

Kant on Reason and Religion

ONORA O'NEILL

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ONORA O'NEILL is principal of Newnham College, Cambridge University. She was educated at Somerville College, Oxford University, and received her Ph.D. from Harvard University, where she was awarded the Carrier prize for her dissertation *Universilizability*. She has taught at Barnard College and the University of Essex, serves on the council of the Royal Institute of Philosophy, the Nuffield Council on Bioethics, and the Oxford Commission of Inquiry, and is a past president of the Aristotelian Society. She is also a fellow of the British Academy and a foreign honorary member of the American Academy of Arts and Sciences. She has written widely on ethics and political philosophy, and her most recent books include *Faces of Hunger: An Essay on Poverty, Development, and Justice* (1986), *Constructions of Reason: Exploration of Kant's Practical Philosophy* (1989), and *Towards Justice and Virtue* (1996).

LECTURE I. REASONED HOPE

Kant's philosophy of religion has perplexed even his warmest admirers. Nobody has pointed this out more amusingly than Heinrich Heine, who saw in Kant the Robespierre of the intellect. The orderly philosopher of Königsberg, whose daily constitutional was attended and sheltered by his servant Lampe, armed with a modest umbrella, was really a terrorist who destroyed the *ancien régime* of European religion and philosophy. The *Critique of Pure Reason* was the sword that killed deism in Germany. Yet Kant, Heine suggests, derailed this sublime and terrifying philosophy, that pointed toward the death of God, when a domestic difficulty arose. He relented and patched a God together because his servant, old Lampe, was disconsolate. Heine lampoons Kant:

Immanuel Kant traced his merciless philosophy up to this point, he stormed heaven, . . . there was no more allmercyfulness, no more fatherly goodness, no otherworldly rewards for this worldly restraint, the immortality of the soul was at its last gasp . . . and old Lampe stood there with his umbrella under his arm, a miserable onlooker with anxious sweat and tears running down his face. And so Immanuel Kant had mercy and

As a graduate student at Harvard in the 1960s I read Kant's philosophy of religion and was both fascinated and baffled. My interest was rekindled when I gave a number of seminars on the subject as Read-Tuckwell lecturer at the University of Bristol in 1986. I am grateful to the Read-Tuckwell committee and to the University of Bristol for the stimulus and opportunity to explore the topic with knowledgeable and helpful colleagues. At the time I remained puzzled by Kant's conception of reason, and consequently about his intent in giving the title *Religion within the Limits of Reason Alone* to a work that seems so remote from other writing on reason and religion. In the years since then I have worked extensively on Kant's conception of reason. When invited to deliver the Tanner Lectures at Harvard University I hoped that I would at last be in a position to speak about the ways in which Kant's writing on religion connects reason, hope, and interpretation. I am deeply grateful to the Tanner Foundation for the opportunity to present this work and to Harvard University for making the occasion both intellectually engaging and enjoyable.

showed that he wasn't just a great philosopher, but also a good person. He thought it over and said, half kindly and half in irony: "Old Lampe must have a God, or the poor fellow can't be happy — but man ought to be happy on earth — practical reason says so (at least according to me); so let practical reason also disclose the existence of God." By this argument Kant distinguished theoretical from practical reason and, as with a magic wand, brought back to life the corpse of deism which theoretical reason had killed.¹

If Heine and other critics are right, Kant's retreat is ignominious. In the first Critique he asserts the death of God: "No one indeed will be able to boast that he *knows* that there is a God and a future life" (*CPR* A828-29/B856-57);² in the second Critique he argues for God and immortality. Can practical reason really produce a magic wand to revive the corpse of deism — let alone of a more comfortable religion for old Lampe? Or does it provide no more than an old man's umbrella as defence against the terrifying weapons of theoretical reason? Heine is not the only critic who concludes that Kant's "practical" arguments fail, that there is no

¹ Heinrich Heine, *Zur Geschichte der Religion und Philosophie*, in his *Gesammelte Werke*, 6 vols. (Berlin and Weimar: Aufbau Verlag, 1951), vol. 5, 110.

² Kant references are given parenthetically using abbreviated titles and the following translations; except where indicated the page numbers are those of the translation.

Critique of Pure Reason, tr. Norman Kemp Smith (London: Macmillan, 1933). (*CPR*; pagination of first and second editions)

Critique of Practical Reason, tr. L. W. Beck (Indianapolis: Bobbs-Merrill, 1977). (*CPrR*; Academy pagination)

Critique of Judgement, tr. James Creed Meredith (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1978). (*CJ*)

Religion within the Limits of Reason Alone, tr. Theodore M. Greene (New York: Harper and Row, 1960). (*R*)

Groundwork of the Metaphysics of Morals, tr. H. J. Paton as *The Moral Law* (London: Hutchinson, 1953). (*G*; Academy pagination)

The Conflict of the Faculties, tr. Mary Gregor (New York: Abaris Books, 1979). (*CF*; Academy pagination)

Theory and Practice, What Is Enlightenment? and What Is Orientation in Thinking? — all tr. H. B. Nisbet in Hans Reiss, ed., *Kant: Political Writings*, 2nd ed. (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1991). (*TP, WE, WOT*)

real consolidation to be had, and that we cannot escape the colossal wreck of rationalist metaphysics and theology and the threat to religious faith.

1. *The Great Gulf*

If these critics are right, the defects of Kant's account of religion are symptoms of wider problems in his philosophy. The arguments for God and immortality that Kant advances in the *Critique of Practical Reason* are supposed to bridge a "great gulf" (CJ 14, 36) between Kant's accounts of the natural world and of human freedom. If no bridge can be built, Kant is committed to a spectacular but wholly implausible metaphysical position that claims that human beings live in two unconnected worlds. They are part of a natural, phenomenal world that is temporally structured, causally ordered, and knowable by theoretical reason. Yet they are also free agents who are part not of the natural, phenomenal world but of a noumenal or intelligible world that is inaccessible to theoretical reason and neither temporally structured nor causally ordered.

I shall take it that Kant and Heine are both right in thinking that the critical philosophy leads us toward the brink of a great gulf, which seemingly separates self from world, freedom from nature, and acting from knowing. It is therefore entirely reasonable to ask what sort of bridge Kant tries to build across the great gulf, and whether it reinstates the God for whom Lampe pined, or is as flimsy as Heine suspected, or whether there are other ways of looking at the matter.

In these lectures I shall offer reasons for thinking that the critical philosophy indeed destroys and neither revives nor aims to revive either deism or more familiar forms of theism. Nevertheless, I shall argue, Kant offers good reasons for thinking that the bridge across the great gulf can be bridged by an account of religion, and also for thinking that this account of religion can lie "within the limits of reason alone." The key to this alternative understanding

of “religion within the limit of reason alone” lies, I shall argue, in proper attention to Kant’s distinctive account of reason.

This evening I shall begin by sketching the great gulf that is to be bridged and by outlining Kant’s conception of reason. I shall then turn to his view that the bridge that is to cross the great gulf is a bridge of hope, and finally shall try to say something about what it would take for hopes to be reasonable. Tomorrow I shall build on this account of reasoned hope to understand why in his last writings on religion Kant constantly cites (and miscites) the texts of Christian Scripture,³ while still claiming to offer an account of “religion within the limits of reason alone.”

2. *The Two Standpoints*

A common view of the predicament in which Kant believes we find ourselves, and of his solution to it, is that it is a predicament of his own making, which he could have avoided. There is no gulf between self and world, between nature and freedom, between knowledge and action, and so there is no need to work out how the gulf might be bridged. Put more prosaically, the proper task of philosophy is to provide an adequate account of human freedom and action that is not only compatible with but integrated into an adequate account of our knowledge of a causally ordered world. By avoiding Kant’s problem we would also avoid any need for his desperate remedy.

I cannot within the framework of two lectures trace the arguments that led Kant to the contrary view, but shall outline the position that he reaches, and some of the reasons he offers for thinking that it is not internally incoherent. The point can be put in a compressed form by noting that Kant thought that he was making not an ontological but an epistemological claim. The predicament in which we find ourselves is not that of having to lead

³ For discussion of Kant’s use of Scripture see Henri d’Aviau de Ternay, *Traces Bibliques dans la Loi Morale chez Kant* (Paris: Beauchesne, 1986), and “Kant und die Bibel: Spuren an den Grenzen,” in Friedo Ricken und Francois Marty, *Kant über Religion* (Stuttgart: Kohlhammer, 1992).

our lives in two distinct ontological orders, but that of having to adopt two mutually irreducible standpoints in leading our lives. The theoretical standpoint is naturalistic: from it we see the world and human life as subject to natural law and causal inquiry. The practical standpoint is that of human freedom: from it we see ourselves as agents who intervene in limited ways in that natural order. Only the theoretical standpoint can accommodate science; only the practical standpoint can accommodate morality.

We are unavoidably, deeply, and thoroughly committed both to the naturalistic standpoint and to the standpoint of freedom. We can dispense with neither standpoint, since neither makes sense without the other. If we do not see ourselves as free we can give no account of activity, hence none of the activities of judging and understanding by which we establish the claims of knowledge; if we do not see ourselves as parts of a causally ordered world we can give no account of the effective implementation of human projects, including moral action, in the world. Our lives would be impossible without commitment to freedom *and* to causality in the robust sense in which Kant understands these terms: neither can stand alone. Yet we do not understand, let alone know, what makes them compatible. The strangeness of human life is that we find a hiatus at the core of our self-understanding, which cannot be comprehended within any single perspective. We have to adopt both standpoints: neither is dispensable and neither is subordinate or reducible to the other —yet their conjunction is a challenge and an affront to the very project of reasoning, which aims at coherence. This hiatus is the “great gulf” that threatens Kant’s philosophy.⁴

A traditional reading of Kant —Heine’s is one among many — is that Kant resolves this problem by reinstating some form of transcendent realism, within which the coordination of nature and

⁴ For epistemological readings of Kant’s account of the two standpoints see Henry Allison, *Kant’s Theory of Freedom* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1990), and Onora O’Neill, “Reason and Autonomy in Grundlegung III,” in *Constructions of Reason: Explorations of Kant’s Practical Philosophy* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1989), 51–65.

freedom is to be secured by metaphysical means —as it were off-stage. I believe that the strategies Kant mainly deploys to solve the problem are more modest. The first and the most fundamental aspect of his more modest approach is a surprisingly minimalist view of the powers of human reason.

3. *Human Reason*

From the very beginning of *The Critique of Pure Reason* Kant insists on the limits of human knowledge: our knowledge cannot reach beyond human experience and our experience is confined to the natural world. The deficiency is not easily remediable, since it arises from the limits and failings of human reason, which “is burdened by questions which, as prescribed by the very nature of reason itself, it is not able to ignore, but which as transcending all its powers, it is also not able to answer.” (*CPR*, Avii).

Even everyday methods of reasoning can lead into incoherent conceptions of the soul (the paralogisms), of cosmology (the antinomies), and of God (the critique of rational theology). Try as we will, we find ourselves torn between insatiable desires to know metaphysical truths and the frustrated realization that attempts to do so repeatedly lead us into dialectical illusion. The problem of providing a proper account of the character and tasks of human reason is postponed for many hundreds of pages, until the discussion of philosophical method in the *Doctrine of Method*, which begins with a candid acknowledgment that the whole edifice of the critical philosophy remains insecure because we still lack any account of the methods to be used if these cognitive shipwrecks are to be avoided.

All that Kant proposes as remedy for this uncomfortable situation is that we *accept* that our grandest cognitive ambitions must be set aside and that we *adopt* a form of cognitive *discipline* to protect ourselves from error:

The greatest and perhaps the sole use of all philosophy of pure reason is therefore only negative; since it serves not as an

organon for the extension but as a discipline for the limitation of pure reason, and, instead of discovering truth, has only the modest merit of guarding against error. (CPR A795/B823 ; cf. A709/B737)

He admits that this is an uncomfortable conclusion to reach after long philosophical efforts:

that reason, whose proper duty it is to prescribe a discipline for all other endeavours, should itself stand in need of such a discipline may indeed seem strange. (CPR A710/B738)

At first consideration the proposal may seem worse than strange. If reason is or is to be subordinated to a *discipline*, then it seems that Kant must have given up the ambitions of philosophy, or perhaps have settled for some antirational appeal to common sense or shared understandings or the like, which usurps the claims and title of reason. However, the *Transcendental Doctrine of Method* offers quite another picture, in which reason itself is construed as a certain sort of negative self-discipline.

Kant's account of the discipline of reason can be summarized in three claims. First, in calling reason a discipline, he is claiming that it is a *negative* constraint on the ways in which we think and act: there are no substantive axioms of reason, whose content can fully steer processes of reasoning; there are merely constraints.⁵ Reason is indeed merely formal.

Second, the discipline of reason is *nonderivative*. Reason does not derive from any more fundamental standards. On the contrary, it appeals to no other premises, so can be turned on *any* claim or belief or proposal for action. Neither church nor state,

⁵ Kant uses the term *discipline* for a form of *negative instruction*, "by which the constant tendency to disobey certain rules is restrained" (CPR A709-10/B737-38). See more generally chapter I of the *Transcendental Doctrine of Method*, called *The Discipline of Pure Reason* (CPR A707/B735ff.), especially the first few pages and the considerations that lie behind rejecting the geometric method that are rehearsed in section I of the chapter titled *The Discipline of Pure Reason in Its Dogmatic Employment*.

nor other powers, can claim exemption from the scrutiny of reason for their pronouncements and assumptions. The authority of reason would be nullified by any supposition that it is subordinate to the claims of one or another happenstantial power:

Reason must in all its undertakings subject itself to criticism; should it limit that freedom of criticism by any prohibitions, it must harm itself, drawing upon itself damaging suspicions. Nothing is so important through its usefulness, nothing so sacred, that it may be exempted from this searching examination, which knows no respect for persons. (*CPR* A738/B766)

If reason has *any* authority, it must be *its own* rather than *derivative*.

Although reason does not have derivative authority, authority it must have. Authority is needed to distinguish between ways of organizing thought and action that are to count as reasoned and those that are to be dismissed as unreasoned. Kant traces this non-derivative authority to the requirement that reasons be public, in the sense that they can be given or exchanged, shared or challenged. Nothing then can count as reasoned unless it is followable by others, that is, unless it is *lawlike*. Ways of organizing thought and action that are not lawlike will be unfollowable by at least some others, who will view them as arbitrary or incomprehensible.

The minimal, modal requirement that reasons be followable by others, without being derivative from other standards, is Kant's entire account of the authority of reason. Yet mere nonderivative lawlikeness has considerable implications for the organization of thought and action: in the domain of theory it amounts to the demand that reasons be intelligible to others; in the domain of action it amounts to the requirement that reasons for action be ones that others too could follow.⁶

⁶ This formulation covers both the partially reasoned case of *heteronomous* action, where principles are lawlike, but derivative from or conditional on desires, and the fully reasoned case of *autonomous* action, whose principles are lawlike and not derivative from or conditional on any particular desires. Reasons for action whether partial or complete must be followable by those for whom they are to be reasons for action.

The three aspects of Kant's conception of reason are summarized in the thought that reason requires a "wholly nonderivative and specifically negative law-giving" ("da scheint eine ganz eigene und zwar negative Gesetzgebung erforderlich zu sein," *CPR* A711/B739, my translation). The same trio of requirements —that reason be negative, underivative, and lawlike —are linked in numerous Kantian formulations, and most notably in the best-known version of the Categorical Imperative, which demands action only on maxims that can at the same time be willed as universal laws. Here the supreme principle of practical reason is presented as a *negative* (formal) requirement that is *underivative* because it appeals to no other spurious "authorities" (that would be heteronomy) and demands adherence to *lawlike* maxims (i.e., to maxims that could be adopted by all).⁷

How far does this meagre conception of reason help us to understand Kant's claim to offer an account of religion within the limits of reason alone? Evidently it cannot offer reasons for thinking that the impasses to which speculative reasoning leads are likely to be overcome. This meagre conception of reason is unlikely to yield proofs of human freedom or immortality or of God's existence. However, Kant notes that our reasons for being interested in the soul and in God are primarily practical (*CPR* A800-804/B828-32) and raises the question whether "reason may not be able to supply us from the standpoint of its practical interest what it altogether refuses to supply in respect of its speculative interest" (*CPR* A805/B833; cf. A796/B824).

4. *Kant's Fundamental Questions*

Kant's surprising move far into his discussion of method, almost at the end of the *Critique of Pure Reason* (*CPR* A805/B833),

⁷ For further textual evidence for this interpretation of Kant's conception of reason see Onora O'Neill, "Reason and Politics in the Kantian Enterprise" and "The Public Use of Reason," in *Constructions of Reason*, 3–27, 28–50, and "Vindicating Reason," in *The Cambridge Companion to Kant*, ed. Paul Guyer (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1992), 280–308.

is to assert that human reason is fundamentally interested not in two questions — one about knowledge, one about action — but in three questions : ⁸

1. What can I know?
2. What ought I do?
3. What may I hope?

The grouping of questions was hardly new. For example, a summary of Christian commitment would comprise answers to each question : I can know God; I ought to love God and my neighbour as myself; I may hope for the life to come. Each answer picks out the underlying principle of one of the traditional theological virtues, faith, hope, and charity: faith centres on knowledge of God; hope centres on the life to come; charity centres on love for God and neighbour.⁹

Kant does far more than take over and resequence these three traditional questions. His answers to “What can I know ?” and

⁸ Elsewhere Kant adds a fourth question: what is man? (e.g., *Logic*, tr. Robert Hartman and Wolfgang Schwarz [Indianapolis: Bobbs-Merrill, 1974], 29). However, this fourth question is viewed as comprising the other three, which would need to be answered within any adequate answer to the fourth. Since the fourth question is to be answered by anthropology (in Kant's understanding of the term), this arrangement of the fundamental question confirms the view-evident from the outset of the *Critique of Pure Reason* - that Kant's philosophy begins from an anthropocentric rather than a theocentric starting point.

⁹ It is notable that Kant displaces hope from the middle place that it holds in the theological triad. That intermediate position has been thought to suggest that hope is less fundamental than faith and less perfect than charity (cf. Aquinas, *Summa Theologiae*, IaIIae.62.4) ; or even that it is only an aspect of imperfect, doubting faith, to be superseded in the future fuller faith of those who “possess” God, as mundane hopes are superseded when a hoped-for goal is achieved. However, some recent theologians — influenced in part by Kant-lay more weight on hope. For example, Karl Rahner writes- that “hope does not express a modality of faith and love” and that “hope is . . . the basic modality of the very attitude to the eternal” (Karl Rahner, *A Rahner Reader*, ed. G. A. McCool [London: Darton, Longman and Todd, 1975], 231). Jiirgen Moltmann too in some ways places hope ahead of faith and charity: “Christian proclamation is not a tradition of wisdom and truth in doctrinal principles. Nor is it a tradition of ways and means of living according to the law. It *is* the announcing, revealing, publishing of an eschatological event” (Jiirgen Moltmann, *Theology of Hope: On the Ground and the Implications of a Christian Eschatology*, tr. James W. Leitch [London: SCM, 1967], 299.

“What ought I do ?” are developed without any reference to God and without use of religious discourse; it is these answers that supposedly open up the great gulf that Heine, and many others, think will swallow up Kant's whole philosophy. Kant thought that he could avert this disaster by showing how a reasoned answer to the third question - “What may I hope ?” - could bridge the great gulf.

5. Faith and Hope

It is easy to miss the central place that hope has in Kant's philosophy, and in particular in his philosophy of religion, because his discussion of religion often focuses on faith rather than on hope. In the preface of the second edition of the *Critique of Pure Reason* he famously asserted that “I have therefore found it necessary to deny knowledge to make room for faith” (*CPR* Bxxx; cf. A745/B773). In the *Doctrine of Method* and in the *Critique of Practical Reason* he identifies three postulates of God, freedom, and immorality, of which two are readily construed as articles of faith.

These passages taken in isolation might suggest that Kant expects to show that traditional theological claims, although they are not supported by the rational proofs to which deists aspired, can yet be reached by some nonrational “leap of faith.” Yet neither in the account of faith offered in the discussions of the Postulates of Pure Practical Reason in the *Critique of Practical Reason* nor in *Religion within the Limits of Reason Alone* does Kant take this line. He doesn't assert that if we are prepared to overlook the claims of reason, then we can embrace religious truths without needing reasons. Rather he proposes that although articles of faith cannot be known or proven, the grounds of faith lie within the limits of reason. He is, it seems, neither deist nor fideist.¹⁰ What then is his account of faith?

¹⁰ For a contrary view see Alan Wood, “Kant's Deism,” in *Kant's Philosophy of Religion Reconsidered*, ed. Philip J. Rossi and Michael Wreen (Bloomington and

6. *Meinen, Wissen, Glauben*

Late in the *Critique of Pure Reason* (CPR A820-B848ff.; cf. CJ 140ff.) and shortly after he poses the three questions that interest human reason, Kant distinguishes three forms of cognitive attitude. Mere *opining* (*meinen*) is holding something true, being consciously aware that one has no sufficient grounds, and that there are no objective grounds. Even opinion requires some grounds — or it would be no more than imagination — but the grounds of opinion are not even subjectively sufficient. *Knowing* (*wissen*) is holding something to be true for reasons that are both subjectively and objectively sufficient. Between opinion and knowledge Kant places *Glaube*, whose obvious translation would be *belief* or *faith*, and which he characterises as holding something for reasons that are objectively insufficient but subjectively sufficient, indeed subjectively unavoidable.

Glaube is a form of cognitive propositional attitude that is neither mere opinion nor knowledge. What can it be to have faith in this sense? Kant draws on an image (CPR A825/853), familiar both in Blaise Pascal and in Soren Kierkegaard, that strength of faith or belief can be understood in terms of a wager. *Glaube* is apparently to be understood as commitment, or trust. We know how strong our trust or commitment is when we realise how much we would stake on it. A measure of commitment is not, however, the same thing as a reason for making the commitment, and unless Kant can show reasons (even if not the objective reasons that can ground knowledge) for religious commitment he will not have shown that it is other than credulity. If religion is to be considered

Indianapolis: Indiana University Press, 1991), 1–21, and also in his earlier work, *Kant's Rational Theology* (Ithaca, N.Y.: Cornell University Press, 1973). Wood sees Kant as a deist despite his insistence that we can make no religious knowledge claims, and even speaks of Kant's *Religion* as a rationalist interpretation of Christian doctrine. This expansive use of the terms *deist* and *rationalist* obscures the fact that Kant nowhere endorses the knowledge claims of natural religion, and so takes a position very distant from deism as usually understood. The same disregard for Kant's insistence that we do not know religious truths can be seen throughout the articles by Joseph Runzo and Nicholas Wolterstorff in the same volume.

within the limits of reason alone, it must not merely be possible to make religious commitments: there must be reasons to do so. The reasons that Kant offers interpret religious trust or commitment fundamentally as a mode of hope: religious faith cannot be a matter of knowledge, and must be a matter of taking a hopeful view of human destiny.

Kant stakes a great deal on the claim that religious commitment is not any sort of knowledge. He claims that if the rationalist dream were fulfilled and we knew the truths of deism, religious belief would be coerced and morality impossible. In the second Critique he asserts that it is because faith is not provable and human beings have to struggle with doubt and commitment that morality is possible:

[If] God and eternity in their awful majesty would stand unceasingly before our eyes. . . . Transgression of the law would indeed be shunned, and the commanded would be performed. But . . . because the spur to action would in this case always be present and external . . . most actions conforming to the law would be done from fear, few would be done from hope, none from duty. The moral worth of actions . . . would not exist at all. The conduct of man would be changed into mere mechanism. . . . (CPrR 147)

It would be a religious and moral disaster if *per impossibile* God were the demonstrable God of the rationalist tradition: religion (as Pascal also understood) *requires* a hidden God. *Deus absconditus* coerces neither belief nor action. Far from it being a misfortune that “no one indeed will be able to boast that he knows that there is a God and a future life” (CPR A828–29/B856–57), this cognitive limitation is indispensable for uncoerced morality; moreover, it leaves the space in which the question “What may I hope?” can be asked. In this respect, as in so many others, Kant is wholly at odds with his rationalist predecessors, who grounded optimism about human destiny in the conviction that no less-than-optimal destiny would have been created for us

by the demonstrable creator of the best of all possible worlds. Enlightenment optimism, unlike hope, is grounded in knowledge.

If Kant had offered *only* an argument from ignorance and the limits of human knowledge, his claim to show that we have reason to adopt any form of faith or hope, let alone specific faiths or hopes, would be quite unsatisfactory. However, the argument from the limits of human knowledge is only part of the picture. The other part of the picture consists of arguments for the indispensability and the irreducibility of the two standpoints. We cannot fail to act on the assumption of our own freedom, if only because the very activities of cognition require us to assume our own freedom; conversely, in acting we cannot fail to assume that we know a causally ordered world in which our action is to intervene. Hence we have to make sense not simply of the thought that our knowledge is limited, but of the further thought that we must accept some set of assumptions under which the answers we give to the first two questions that interest human reason are rendered mutually consistent. In short we must assume that there is some sort or degree of coordination of nature and freedom that ensures that our future is one in which we can act, and in which the aim of moral action is not absurd: it must be possible to insert the moral intention into the world (cf. *CPR* A807-8/B836-37; *CJ* 143, 146 [470,472]).

Of course, this is not to say that we *know* how or how far the natural and the moral orders are coordinated, let alone that their full integration is possible, or will come to pass. It is only to say that for practical purposes we must take it that some degree of their coordination is possible. In doing so we commit ourselves to the view that the future in which we act is not inevitably frustrating—in short we must entertain at least a minimal hope that the future on which we take our action to bear is a future on which it can bear. The core of any answer to the third question “What may I hope?” is the thought that whatever I may hope must incorporate a hope that human destiny leaves some room for action

and specifically for the moral intention to be realised by acting in the world. Rather than grounding hope in faith, Kant in fact construes the basics of faith as a form of hope.¹¹

Several large questions arise at this point. I shall take up three of them. First, does the reality that hope can fail show that, contrary to Kant's view, we do not need to live in the light of (any sort of) hope? Second, does he show that *only* religious hopes as traditionally conceived will provide the right light? Third, does he show that religious hopes as traditionally understood, or any other specific hopes, can be reasoned hopes?

7. *Hope and Despair*

We may begin with the most general difficulty: is Kant right to insist that human reason must ask a third question that points to the future, and whose answers point to hopes for that future? Isn't hope a splendid but optional matter? What makes the question of the future an unavoidable interest of human reason, and not merely a topic of emotional or personal concern to each of us? The very idea that commitment to action and morality requires hope can seem implausible. Do not many reasonable people with strong moral commitments look to the future more with fear or foreboding, or even with indifference and despair, than in hope? Do not others hope unreasonably, building their lives around illusory or even self-deceiving aspirations or wishes? In short, isn't hope unnecessary?

The most plausible of Kant's moves is surely the claim that we must be committed to *some* view of the future if we are committed to action of any sort. If we were entirely noncommittal about the future, we could make no sense of any commitment to action. We see this clearly when we remember what it would be to think that there is no possible future: *complete* despair overwhelms all commitment and stifles action. In acting we look to the future; if we

¹¹ Cf. *Critique of Judgement*, 146: "Faith, in the plain acceptance of the term, is a confidence of attaining a purpose the furtherance of which is a duty. . . ."

can bring about any change, it can only be change in the world, in the future. Those who think action that changes the future impossible can aim for nothing: commitment to action that is thought impossible is not really commitment; we cannot aim to achieve what we know to be unachievable. Conversely, if we act at all we reveal at least a minimal commitment to, a minimal hope for, some future in which some action may take place and may have some results. That we have some intimation of a future that is open to action in some respects is constitutive not only of the moral life, but of the life of action, and so on Kant's view also of cognition.¹²

Kant does not, of course, claim that despair is impossible. His claim is conditional: commitment to action and morality, that is, commitment to acting morally within a causally ordered world, demands that we hope that our commitments are to some extent realisable in that world. He aims to show not simply that lack of hope is psychologically hard, but that it is incoherent unless action and morality too are given up.

8. *Modalities of Hope*

The second large question is whether a requirement for hope must be or must include religious hopes as traditionally conceived. On this Kant apparently gives several differing answers. The different views are in part a reflection of the different modalities of hope.

Kant formulates the third question in which human reason is unavoidably interested permissively. He asks not "What *must* I hope?" but rather "What *may* I hope?" Yet in many passages in

¹² What happens in dark conditions when action is barely possible is instructive. Consider Nadja Mandelstam's *Hope against Hope: a Memoir*, tr. Max Hayward (London: Collins Harvill, 1971), or Bruno Bettelheim, *The Informed Heart: The Human Condition in Modern Mass Society* (London: Thames and Hudson, 1960), with its poignant discussion of those who gave up hope in the death camps, became walking dead, and were dubbed "Musselmänner" by others. It may be sober truth rather than whistling in the dark when we tell one another that while there is life there is hope.

various works he concentrates on what must rather than on what may be hoped. Of course, any adequate account of what we *may* hope will have to incorporate some account of anything that we *must* hope. There might, however, be many distinct answers to the question "What may I hope?" that had in common only those aspects of hope that are required. It may, for example, be the case that various quite distinct hopes for human destiny incorporate a convincing account of what we must hope.

Notoriously Kant puts forward a very strong account of what we must hope in the *Critique of Practical Reason*. He there argues not only that we must hope that the moral intention can be inserted into the world to some extent, but that we must hope that the moral and natural orders can be *fully* coordinated in an optimal way in which happiness and virtue, our natural and our moral ends, are eventually perfectly coordinated in each of us.

These demanding hopes are presented as requiring certain Postulates of Practical Reason. On Kant's account a postulate is

a theoretical proposition which is not as such [i.e., theoretically] demonstrable but which is an inseparable corollary of an *a priori* unconditionally valid practical law. (*CPrR* 122)

In the second Critique Kant argues for the demanding claim that we must aim not only to introduce the moral intention into the world but to work toward the *summum bonum* or *complete* coordination of natural and moral good, of happiness and virtue, in each free agent, so must hope for a correspondingly strong and complete degree of coordination between the natural and the moral order, and so must postulate or hope for our own immortality and for the existence of God:

This infinite progress is possible, however, only under the presupposition of an infinitely enduring existence and personality of the same rational being; this is called the immortality of the soul. Thus the highest good is practically possible only on the supposition of the immortality of the soul. . . . (*CPrR* 122)

Accordingly each of us

may hope for a further uninterrupted continuance of this progress, however long his existence may last, even beyond this life. (*CPrR* 123)

Hence, Kant holds, we must also postulate

the existence . . . of a cause of the whole of nature, itself distinct from nature, which contains the ground of the exact coincidence of happiness with morality . . . the highest good is possible in the world only on the supposition of a supreme cause of nature which has a causality corresponding to the moral disposition. (*CPrR* 125)

If we aimed only for a lesser degree of happiness or of virtue, or for a lesser degree of their coordination, we might need to adopt only lesser postulates or hopes. However, the maximal aim would make little sense unless one also hoped for or assumed an eternity to achieve it and a deity to make it possible. The strong and specific claims about what we must hope that Kant defends in the *Critique of Practical Reason* are plausible if, but only if, we find good reasons for the assumption that we *must* take it that a *complete* coordination of happiness and virtue in each of us is on the cards.

Yet might we not make sense of our dual commitment to knowledge of a causally ordered world and to action, including moral action, within that world on the basis of lesser assumptions? Why should action not posit or hope for the possibility of moral progress, but make no assumptions about the possibility of achieving natural and moral perfection? Might it be enough to postulate that we can insert the moral intention into the world as and how we can, rather than with total efficacy? If so might we not construe the task of moral progress as a this-worldly, shared and historical, perhaps incompletable task, rather than as one that will provide each of us an occupation for an eternal afterlife?

In some of his political and historical writings Kant takes a this-worldly view of reasoned hope, in which neither God nor immortality is taken to be an indispensable corollary of our commitment to his views of our dual commitment to the natural and the moral orders. In place of the religious interpretation of the Postulates of Pure Practical Reason of *Critique of Practical Reason*, he articulates the hopes we must have as hopes for an earthly future, for the possibility of progress in which nature and morality are coordinated not in another life but on this earth. If moral action is seen as a historical goal, reasoned hope may fasten not on God and immortality, but on history and progress.¹³

There are many passages in which Kant articulates a this-worldly counterpart to the Postulates of Pure Practical Reason. Here one instance may serve for many; in *Theory and Practice* he wrote:

I may thus be permitted to assume that, since the human race is constantly progressing in cultural matters (in keeping with its natural purpose), it is also engaged in progressive improvement in relation to the moral end of its existence. . . . I do not need to prove this assumption. . . . I base my argument upon my inborn duty of influencing posterity in such a way that it will make constant progress. . . . History may well give rise to endless doubts about my hopes . . . however uncertain I may be and may remain as to whether we can hope for anything better for mankind, this uncertainty cannot detract from the maxim I have adopted, or from the necessity of assuming for practical purposes that human progress is possible. (*TP* 88)

Many moves in this passage mirror those by which Kant argued in the second Critique to God and immortality: we are committed to moral aims whose feasibility we cannot prove theoretically; to make sense of this we need to postulate, assume, or hope for a

¹³ Cf. Yirmiahu Yovel's discussion of the Postulates of Pure Practical Reason and the Regulative Ideal of History in his *Kant and the Philosophy of History* (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 1980), 72.

human future that allows room for human progress (not in this case necessarily for progress to perfection); these hopes for the future of humankind cannot be renounced if we are committed to morality. Here and elsewhere Kant pictures human destiny in this-worldly terms.

Only if any answer to the question “What may I hope?” must include hope for God and immortality will Kant’s answer to his third question vindicate theistic religious claims; even if reasoned hope were to vindicate some rather abstract religious claims, it might not vindicate all the familiar Christian tenets that would restore Lampe’s happiness. Heine’s comments on Kant’s strategy for consoling Lampe can be read as doubts whether the supposed constraints that reason places on what we *may* hope are sufficient to show that we *must* have any sort of religious hope. Even if the abstract claims of deism and the tenets of traditional Christian faith provide two specific answers to the question “What may I hope?” Kant’s arguments may not show that either forms part of *every* answer to the narrower question “What must I hope?”

Could Kant have supplied an argument for the unique status of hopes for God and immortality, so showing that we not merely may but must hold such hopes? Does he establish his claim that it is “morally necessary to assume the existence of God,” so proving that any answer to the question “What *may* I hope?” must incorporate a theistic claim? If he does not, Kant will have shown only that we must make *Some* assumption about the grounds of the possibility of coordination between the natural and moral orders. He would not have offered reasons to think that we must hope for God and immortality, let alone for the specifics of Christian faith. He would have left it open that our hopes need not have a specifically religious form, and even that they might be more coherent if they do *not* take a religious form.

What are we to make of this apparent shift in Kant’s views? Was he constantly revising his account of human hopes and destiny, searching for the most convincing answer? Or does he take it

that there are no reasons to think that our hopes must take a unique form? Does he think that we may hope either for God and immortality or for historical progress? Or is there evidence that either religious hope or historical hope is his final view of human destiny and that he rejects other views? Or does he merely vacillate between alternative answers to this third question?

9. *Hope and Reason*

The broad sense in which hopes for a future in which action and morality are possible may be reasoned is that they render Kant's theoretical and practical philosophies consistent. The theoretical and practical uses of reason lead us to positions that seem to be far apart—separated indeed by a great gulf. Hopes for a future in which action in the world is possible provide at least a slender bridge across that great gulf. The bridge is slender in that nothing demonstrates that or how the natural world and the moral order come to be coordinated. Kant does not provide any basis for boasting that we *know* that there is a God and a future life, or even that we *know* that history will allow for progress. His account of what we must hope is, after all, only an account of the required core of hope that we must adopt to achieve consistency.

It may be only this required core of hope that we are given grounds to think of as *reasoned hope* (a successor to *docta spes*). This core of hope is cognitively simple and indeterminate. It is merely formal, or *negative*, unlike more determinate hopes for God and immortality or for specific modes of historical progress. It is *nonderivative* in the sense that it does not invoke or presuppose the authority of any particular metaphysical system or religious revelation, or of any church, or state, or other power. Moreover it is *lawlike* in the sense that these minimal hopes are hopes that everyone can have, indeed hopes that everyone who is committed to knowledge and action has reason to share.

However, much of Kant's writing on hope goes beyond this picture and invokes more specific religious or historical hopes. One

way in which his various accounts of more specific hopes might be understood is as answers to his broader question "What may I hope?" In the second of these lectures I shall consider some of the accounts of permitted hope that can be found in *Religion within the Limits of Reason Alone* and ask whether Kant offers us reason to think that these more resonant hopes too lie within the limits of reason.

LECTURE II. INTERPRETATION WITHIN THE LIMITS OF REASON

Kant pursued his inquiry into the links between reason and religion into his final years. His last major complete work is his extraordinary, and in many ways disconcerting, *Religion within the Limits of Reason Alone*. At first encounter there seems to be a great distance between this convoluted work, with its numerous discussions of Scripture and of Christian dogma, of ancient authors and of anthropology, of comparative religion and of church governance, its speculations on etymology and on ethical associations, and the abstract arguments that lie behind the Postulates of Practical Reason of the *Critique of Practical Reason*.

The publication of *Religion within the Limits of Reason Alone* got Kant into wearisome troubles with the anxious Prussian censors. At first consideration this is a surprising response to a work that seems more respectful of established faith than his numerous earlier writings on religion, which had brought him no trouble.¹ Christian concerns and Christian Scriptures are in evidence throughout the book. It consists of four long linked essays, the first published in 1792 and the others in 1793. Each takes up

¹ The explanation is usually said to lie in the more conservative regime in Berlin, where Frederick William II had appointed as minister of justice J. C. Wollner, who introduced a more restrictive Censorship Edict in 1788, which permitted religious freedom provided that dissidents kept unorthodox opinions to themselves. Yet it is surely relevant that Kant confronted the censors with an entirely new and unsettling tone and approach in his late writing about religion. In the event publication was permitted, but Kant was required to publish nothing further on religion.

an ancient and resonant thematization of good and evil. The first discusses the *common root* of good and evil in human freedom; the second the *conflict* between good and evil; the third the *victory* of good over evil; and the last the life lived in *service* of the good. This sequence follows a traditional Christian articulation of human origins and destiny: *original sin, temptation, conversion, and ministry* are moments of the encounter of the pilgrim soul with good and evil. This Christian tenor is sustained by numerous discussions of Christian Scripture.

Yet Kant's underlying line of thought appears to question rather than to endorse much of Christian faith and tradition. His task, he asserts, is that of the *philosophical theologian*, who approaches religion *within the limits of reason*. This task, he insists, is quite different from that of the *biblical theologian*, who defends ecclesiastical faith by appealing to church authority to guide his reading of Scripture, and whose defence of faith does not appeal to reason.² The discussions of Christian Scripture in *Religion within the Limits of Reason Alone*, however, are to be reasoned. Indeed, in the preface to the second edition Kant asserts that "reason can be found not only to be compatible with Scripture but also at one with it" (R 11). How can religion within the limits of reason conceivably be "at one with" the Scripture of a particular religious tradition?

Much here will depend on one's understanding of Kant's conception of reason. This evening I shall try to show how the minimalist account of reason that Kant presents in the *Doctrine of Method* of the *Critique of Pure Reason* can be used to unravel his interpretations to Christian Scripture, and to make sense of his

² The distinctions between philosophical and biblical theology are a major theme also of Kant's *Conflict of the Faculties*, published a year later. There (as also in *What Is Enlightenment?*; also in *Kant: Political Writings*) he cites obedience to the state as the ultimate reason why biblical theologians may not appeal to reason: "the biblical theologian . . . draws his teaching not from reason but from the *Bible*; . . . As soon as one of these faculties presumes to mix with its teachings something it treats as derived from reason, it offends against the authority of the government that issues orders through it" (CF 23).

claim to approach religion within the limits of reason alone by way of interpretation of the sacred texts of one tradition.

1. *Relation to the Second Critique*

Unsurprisingly there are many continuities between Kant's earlier and his later writing on religion. Like the second Critique, *Religion within the Limits of Reason Alone* argues to religious claims from moral claims. The book begins with the claim that "morality leads ineluctably to religion" (*R* preface 1, 5) and ends with the thought that "the right course is not to go from grace to virtue but rather to progress from virtue to pardoning grace" (*R* 190). Morality once again appears as the parent rather than as the child of religion; charity once again does not build on but precedes faith. Once again we are presented with a reversal of tradition that old Lampe might not have found consoling.

Moreover, like the *Critique of Practical Reason*, *Religion within the Limits of Reason Alone* takes up the question "What may I hope?" Here too Kant insists that hope forms the bridge that renders our dual commitment to knowledge and to moral action coherent. Our moral ambitions, indeed our moral intentions and our very plans of action, cannot be fully grounded in knowledge: we lack not only the relevant knowledge that the world is open to the possibility of moral or other intervention, but even the self-knowledge that would assure us that we are committed to moral action:

Man cannot attain naturally to assurance concerning such a [moral] revolution . . . for the deeps of the heart (the subjective first grounds of his maxim) are inscrutable to him. Yet he must be able to *hope* through his *own* efforts to reach the road which leads hither. . . because he ought to become a good man. (*R* 46)

Yet at many points *Religion within the Limits of Reason Alone* is less definite than the *Critique of Practical Reason* about the form that hope, even hopes for the highest good, must take. Often the

text does not make it clear whether the hope that makes sense of our aspirations to morality is this-worldly or other-worldly; sometimes it is not obvious whether the hope is religious or historical. Near the end of the work Kant claims that

reason . . . says that whoever, with a disposition genuinely devoted to duty, does as much as lies in his power to satisfy his obligation . . . may hope that what is not in his power will be supplied by the supreme Wisdom *in some way or other*. (R 159; cf. 130)

The same very abstract structure of hope is the appropriate corollary to intentions to seek the highest good:

The idea of the highest good, inseparably bound up with the purely moral disposition, cannot be realized in man himself . . . yet he discovers within himself the duty to work for this end. Hence he finds himself impelled to believe in the cooperation or management of a moral Ruler of the world, by means of which this goal can be reached. And now there opens up before him the abyss of a mystery regarding what God may do . . . , whether indeed *anything* in general, and if so, *what* in particular should be ascribed to God. (R 130)

Whether we not merely *may* hope but have good reasons, indeed *ought*, to hope that supreme Wisdom will act in this life or the next, in history or in the hereafter, or in both, whether indeed anything in particular should be ascribed to God, is often left quite obscure.

2. *Scripture as Symbol of Morality*

There are also many ways in which the discussion of religion in *Religion within the Limits of Reason Alone* differs from and is far more specific than that in the *Critique of Practical Reason*. The most obvious puzzle is to understand how anything we would call *philosophical theology* can appeal to Scripture — or for that matter can be advanced by commenting on Roman and tribal reli-

gion, on superstition and clericalism. What part can discussion of the Fall of Man or the Virgin Birth or the Second Coming have in an account of religion within the limits of reason? Surely a work on the religion of reason should invoke particular tales and traditions only as examples of lack of reason.

In the preface to the first edition Kant remarks (rather unhelpfully) that it would be a good idea to have a

special course of lectures on the purely *philosophical* theory of religion (which avails itself of everything including the Bible), with such a book as this, perhaps, as the text (or any other if a better can be found). (R 10)³

He is quite right that the text avails itself, if not quite of everything, still of too much; but this seemingly will make it harder rather than easier for us to read it as an account of religion within the limits of reason.

The reasons that Kant offers for thinking that his discussion of Scripture is appropriate to his task lie scattered in comments on narrative and interpretation at various stages of the book. The initial discussion of interpretation is interspersed with comments on the Adamic myths in book one. Here Kant suggests that Scripture may be understood as a group of narratives that offer a temporal *model* or *symbol* of a rational (hence atemporal) structure. For example, his reading of the story of Adam's sin and of the expulsion from Eden sees it as symbolizing the subordination of moral principles to natural inclinations.

Holy Scripture (the Christian portion) sets forth this intelligible moral relationship in the form of a narrative, in which two principles in man, as opposed to one another as heaven is

³ The censors reacted rather promptly to this thought, if in the wrong way. In 1795, a year after the second preface, they issued an order to the academic senate at Königsberg expressly forbidding *any* professor to lecture on *Religion within the Limits of Reason Alone*. Cf. "Translator's Introduction" to *The Conflict of the Faculties*.

to hell, are represented as persons outside him; who not only pit their strength against each other but also seek (the one as man's accuser and the other as his advocate) to establish their claims *legally* as before a supreme judge. (R 73)⁴

The drama of temptation and salvation may be read as symbolizing a conflict between the moral principle and the principle of subordinating morality to desire. Although, Kant writes, the "natural inclinations, *considered in themselves*, are good" (R 51; cf. 31),⁵ the subordination of morality to inclination would be freely chosen evil. This is appropriately symbolized in the story of the Fall, where an originally innocent being comes to moral awareness, is reminded by a good spirit of the demands of morality, is tempted by a spirit who personifies the principle of evil, freely chooses to subordinate morality to desire, and yet leaves open the possibility of a return to the good (R 37).

Since the details of the Adamic myths can be read as symbols of the interrelationship between freedom, knowledge, and morality in our lives, we can understand the story as told of ourselves, but symbolically. Kant quotes a line from Horace, who admonishes us not to scoff even at ludicrous tales about the gods, reminding us that *mutato nomine de te fabula narratur* (R 37).⁶ A story does not have to be literally true, or even (as Kant suggests by quoting a pagan author) taken from the Bible, in order to be read in the interests of morality. The myth of the Fall can be *rehabilitated* rather than *repudiated* if it is read as a narrative that symbolically

⁴ The restriction of this claim to the Christian portion of Scripture is immediately disregarded; later in the book it is clear that a restriction to the Bible is also to be set aside.

⁵ This point is notoriously missed in reading Kant's ethics. Yet it is an unavoidable corollary both of his view that happiness, which is the satisfaction of natural inclinations, is a component of the *summum bonum* and of his theory of action, which demands that maxims be freely adopted.

⁶ "Under another name the tale is told of you." Horace, *Satires*, in *Q. Horati Flacci Opera*, ed. E. C. Wickham, revised H. W. Garrod, Oxford Classical Texts (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1984), Book I, i, line 69, 135.

represents our understanding of evil as freely chosen and yet rejectable:

For man, therefore, who despite a corrupted heart possesses a good will, there remains a hope of a return to the good from which he has strayed. (*R* 39)

Nobody will be surprised that the Adamic myths *can* be read in this way, or more generally that Scripture *can* be given an interpretation that makes it an appropriate symbol of Kant's views of the relation between knowledge and morality, and so of hope; but it is surprising that Kant makes this move. Why should *Religion within the Limits of Reason Alone* discuss Scripture at all? In making sympathetic use of the myths and symbols of biblical traditions Kant is very distant from the spirit of reasoned religion as generally understood. Deism, for example, aspired to a quite limited salvage job on the most abstract propositions of Christian faith —and was content to jettison the rest, and to deride bits of it as superstition. Kant can be as scathing as any deist in his denunciation of popular superstition, which he castigates as religious illusion (*R* 156ff.), and of clericalism, which he denounces as fetishism “which borders very closely on paganism” (*R* 168): yet he does not denounce or renounce Scripture. Rather he regards it as important to show that Scripture can or may be read in a certain way.

3. *In the Interests of Morality*

The second element of Kant's account of the role of interpretation of Scripture within religion within the limit of reason is summarized by the thought that sacred texts not merely *can* be read as symbols of morality, but that they *ought to* be read in this way:

this narrative must at all times be taught and expounded in the interests of morality. (*R* 123)

It would be easy to think that what Kant means is simply that we ought to seek a morally edifying meaning in the stories of Scrip-

ture, that it is a matter, as we say, of bringing out the moral of the story. This is a common enough view of how Scripture can or even of how it ought to be interpreted “in the interests of morality,” which has provided the basis for countless sermons and homilies. However, it will not serve Kant’s purposes, since the idea of “bringing out the moral” presupposes that a text of Scripture has an intrinsic, if sometimes obscure, moral meaning (which other secular or pagan texts may lack) and that this meaning is to be brought out.

Kant, however, does not attribute either special standing or moral wisdom to Christian Scripture. The Bible is no more than a book that has “fallen into men’s hands” (*R* 98); traditional faith may be no more than something that “chance . . . has tossed into our hands” (*R* 100). There is no reason to suppose that such contingent cultural documents and traditions are morally admirable or even sound. Nevertheless Kant insists not only that we can, but that we ought to read them “in the interests of morality.” Doing so is not a matter of looking for their true meaning. The relevant

interpretation may, in the light of the text . . . appear forced — it may often really be forced; and yet if the text can possibly support it, it must be preferred to a literal interpretation which either contains nothing at all [helpful] to morality or else actually works counter to moral incentive. (*R* 101)

This conception of proper interpretation can get going on the sacred texts of any tradition. Christian texts are neither unique nor indispensable. This can be illustrated by the fact that the philosophers of classical antiquity managed to interpret the crudest of polytheistic stories in ways that approximate a moral doctrine intelligible to all (*R* 101–2), and by equivalent moves in Judaism, Islam, and Hinduism (*R* 102).

The issue behind these interpretive moves is highlighted by posing the question:

whether morality should be expounded according to the Bible or whether the Bible should not rather be expounded according to morality. (*R* 101n)

Kant's firm answer is that morality rather than Scripture comes first:

since . . . the moral improvement of men constitutes the real end of all religion of reason, it will comprise the highest principle of all Scriptural exegesis. (*R* 102)⁷

4. *Reasoned Interpretation and Authority*

These moves show why Kant speaks of his work as defending *moral religion*; they do not make it entirely clear why he should speak of himself as defending *religion within the limits of reason*. It is, of course, true that Kant sees morality as based on practical reason, but it does not follow that all interpretation of Scripture "in the interest of morality" must itself lie within the limits of reason. Even if morality is based on reason, the readings of texts that support or express moral principles might, as Kant notes, be forced rather than reasoned.

However, interpretations that are forced by the standards of literal or fundamentalist interpretation may conform to Kant's minimalist account of reason. Kant depicts reason as a way of disciplining thinking and acting, which is *negative*, in that it lacks all specific content, *nonderivative*, in that it does not invoke authorities other than reason, and *lawlike*, in that it uses principles that all can adopt. If there are reasoned ways of interpreting, they will have to meet these three standards, and in doing so will also meet the criteria that are combined in the Categorical Imperative, so will constitute guidelines for moral as well as for reasoned interpretation.

The first two standards are readily apparent in Kant's account of the sorts of interpretation that would be appropriate for the philosophical theologian. The philosophical theologian lacks any

⁷ In *The Conflict of the Faculties* Kant also identifies reason as "the highest interpreter of Scripture" (*CF*41).

substantive standards of interpretation and may not invoke any authority other than that of reason to guide interpretation. Scriptural exegesis “within the limits of reason” may not appeal to revelation, state or ecclesiastical authority, or historical scholarship, let alone authorial intentions (cf. *R* 39n; cf. 101ff.), on which traditions of biblical theology may build.⁸ Equally, scriptural exegesis within the limits of reason does not appeal to the no less suspect “authority” of individual religious experience, conscience, or feeling — a mode of interpretation that Kant thinks leads to enthusiasm or fanaticism (*R* 104–5; cf. *WOT* 246ff.).

However, none of this explains why religion within the limits of reason should refer to Scripture, except for polemical purposes, let alone why it should seek interpretations that rehabilitate rather than repudiate. Does not the activity of interpreting particular texts suggest some covert, if very indeterminate, assumption that they have some authority? If so, should not their interpretation be firmly excluded from religion within the limits of reason?

5. *Reasoned Interpretation and Popular Religion*

Kant’s central comments on interpretation deal mainly with issues of authority and do not show why religion within the limits of reason should engage with Scripture. At most they show that *if* (for some still obscure reason) reasoned religion did interpret Scripture, it would do so without assuming substantive starting points and in particular without taking any other authority for granted. However, the third aspect of Kant’s account of reason — that it is lawlike — can, I believe, explain why Kant thinks that an engagement with accepted traditions and texts is an indispensable part of reasoned religion.

⁸ Kant acknowledges that as things are the *philosophical theologians*, who interpret Scripture by reference to the principles of morality and hence of reason, are far outnumbered by *scriptural scholars* or *biblical theologians*, who are usually expositors of one or another historically specific ecclesiastical faith, and who rely on the authoritative tenets of a particular church or tradition to guide their *doctrinal* interpretation (*R* 103–5; *CF* 23–24; 36ff., 61ff.).

Kant puts his reason for thinking that the philosophical theologian needs to engage with Scripture as follows:

the authority of Scripture . . . as . . . *at present* the only instrument *in the most enlightened portion of the world* for the union of all men into one church, constitutes the ecclesiastical faith, which, as the popular faith, cannot be neglected, because no doctrine based on reason alone seems to the people qualified to serve as an unchangeable norm. (R 103; my italics)

These reasons for interpreting Christian Scripture refer to a time and a place: they are reasons for eighteenth-century Europe. Somehow, at some juncture, the philosophical theologian has to reason in ways that engage with actual religious conceptions as they are held and cherished by the people. Otherwise an “appeal to pure reason as the expositor” could have nothing to say to the many millions who held to the time-honoured religion that sustained old Lampe and countless others, or to adherents of the other religions.

Kant accepts that such reasoning must take account of its audience:

It is also possible that the union of men into one religion cannot feasibly be brought about or made abiding without a holy book and an ecclesiastical faith based on it. (R 123)

Reasoned religion must be lawlike, not just in the sense that it can be followed by any rational being, but also in taking account of the fact that rational beings, as things are, are adherents of particular religious traditions. So reasoned religion too must engage with the sacred texts and traditions of popular religion; it must start on familiar ground and show how the familiar sayings of Scripture can be interpreted without appeal to groundless authorities: otherwise it will be accessible only to a few philosophical theologians.

It follows that the philosophical theologian *must* interpret whichever sacred texts are actually widely understood and re-

spected. Without this move, religious teaching cannot fully meet the requirements of reason. Surprising as it may seem, religion within the limits of reason not merely *may* but *must* interpret accepted texts, and their ordinary reception. Only this focus and strategy of interpretation can secure a conception of religion that is guided by principles that are negative (formal), underivative, and also lawlike, so support religion within the limits of reason.

Lawlikeness is, however, a slender constraint. Kant is not appealing to any conception of *lawfulness*, which would invoke some further, separate authority to guide the interpretation of Scripture. That is the unreasoned strategy of biblical theologians, whose problem is that the separate authority to which they appeal stands in need of but does not receive justification. So it is to be expected that the interpretations that the philosophical theologian reaches, although they lie within the limits of reason, may not be unique or even highly determinate reasoned interpretations. Reason will not fully fix the reading of Scripture, any more than it fully fixes the content of permissible hope.

6. *Reasoned Interpretation and Polymorphous Hope*

This account of Kant's conception of reasoned interpretation is corroborated by the fact that he repeatedly states simply that we *may* or that we *can* read a passage of Scripture in a certain way, rather than that we *must* do so. For example, in speaking of the incarnation he writes:

. . . just because we are not the authors of this idea [of moral perfection], and because it has established itself in man without our comprehending how human nature could have been capable of receiving it, it is more appropriate to say [*kann* man hier besser sagen] that this archetype has *come down* to us from heaven and has assumed our humanity. . . . Such union with us *may* therefore be regarded [*kann* . . . angesehen werden] as a state of *humiliation* of the Son of God. (R 54–55; my italicization of modal terms)

In speaking of the temptation of Christ he writes:

So it is not surprising [literally: it *may not* be taken amiss: “es *darf* also *nicht* befremden”] that an Apostle represents this *invisible* enemy, who is known only through his operations upon us and who destroys basic principles, as being outside us and, indeed, as an evil *spirit*. (R 52; my italicization of modal terms)

And in speaking of the end of the world he writes:

The appearance of the Antichrist, the millennium, and the news of the proximity of the end of the world — all these *can* take on, before reason, their right [gute] symbolic meaning. (R 126; my italicization of modal terms)

The reason Kant takes this tentative approach should now be clear. He himself puts it this way:

Nor can we charge such interpretations with dishonesty, provided we are not disposed to assert that the meaning which we ascribe to the symbols of the popular faith, even to the holy books, is exactly as intended by them, but rather allow this question to be left undecided and merely admit the *possibility* that their authors may be so understood. (R 102)

When Kant speaks of his approach to religion as lying *within the limits of reason* he does not mean that he identifies a unique set to reasoned beliefs or hopes, but only that he identifies a range of beliefs or hopes whose structure places them within the limits of reason. The sense in which reason is “not only . . . compatible with Scripture but also at one with it” (R 11) is therefore weaker than it may initially have seemed: reasoned faith and hope are polymorphous.

7. *Hope without Doctrine*

If Kant’s minimalist account of reason and of reasoned interpretation allows for a plurality of interpretations of the Scrip-

tures on which popular faith rests, it is not surprising that he thinks that his account of faith and of hope will be undogmatic and undoctinal, even when it engages with the texts and tenets of received religion. Reasoned religion is, after all, to answer the third question that interests human reason, the question of human destiny, which asks not “What must I hope?” but more openly “What may I hope?” In asking this question Kant leaves open not only various ways in which identifiably religious hopes for human destiny may be articulated, but also the possibility that hopes for human destiny may be articulated in social, political, and historical, this-worldly terms rather than in other-worldly terms.

The pure religious faith for which philosophical theology is to provide reasons lies *within the limits* of reason, but it is not the only articulation of hope that lies within those limits. Every articulation of hope and belief that lies within the limit of reason must incorporate the *canon* of reasoned faith, that is to say, an answer to the question “What *must* we hope?” Each ecclesiastical faith also proposes one *organon* of religious faith, that is to say, a specific answer to the question “What may I hope?” Another ecclesiastical faith might use quite another vocabulary to support a different account of what we may hope.⁹

In *Religion within the Limits of Reason Alone*, as one might expect, the accent is on religious articulations of the hopes we may have. And yet even here, in a work that constantly comments on Christian Scripture and that refers repeatedly to Christian and more broadly to religious articulations of hope, the traditional, other-worldly formulations of Christian hope are constantly put in question.

The first and evidently the most basic way in which Christian hope is put into question is by the shift of religious concern from the first to the third question of human reason, from a question

⁹ See Friedo Ricken, “Kanon und Organon im Streit der Fakultäten,” in *Kant über Religion*, ed. Francois Marty and Friedo Ricken (Stuttgart: Kohlhammer Verlag, 1992), 181–94.

about knowledge to a question about hope. Although Kant views the language of Scripture as an appropriate articulation of the hopes we may have, nothing that he claims restores a realist interpretation of God or immortality. Hope is not backed by knowledge. Human destiny remains a matter not of knowledge but of hope.

The second way in which Christian hope, as traditionally understood, is put into question in *Religion within the Limits of Reason Alone* is by the fact that the essential core of Kant's answer to the question "What may I hope?" establishes so little about what I must hope. All that Kant argues is that we must postulate, assume, hope for the possibility that our moral commitments are not futile: we must hope for the possibility of inserting the moral intention into the world. This bare structure of hope —the canon of hope —can be expressed in a range of vocabularies whose permissible articulations of hope will be accessible to different people, who may hope for varying conceptions of grace or of progress that might bridge and gap between moral intention and empirical outcomes.¹⁰ Religious articulations of hope are not to be rejected, but other forms of hope are also permissible. We may hope for grace, for progress, or for both, and for each in many forms.

8. *Ecclesiastical Faith and the Ethical Commonwealth*

Behind these varied hopes lies a common commitment to action, which does not vary. Both in his accounts of religious hope and in his accounts of historical hope, Kant depicts the action to which we are committed as social as well as individual, and as this-worldly.¹¹ In *Religion within the Limits of Reason Alone* he puts

¹⁰ Consider Kant's central claims about service to God at the beginning of book 4 of the *Religion*. He starts from the thought that "religion is the recognition of all duties as divine commands," which on the surface appears to require that God exists. But in the note to the text he immediately rebuts this reading by claiming that "no assertorial knowledge is required (even of God's existence)" and that "the *minimum* of knowledge (it is possible that there may be a God) must suffice" (R 142).

¹¹ Kant does not think that we have any special duties to God (R 142n). However, viewing our duties as divine commands takes us beyond individual duty.

it in the following terms at the beginning of his account of the victory of good over evil:

As far as we can see, therefore, the sovereignty of the good principle is attainable, so far as men can work towards it, only through the establishment and spread of a society in accordance with, and for the sake of, the laws of virtue, a society whose task and duty it is to rationally impress these laws in all their scope upon the entire human race. For only thus can we hope for a victory of the good over the evil principle. (R 86 and cf. the following pages)

The fully achieved version of such a society would be what Kant terms an *ethical commonwealth* (“ethisches gemeines Wesen”). An ethical commonwealth is a “union of men under merely moral [as opposed to juridical] laws”; it can exist in the midst of a political commonwealth; it may even include all the members of a political commonwealth (R 86). However, in human hands this ethical ideal “dwindles markedly” (R 91), although it can be approximated, more or less well, by the visible church (R 91ff.).

Both in *Religion within the Limits of Reason Alone* and in *Conflict of the Faculties* Kant depicts the visible church as a *vehicle*, which will finally be superseded as a purer, more fully reasoned faith supplants mere ecclesiastical faith:

In the end all religion will gradually be freed from all empirical determining grounds and from all statutes which rest on history and which through the agency of ecclesiastical faith provisionally unite all men for the requirements of the good; and thus at last the pure religion of reason will rule over all, “so that God may be all in all.” . . . The leading-string of holy traditions with its appendages of statutes and observances,

One important passage is the following: “Now here we have a duty which is *sui generis*, not of men toward men, but of the human race towards itself. For the species of rational beings is objectively, in the idea of reason, destined for a social goal, namely, the promotion of the highest as a social good. . . . the highest moral good cannot be achieved merely by the exertions of a single individual towards his own moral perfection but requires rather the union of such individuals into a whole towards such a goal — into a system of well-disposed men” (R 89).

which in its time did good service, becomes bit by bit dispensable, yea, finally when man enters upon his adolescence it becomes a fetter. (*R* 112)¹²

If all of the outward and visible elements of church life and liturgy could be shed, we would be left with the abstract demands of purely moral religion. What we are left with is not however a mere hope, for whose realization we must wait, whether patiently or impatiently. We are also left with the moral commitment that underlies hope. This commitment sets a task that we may not sit back and leave either to Providence or to others:

. . . man [must] proceed as though everything depended on him; only on this condition dare he hope that higher wisdom will grant the completion of his well-intentioned endeavours. (*R* 92; cf. 149ff.)

The only thing that matters in religion is deeds [Alles kommt in der Religion aufs Tun an]. (*CF* 41)

The context of action may but need not be framed by the life of a church. Kant's account of reasoned religion allows at least a *transitional* role to ecclesiastical faith and to the visible church, but it is not clear whether it allows more. Can the empirical realities and institutional structures of a church (or of another social but secular "vehicle") be wholly superseded? If so, what is to bind the members of the ethical commonwealth together? If there are shared duties "of the human race," will their enactment not require shared public practices and institutions? If so, will not our hopes, including our shared hopes, have to be connected to shared

¹² Compare this account to the secular, political, and historical account of the maturing of reason that Kant offers in *What Is Enlightenment?* where he describes the gradual emergence of human beings from immaturity to rationality, from a private, other-directed use of their incomplete capacities to reason to a public, autonomous use of their more developed capacities to reason. For a fuller discussion see Onora O'Neill, "Reason and Politics in the Kantian Enterprise," in *Constructions of Reason: Explorations of Kant's Practical Philosophy* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1989), 3–27.

activities and institutional structures, whether religious or this-worldly? Even if we hope for God and immortality it does not follow that a time will come at which joint action in this life can dispense with all specific institutions and practices: the religious may always need to take the structures of a visible church seriously on this earth.¹³

. . . by reason of a peculiar weakness in human nature, pure faith can never be relied on as much as it deserves, that is a church cannot be established on it alone. (*R* 94)

Equally, if the future for which we may hope is conceived of in this-worldly terms, it seems clear that we could not dispense with all social structures in building toward an ethical commonwealth. The history of would-be purely intentional communities is discouraging, despite the fact that they have in fact built on many shared social structures. It seems that the only point at which joint action without shared structures might be possible is in the afterlife —of which we know nothing.

So a third way in which at least some forms of Christian hope are put into question is by the fact that, in the end, in this world, religious and social and political hopes must be closely connected. All types of hope are expressed in action, indeed in collective action, that aims toward an ethical commonwealth; all are a matter of taking it that the moral intention can be expressed in the world. However, different genres of hope answer the question “What

¹³ Kant himself seems to hesitate on the dispensability of institutional structures in this life. In some passages both in *Religion within the Limits of Reason Alone* and in *The Conflict of the Faculties* he relegates all institutional forms to the status of a *vehicle* by which a transition from ecclesiastical faith to pure religious faith, shorn of observances and liturgy, of tradition and history, can be achieved (cf. *R* 106). At other times he suggests that the vehicle is indispensable, at least in this life (cf. *R* 126n). See Hans Michael Baumgartner, “Das ‘Ethische gemeine Wesen’ und die Kirche in Kant’s ‘Religionsschrift,’” in *Kant über Religion*, ed. Francois Marty and Friedo Ricken, 156–67, and Allen Wood, “Rational Theology, Moral Faith, and Religion,” in *The Cambridge Companion to Kant*, ed. Paul Guyer (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1992), 394–416, for thoughtful discussion of this problem.

may I hope?” using different vocabularies and images, which can be woven into differing this-worldly practices and institutions. The religion of reason, on Kant’s account, shows us that many religious and historical articulations of hope are permissible, that some articulations are congruent and compatible with others, but does not show that one type of hope is required to the exclusion of all others.

The censors of Prussia are long dead, but they were, I think, right to be worried. Although the surface of *Religion within the Limits of Reason Alone* presents a view of reasoned religion that seemingly takes Christian faith and Scriptures seriously, Kant’s philosophical theology does not endorse religion in any straightforward way. Slightly below the surface of the work is a view of reason and of reasoned interpretation that assigns no unique status to religious hopes, to Christian hope, to Christian Scriptures, to the Christian church, or to all that old Lampe held sacred. The only moves Kant makes toward the specificities of the faith that Lampe knew and loved are that he gives general reasons for taking existing popular religion seriously in reading texts and existing ecclesiastical faith seriously in moving toward an ethical commonwealth. The outcome allows that traditional faith and hopes *may* be retained, but Kant’s own hope is that both popular and ecclesiastical faith will be interim measures, and serve as vehicles to a purer faith and more abstract hopes that need no institutions and lack all specificity. The guardians of established religion could hardly be expected to endorse — even if they did not need to censor — a vision of religion that demotes the particular inflection of faith and hope that was in their care to the status of one among many permissible variants.