criticisms of *IDKR*, which we will examine momentarily, but also in her position that human reason, for Kant, “cannot grasp perfection” (5).

This claim, of course, is in tension with Kant's adherence to a basically traditional and rationalistic conception of God and seems to me to be in outright contradiction with Anderson's admission that Kant employs the idea of “the original being” in his theoretical philosophy.¹² Kant, of course, goes much further than merely referring to God as “the original being” in the first *Critique*; he also refers to God as the “highest being” (A578/B606), the “being of all beings” (A578/B606), the “highest reality” (A579/B607), the “necessary all-sufficient original being” (A621/B649), and “a being having all reality” (A631/B659). What is this being, for Kant, other than a reference to the perfect being theology of the continental rationalist tradition extending back into pre-Modernity? In *IDKR*, we trace key aspects of Kant's rational theology back through Wolff and Leibniz to John Duns Scotus and his doctrine of univocity.¹³ Anderson does not interact with this material, preferring to focus on the first half of the first *Critique* instead and to provide an empirically-driven account of Kant, so it is difficult to know what she thinks about it.

---

¹¹See Peter Byrne, “Kant's Moral Proof for the Existence of God,” *Scottish Journal of Theology* 32 (1982), 333–343; Don Cupitt, “Kant and the Negative Theology,” in *The Philosophical Frontiers of Christian Theology: Essays Presented to D. M. MacKinnon*, ed. Brian Hebblethwaite and Stewart Sutherland (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1982), 55–67; and Keith Ward, *The Development of Kant's View of Ethics* (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1972).

¹²On Kant's basic adherence to rationalist theology, see Allen Wood, *Kant's Rational Theology* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1978), 150–151.

¹³*In Defense of Kant's Religion* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2009), 159–163.

Be this as it may, Anderson does level two criticisms of *IDKR* in support of her position. Her first criticism focuses on the distinction we make between cognition (*Erkenntnis*) and knowledge (*Wissen*). Following Kant's *Lectures on Metaphysics*, we highlight this distinction in chapter 4 of *IDKR* and use it to set the stage for our interpretation of *Religion* in the succeeding chapters. Anderson suggests this distinction is out of step with Kant's critical philosophy proper. Her position, like that of Byrne, Cupitt and Ward, holds that cognition is not only synonymous with knowledge (which, as an isolated claim, we likewise affirm), but also *exhaustively* synonymous with knowledge. According to Anderson, *Erkenntnis* and *Wissen* are (or must be) identical for Kant in every case. The second criticism is closely related to the first, but zeros in on pure cognition as supposedly a type of knowledge or "coming to know." If we are really using the notion of pure cognition to mean "coming to know" (rather than, as we claim in *IDKR*, a potential source of rational faith), then *IDKR* illegitimately expands the boundaries of knowledge so that they include a veritable pantheon of transcendental ideas as possible objects of knowledge. If this is indeed part of our interpretation, then it is clearly out of step with Kant's theoretical strictures.

The first criticism is not surprising to us insofar as we make a point in *IDKR* to show that Kant's interpreters, particularly interpreters of Kant's philosophy of religion, regularly and incorrectly assumed that *Wissen* and *Erkenntnis* are, in all cases, synonymous for Kant. We are not the first Kant interpreters to make this point. Rolf Georg awakened us to the issue in his essay "*Vorstellung* and *Erkenntnis* in Kant."¹⁴ Perhaps no single misstep has muddled the waters of the secondary literature on Kant's philosophy of religion more than this false identification of meaning. Kant can and does get God in mind and this idea is not reducible to compound combinations of empirical cognitions. Kant warns against such anthropomorphic notions of God in many places in his writings. In *IDKR*, capitalizing on the work of Allen Wood, we point out that central to Kant's transcendental theology of the first *Critique* is the concept of the *ens realissimum* (i.e., God the all-reality or the sum of all possible predication).¹⁵ Kant readily adopts this fairly common rationalist conception of God in his theoretical philosophy and then develops it in his subsequent writings. To show how this development is possible, we turn in *IDKR* to Kant's *Lectures on Metaphysics*. There, Kant argues that cognition has two variants—empirical cognition, which is synonymous with knowledge (*Wissen*), and pure cognition, which simply means *to get something in mind*. As a transcendental rationalist, Kant thinks it perfectly fine

¹⁴Rolf George, "*Vorstellung* and *Erkenntnis* in Kant," in *Interpreting Kant*, ed. Moltke S. Gram (Iowa City, IA: University of Iowa Press, 1982). See our discussion of his work in *In Defense of Kant's Religion*, chap. 4.

¹⁵See the section entitled "Witness for the Defense: Allen W. Wood" in *In Defense of Kant's Religion*, 36–45; and Allen Wood, *Kant's Rational Religion* (Ithaca and London: Cornell University Press, 1978).

to think a robust class of ideas or abstractions for which there are no possible corresponding intuitions via the senses. Instead, they are possible objects of rational faith.

Anderson seems concerned that Kant's distinction between pure and empirical cognition is impossible to sustain in that it does not obey Kant's strictures on knowledge. It is hard to know what to say here. On Anderson's reading, Kant is not really a rationalist thinker at all. That is, she seems to believe that Kant does not agree with Descartes, Leibniz, or Wolff, or even with his esteemed teacher Martin Knutzen, in holding that we can think perfection, that we can get God in mind, and that these ideas are aspects of our mental noetic superstructure with genuine ontological significance. According to *IDKR*, what is most interesting about Kant's transcendental rationalism is not that we can think God (this, to our minds, should be uncontroversial), but that, by making a transition of critical focus to other transcendental dimensions of reason, God becomes the centerpiece of more doctrines of rational religious faith (i.e., human depravity, prototypical redemption, and the Ethical Commonwealth).¹⁶ Because Anderson's Kant is a logical positivist, Kant's philosophy must remain infinitely far removed from this sort of interpretation. Not only can't humans have an immediate intuition of God via the senses (which is a position every Kant interpreter affirms), but also humans, it seems, can't even manage to think God in any kind of traditional rationalistic sense.

C. Stephen Evans is helpful here. According to Evans, Kant is fully aware that theoretical reason has to supply the idea of God for rational faith to be developed in accord with the subjective dimension of the critical philosophy.¹⁷ Echoing Kant's distinction between pure cognition and empirical cognition, Evans affirms that "Kant certainly held that the field of the thinkable is broader than the knowable, and even broader than the conceivable in that narrow sense in which the conceivable means the possibly knowable."¹⁸ Although no knowledge (empirical cognition) of God is possible, we can think (pure cognition) God and raise relevant questions about the universe that demand appeal to and indeed belief in God for their resolution. Andrew Chignell makes an additional clarification regarding the relationship between thought and belief in Kant's philosophy that brings the discussion into sharp relief. According to Chignell, belief is a type of assent for Kant that can be either empirical or rational. I can think of anything I like, but in order to have a belief I need sufficient empirical or rational reasons for it. Chignell, like Evans, Wood, Firestone, and Jacobs, points to Kant's understanding of the *ens realissimum* conception of God in the first *Critique* as an example of a theoretical belief. "This assent, too,

¹⁶See *In Defense of Kant's Religion*, chaps. 5–7.

¹⁷C. Stephen Evans, *Subjectivity and Religious Belief: An Historical, Critical Study* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans Publishing Co., 1978), 19.

¹⁸*Ibid.*, 23.

is a result of the rational need for completeness or a sufficient reason—the need to avoid the abyss.”¹⁹

Anderson’s reading runs contrary to all of these interpretations of Kant’s rational theology. In her empiricist-styled approach, thoughts are reducible to sense perception in an eliminative sense. Ideas that are not traceable to particular sense perceptions, even such basic ideas as God, freedom, and immortality, are never really complete thoughts of reason and therefore cannot be thought of as existing in reality or as possible objects of rational faith. For her, transcendental ideas are merely names that reason posits in support of human moral striving for the highest good. Her interpretation in this sense stands in sharp contrast with Kant’s philosophical heritage and makes almost no sense of the immense amount of textual data in support of a more rationalistic understanding of Kant on God.

Anderson’s second criticism of *IDKR* is that we equate pure cognition with something akin to a lesser form of knowledge or what she terms a “coming to know” (1–2). If pure cognition is a form of knowledge in any sense, then it is reducible to empirical cognition and no pure cognition of God would thus be possible. In attributing this position to us, she assumes that we are making the same mistake made by Don Wiebe.²⁰ Wiebe argued that rational faith, for Kant, in some modest way expands our knowledge. In chapter 4 of *IDKR*, we show how Wiebe misrepresented Kant on this point. Although on the right track, Wiebe did not understand that rational faith in God is not in any sense a species of knowledge, but rather a purely cognized conviction of reason alone.²¹ The problem with Anderson’s characterization of our position is that it completely misses the purely rational nature of “pure” cognition. Kant is, as I have already stated, a fairly traditional rationalist on this point. As an interpreter of Kant, it is incumbent upon Anderson not to read into Kant an empiricist’s or positivist’s methodology, or any other for that matter, but to track with Kant and seek to understand God, man and world the way he did.

Stephen R. Palmquist

According to Philip Rossi, Kant scholars often see in Kant their own theological position rather than Kant’s.²² This is true for both theological interpreters of Kant and a-theological interpreters of Kant, and is why *IDKR* sticks so closely to the text rather than meta-considerations. As much as interpreters are tempted to find something of themselves in Kant, they must try to resist this urge. *IDKR* devotes itself to interpreting Kant’s *Religion* in a close textual sense in order to minimize this inevitability. Jacobs’s

¹⁹Andrew Chignell, “Belief in Kant,” *Philosophical Review* 116:3 (2007), 327.

²⁰Don Wiebe, “The Ambiguous Revolution: Kant on the Nature of Faith,” *Scottish Journal of Theology* 33 (1983).

²¹Firestone and Jacobs, *In Defense of Kant’s Religion*, 108.

²²Philip J. Rossi, “Reading Kant through Theological Spectacles” in Firestone and Palmquist, *Kant and the New Philosophy of Religion*, 107–123.

response captures the exegetical emphasis of *IDKR* and shows just how far *IDKR* actually is from the authors' own positions. This point is salient as we examine Palmquist's comments on *IDKR*.

Palmquist's criticism of *IDKR* focuses on (1) the supposed claim that *IDKR* is the first linear, holistic reading of *Religion* on the market, and (2) the perceived inaccuracy of our understanding of Kant's two experiments. I will not spend a lot of time on the first claim because I honestly do not know to what it refers. We use the term "linear" only once in the book, on the third to last page. There, we contrast our reading with many others in the field that, when staking a unique position on the text's meaning, often focus on one or another of the four Books of *Religion* while downplaying the others. We write, "By contrast, we have argued that Kant's *Religion* is equally amenable, and perhaps more so, to a holistic and linear interpretation" (*IDKR*, 233). We do not claim that the linear nature of our interpretation is what makes *IDKR* unique; there are other interpretations out there that, to a greater or lesser degree, attempt to read the text linearly. What makes *IDKR* unique is its ability to handle the various conundrums found in the field of Kant-studies over the last twenty-five years in the process of reading it linearly. Palmquist's interpretation may be an example of a linear read—I really am not sure on this point. What I am sure of is that his interpretation does not handle the conundrums in Kant's *Religion*, which is the sole purpose of *IDKR*.

The second criticism is more interesting. Palmquist argues that Kant's two experiments are neither where Hare and Reardon take them to be nor where Firestone and Jacobs take them to be. According to Hare and Reardon, the first experiment is made up of Kant's moral writings (viz., *Groundwork* and *Critique Practical Reason*) and the second experiment is *Religion* as a whole. We call this understanding of the two experiments the "Religion-as-translation" interpretation. Kant takes Christianity and, in *Religion*, translates it into a religious version of Kant's moral philosophy. Firestone and Jacobs, on the other hand, understand both experiments to take place in *Religion*—the first experiment in the first three Books and the second experiment in Book Four. If I understand Palmquist's comments correctly, he thinks the best reading of *Religion* is somewhere between these two positions. Like the *Religion-as-translation* interpretation, the two experiments do involve the translation of Christian truth claims into terms amenable to the transcendental philosophy (i.e., the prototype is Jesus in moral terms for Palmquist). However, like the Firestone and Jacobs interpretation, both experiments are conducted in *Religion*.

Palmquist submits that his position is explained in detail in *Kant's Critical Religion* and *IDKR* ignores these arguments. One needs to remember that our expressed hermeneutic strategy in *IDKR* is focused principally on textual data in *Religion* in the context of the conundrums forwarded in the secondary literature. Without hair-splitting over the fairly complex and often-difficult-to-understand details of Palmquist's interpretation, I will simply say that we found Hare's and Reardon's interpretation and

application of the experiments to have significant explanatory power over the conundrums in *Religion*, while Palmquist's did not. If I may be permitted to speculate for a moment, the reason why Palmquist's interpretation of the two experiments does not handle the conundrums in *Religion* very well may be due to the fact that *Kant's Critical Religion* does not address a single one of them. One could read virtually all of Palmquist's work prior to *IDKR* and be totally unaware that any of the litany of problems noted in chapter 3 of *IDKR* exists in the secondary literature! This is a significant lacuna in Palmquist's work on Kant. Palmquist's claim that we "make little effort to rebut previously published evidence contradicting their position" (175) sounds truly remarkable, given what we find or, more exactly, what we do not find in his own published writings.

Were this not enough, Palmquist goes on to challenge our reading of the two experiments by claiming that we "miss a golden opportunity" by "remain[ing] silent about whether or not such a reading exists" (176). This kind of interpretive criticism strikes me as overly optimistic in reference to Palmquist's own work. Whenever we considered one of the very difficult conundrums forwarded by Kant's critics and consulted Palmquist's writings with a view to resolving it, we were left either in silence or with a quotation of Kant—which only begs the question of what the text actually means. We thus decided to focus on what we perceived to be Palmquist's more lasting contributions to the field, namely, Kant's relationship to Emmanuel Swedenborg, the connection between Kant's pre-critical writings and early critical writings, and the affirmative implications of Kant's philosophy for metaphysics.

Beyond the fact that Palmquist's published writings never handle the conundrums in *Religion*, another problem for bringing his interpretation further into the discussion has to do with the fact that it is couched in a perspectival reading of Kant's philosophy. This interpretation is found in an abbreviated form in *Kant's Critical Religion*, but is spelled out in detail in Palmquist's *Kant's System of Perspectives*. Palmquist's self-titled "perspectival interpretation" brings structural clarity and integrity to the superstructure of Kant's philosophy, which he then applies to *Religion*. However, Palmquist admits that his interpretive method goes beyond what the author explicitly contends in order "to construct a systematic interpretation, even if the original writer was not always so clear and consistent."²³ Problems with this method of interpretation have not gone unnoticed. Jennifer McRobert notes this and questions "whether [Palmquist's] book is intended as an exposition of or as a redeployment of the critical philosophy."²⁴ To this, Palmquist replies, "The answer, quite simply, is *both*! The best 'interpretation,' I believe, consists of both exegesis

²³Stephen R. Palmquist, *Kant's System of Perspectives: An Architectonic Interpretation of the Critical Philosophy* (Lanham: University Press of America, 1993), 9–10.

²⁴Jennifer McRobert, "Review of *Kant's System of Perspectives*," *Canadian Philosophical Reviews* 14:2 (April 1994), 119–121.

and eisegesis. The two factors are complementary, not mutually exclusive: exegesis without eisegesis is like a dead corpse; eisegesis without exegesis is like a disembodied spirit."²⁵ Palmquist's work, under these definitions, is neither a dead corpse nor a disembodied spirit, but what it is is open to interpretation.

In this light, I do not think that Palmquist's writings can be treated as if they are purely exegetical treatments of Kant. Palmquist's writings on *Religion* (and other works by Kant) make an awkward demand of interpreters: *In order to understand this text well, you must first master Palmquist and then discern where Kant ends and Palmquist begins.* With regard to the aim of *IDKR* (i.e., showing *Religion* to contain coherent arguments free from the conundrums thought to be contained in it), we found Palmquist's blend of exegetical and eisegetical insights to be helpful neither in explicating the specific meaning of the passage or passages in question nor in addressing the difficulties repeatedly noted by Kant's critics. We thus chose to focus on more overtly exegetical authors.

In chapters 7 and 8 of *Kant's Critical Religion*, Palmquist unpacks Kant's two experiments as they emerge out of his wider interpretation of Kant's philosophy. He is not arguing on the backdrop of alternative understandings of the text, but merely presenting a view of the experiments as examples of his perspectival interpretation applied to *Religion*. In this light, there really cannot be any competitors to his view. None of them can ever get off the ground on his reading because they must first pass muster by being run through the sieve of Palmquist's perspectival interpretation. His criticism that *IDKR* does not cite his reading of the two experiments thus depends on someone having done the work of applying this reading to the ongoing discussion. This, as far as I know, has not happened. I am glad Palmquist does some of this work in his contribution to this symposium, but we cannot be held responsible for interacting with material that did not at the time exist.

Trinity International University

---

²⁵Stephen R. Palmquist, *Kant's Critical Religion* (Aldershot: Ashgate Publishing Ltd., 2000), 405.