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Chapter 7

Kant's Apophaticism of Finitude: A Grammar of Hope for Speaking Humanly of God

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Kant rarely frames his discussions of God, faith, and religion in terms that explicitly focus on questions about the structure, use and limits of religious language, matters that have come to be of major concern to later philosophers of religion. His relative neglect of questions of religious language is hardly surprising, however, when placed in relation, first, to the leading question that provides impetus to the one major treatise on religion, *Religion Within the Boundaries of Mere Reason*, that he published as part of his critical philosophy, and second, to the surrounding intellectual contexts within which he produced the range of texts that taken together constitute his philosophical account of religion. Yet even though these factors limit the explicit attention he pays to language as it functions in religious belief and practice, his discussions nonetheless point to the possibility

of articulating distinctively Kantian modes of engaging questions about the forms and uses of religious language.

This essay will explore one of these modes: it is one that, I shall argue, brings to bear on questions of religious language a fundamental concern that shapes Kant's larger account of religion within his critical project. This concern is to locate the function of religion, understood in terms of humanity's moral construal of its relation to God, within the distinctive vocation to which Kant sees humanity called in view of its unique status as the juncture of nature and freedom: to recognize, to respect, and to live in accord with the limits and the ends of the finite reason with which it engages the cosmos. As Kant articulates this vocation, it is one that humanity can fulfill only within the concrete workings of culture, society, and history by efforts to bring about the social conditions that make attainment of "the highest good" possible; chief among the conditions for attaining such good is a world order that makes possible an enduring peace among nations. In consequence, I will propose that, within the context of Kant's understanding of humanity's moral vocation, an account of the language humans use to speak of God and their relation to God requires articulating the bearing of that language upon the task of securing lasting peace that Kant sees morally incumbent upon all humanity.

Hope: Making Human Space for Speaking of God

Kant does not frame the main question at issue in *Religion*, "What is then the result of this right conduct of ours?" as one that arises directly out of human religious belief and practice.¹ He sees it rising, instead, from the exigencies of the exercise of human moral reason as its scope and function had been critically elucidated in the *Critique of Pure Reason* and the *Critique of Practical Reason*.² To the extent that Kant's main concern in *Religion* focuses upon the conditions—both personal and social—that sustain a lifetime of conscientious human moral conduct and bring it to its due conclusion, his text often shows far more interest in delimiting what we may properly say about the structural features of the moral deliberation that guides human action than with what humans may properly say

about God. Yet it is not only this internal conceptual structure of *Religion* that deflects his attention from questions of language. At the time Kant wrote this work, not only was philosophy of religion in a nascent state as a distinct field of inquiry, but language had yet to be fully thematized as a central focus preoccupying philosophical investigation. As a result, Kant's treatise on religion does not so much yield a fullfledged philosophy of religion nor does it provide a clearly developed account of religious language, as much as it offers a moral anthropology from which to situate a range of human moral conduct and religious phenomena within which the languages of religious belief and practice function.

Even though questions of language do not stand front and center in Kant's account of the relation in which humanity stands to that which it deems divine, important consequences for understanding the function and scope of the language humans use to articulate and respond to that relation nonetheless follow from his account. So as a first step in identifying and exploring those consequences, it will be useful to show how, even though these aspects of Kant's context limit the attention he explicitly pays to language in his discussion of religion, his account nonetheless opens an important conceptual space from which to pose questions about human efforts to speak, respectively, of God, of humanity's relation to God, and of the place of that relation in human moral endeavor. The space that his account opens is, as I will indicate below, delimited in terms of the hope that is central to the moral anthropology governing Kant's critical philosophy, namely, the hope that such moral conduct will be effective for securing humanity's "highest good." Once this space of hope has been marked out as the locus from which it is proper for humans to speak of God and of humanity's relation to God, we can then turn, in the following section, to the task of identifying within that space those elements of Kant's account that, two centuries later, continue to have import for philosophical inquiries into the scope, shape, and function of religious language.

In seeking to gain this purchase upon questions of religious language within the larger ambit of Kant's treatment of religion, it is important to recognize that Kant did not construct his treatments of God, faith, and religion as a "philosophy of religion" as that term now

applies to a particular field of philosophical study. It is certainly the case that Kant's pre-critical and critical discussions of the concept of God, as well as his articulation of "moral faith" as a distinctive element in his critical writings, had a formative role in what James Collins has called "the emergence of philosophy of religion."³ Yet Kant dealt with them not as if they were elements constituting "religion" as a clearly focused object for philosophical inquiry but rather as matters embedded within his larger critical restructuring of philosophical inquiry, a project that did not result in—and perhaps even helped to preclude—his taking explicit thematic focus on language as a central component for his analyses of human activities, including those that function religiously. While throughout the course of his philosophical career he engaged many major issues now linked together as elements of philosophy of religion, his principal interest in these topics originally had a robust metaphysical focus typical of mid-eighteenth-century school philosophy in Germany. His main concern in exploring questions about human efforts to render the divine intelligible was to articulate the theoretical status and function of the concept of God within a systematically ordered set of basic philosophical principles that account for the order and structure of the world.

Yet as his thinking moves along the trajectory leading to the critical turn, the function of his discussions of God, faith, and religion undergoes a transformation that reorients them with respect to these original metaphysical concerns. He now also places them within a purview in which the central focus is anthropological—on articulating what is constitutive of humanity as the unique juncture of nature and freedom—and for which a crucial question is anticipatory—what hopes can such a uniquely constituted humanity legitimately set before itself in view of the limits it must critically place on the uses of the finite reason with which it engages nature and freedom?⁴ This anthropological focus and its anticipatory question may thus be taken as key coordinates that delimit the space that Kant's account opens for raising questions bearing upon language—even ones that he does not explicitly articulate—particularly as each coordinate functions to mark out the space of finitude for the uniquely constituted human task to serve as the juncture of nature and freedom. Once within that space, moreover, Kant's discussions of God, faith, and religion move in a direction along which questions about language, framed as what may

most appropriately be said—or what is better left unsaid—about God (as well as about how the human stands in relation to God) provide crucial, though sometimes only peripherally discerned, markers for properly delimiting the shape of the human and the horizon of its hope. In moving along this direction, Kant's discussions open up possibilities for construing religious language as a grammar of hope within the space of human finitude, possibilities that will be explored in more detail in the next section.

Even as Kant's work gave impetus to the development of philosophy of religion as a distinctive field of philosophical inquiry, a concern with language as a defining locus for philosophical inquiry that would later bring about a full-fledged "linguistic turn" had started to take shape in the work of some of Kant's contemporaries, most notably Herder.⁵ While this concern did not push language to the forefront of Kant's program of inquiry, questions of language—framed in terms of some traditional metaphysical issues about God—still bubble up through the inchoate eddying of philosophy of religion within his critical project. He displays attention to language in dealing with certain dimensions of the concept of God, most notably regarding the terms or attributes that may or may not properly be predicated of God metaphysically understood as *ens realissimum*. Such focus upon what may be said (and not said) about God has a long philosophical and theological pedigree, but even engagement with that element of the tradition does not result in his paying sustained attention—as some within that tradition had occasionally done—to ways in which these questions bring to light a complex interplay between metaphysics and grammar.⁶ On the evidence of the lecture notes from his teaching, Kant's treatment of the conceptual lineaments of many of the specific attributes that had been standard loci in discussion for "rational theology" (or a "natural theology"), construed as that branch of metaphysics concerned with the infinite being of God, is often not notably different from that proposed in the rationalist and scholastic traditions represented in the textbook by Baumgarten that he regularly used.⁷

The key differences from this prior tradition that arise in Kant's discussions thus do not principally bear upon matters of conceptual detail regarding what may properly be said or not said of God in

consequence of thinking God metaphysically—as Kant thinks human reason will unavoidably do—in terms of concepts such as *ens realissimum*. The interpretive attention that has long been paid to Kant's criticisms of what had become the standard arguments advanced as proofs of the existence of a metaphysically conceived God has tended to overshadow the fact that there are other dimensions of human efforts to "think God" that Kant considers important for his critical project even though, by his account, all speculative efforts to prove the existence of God falter. The importance of these other dimensions, in fact, becomes all the greater for Kant's purposes in light of the failure of the speculative proofs. Kant takes it to be the case—and of significance—that even after the exercise of human reason is kept within the critical limits ruling out the legitimacy of efforts to construct a theoretical proof of the existence of God, reason still will not be dissuaded from thinking God in metaphysical terms. So rather than trying to prevent us from thinking in a way so embedded in the inner dynamic of reason's drive to comprehensive intelligibility that he calls it a "natural disposition,"⁸ Kant's strategy for keeping such thinking within the limits of finite reason is to reorient it toward the practical (moral) end he considers primary for the uses of human reason. This reorientation is most famously signaled in the claim he puts forth in the "Preface" to the second edition of the *Critique of Pure Reason*, "Thus I had to deny knowledge in order to make room for faith."⁹ As a result, he provides a moral reading of the function and import of human efforts to "think" God, particularly in terms of what he calls, in the *Critique of Pure Reason*, the "transcendental Ideal." Kant's moral reading of these human efforts to "think God" will thus be particularly pertinent to developing an account of religious language keyed to the anthropological concerns central to shaping his critical project.

Kant's proposal to reorient human efforts to "think" God" along a moral trajectory also adhere, at least implicitly, to a principle long operative in theological discourse that, in whatever we may try to say of God, the apophatic has priority over the kataphatic, that is, in human efforts to speak of God, we speak more truly of what God is *not*, than we do of what God is. In Kant's case this principle functions in the care he uses, in his lectures as well as in his critical texts, to distinguish what can legitimately be said with respect to the *concept* of

God from what may be affirmed *of* God. With regard to the latter, Kant clearly stands on the side of the apophaticism of a negative theology that severely constrains what we may say of God. The Kantian constraints are severe: we may not even say—as a claim adduced from theoretical considerations—“God exists,” and, as a claim adduced on moral grounds, neither may we say “*It is* morally certain that there is a God,” though we may, on those moral grounds, say “*I am* morally certain that there is a God.”¹⁰ With regard to the former—what may legitimately be said of the concept of God—the constraints are also stringent, but unlike those placed on a theoretically proposed claim about God, need not render us speechless: we may properly say of the concept of God those things that render it suitable for regulative use by human reason with respect to the proper end set before humanity as the unique juncture of freedom and nature. While this may not at first seem like much, the task that Kant sees set before humanity as its proper concrete end—the attainment of an order of enduring peace for the worldwide human community—will provide ample space for speaking in accord with the grammar of hope that he takes to be the proper form in which humans may speak truly of God.

What then marks out Kant's views as distinctive with respect to the tradition he inherited, engaged, and helped to alter profoundly is the practical (moral) significance he attributed to reason's authorization of speech—or of silence—in human discourse about God and about humanity's relation to God. The prime import of such an authorization that issues from a critically chastened reason aware of its limits has less to do with any positive knowledge of God that it might yield, and far more to do with the power such authorization has for orienting us rightly towards the articulation and the attainment of the hope that is proper to our unique human status as the finite juncture of nature and freedom. In keeping with Kant's affirmation of the primacy of the practical use of reason, what we do morally by virtue of our speech and our silence about God provides the most fundamental marker of the propriety, meaning, and truth of such speech and such silence. This practical test, moreover, applies to more than just what we do as individual agents. Since Kant construes the social arena of human culture, politics, and history as the concrete locus within which the attainment of this hope moves forward, the manner in which we articulate our mutual human capacity and

responsibility for enacting such hope together within our human social space will also serve as a crucial marker for our speaking properly of God and of the human relation to God. In consequence, the grammar of hope in accord with which we may speak properly of God that is implicit in Kant's account of religion may be appropriately construed as a grammar of social hope.

Finite Reason: Hope as Apophatic Grammar of God

The discussion in the preceding section suggests at least three coordinates from which the account of the function and the scope of human finite reason that issues from Kant's critical philosophy may be brought to bear on questions about the structure, use, and limits of religious language. The first is a theoretical apophaticism regarding what may be said "of God" that is framed in recognition of the limits that the finitude of human reason places upon the dynamic of intelligibility that drives efforts to articulate a concept of God. The second is an anthropology of finite reason that differentiates as theoretical and practical the uses of reason by which humanity engages the world in which it finds itself placed and that assigns primacy to reason's practical (moral) use in this human engagement with the world. To the extent that Kant understands the practical use of reason to be the exercise of human freedom, his anthropology of finite reason is even more so an anthropology of human finite freedom. The third is the social hope that human reason frames as the focus for its moral engagement with the world, a hope that opens space for mutual discourse among us about the shape of our social interaction. These coordinates each play a role in delimiting the movement of the critical project along an anthropological trajectory focused upon the end that Kant sees forming the scope of the distinctive vocation to which humanity is called in consequence of its possession and exercise of finite reason: this end is to bring about, through exercise of that reason, the juncture of nature and freedom. On Kant's account, human finite reason brings to nature—that is, to the world as it "is"—the demand that it be shaped to accord with freedom—that is, that it be re-formed into the world as it "ought to be."¹¹ In consequence, shaping human action so that it makes it possible for nature to accord with freedom—that is, so that it closes

the gap between “ought” and “is”—constitutes the fundamental human moral task.

Questions about the structure, use, and limits of religious language may thus be articulated along this anthropological trajectory of the critical project by locating them with respect to these coordinates as they each bear upon the distinctively human moral vocation to serve as the junction of nature and freedom. The first coordinate, which enjoins reticence in what we attempt to say of God, is of particular importance for delimiting the space of *all* our questioning—be it about what we say of the human and the anthropological or about what we say about the divine and the religious—as a space of *human* questioning. It is only in the light of the reticence enjoined by the first coordinate that it becomes possible to exercise the requisite intellectual humility needed to take accurate sight on the second coordinate. Kant constructs his anthropology of human finite reason with full attention to the fact that one fundamental truth we may utter about ourselves is also a negative one, one that first of all affirms what we are not: we must be ready always to acknowledge that we are not, nor ever will be, God. The third coordinate then reminds us that, on Kant's account, the human space of our discourse and action is one for which we have the abiding responsibility to make into a social space, a space in which reason functions to hold before us, as the most fitting end for the shared finitude of our humanity, peace among ourselves as a possibility that is in our power to realize. Humanity's moral vocation, as Kant understands it, is one it can fulfill only within the concrete workings of culture, society, and history; it will do so by efforts to bring about the social conditions that make attainment of “the highest good” possible. As we will see at the end of this discussion, it is not without significance for an account of religious language that the most urgent of these social conditions that Kant sees as incumbent for humanity to work for is the establishment of an international order that would make possible a condition of enduring peace among the peoples of the world. It suggests that for Kant the possibility for speaking of God in a manner appropriate to our humanity is a function of envisioning ourselves as coworkers for enacting peace. How and why this is so will emerge from a more detailed discussion of each of these coordinates

and their relation to this fundamental concrete moral task that Kant sees set before human reason.

Kant's theoretical apophaticism is marked by his insistence that, however natural it may be for us to articulate a concept of God to satisfy the efforts of the theoretical use of our reason to attain unconditioned and comprehensive intelligibility, there is nothing affirmative that we may say truly about God on the basis of that concept alone.¹² Even though whatever those efforts yield as *true with respect to the inner logic of the concept of God* as the "faultless ideal"¹³ of reason—for example, that God must be conceived as *ens originarium, ens summum, ens entium*¹⁴—may also very well be true of God, our affirmation of any of them as *true of God* still cannot be authorized in terms of the theoretical intelligibility proper to our finite reason. It cannot be authorized inasmuch as it is only within the spatiotemporal forms of sensible intuition that such theoretical intelligibility yields that what we may speak of as true. Such authorization may not be given in the case of the concept of God, however, inasmuch as the inner logic of that concept requires that whatever it may name or refers to *not* stand under conditions of sensible intuition: any speaking of God is a speaking of that for which sensible intuition may *not* function as frame for its intelligibility—a circumstance that leaves the theoretical use of our own human reason without proper purchase for affirming that concept as "true" of some "thing" (i.e., an item of the kind Kant calls "phenomenon") or of "something" (i.e., that in-principle-unknowable "x" Kant calls "noumenon").¹⁵ Such apophaticism, however, does not render us totally speechless, for it does allow us to utter at least one truth, even though it is a truth about what God is not: God may neither be conceived of nor affirmed as being "of" the spatiotemporal world.¹⁶ The grammar of God is not a grammar of a "thing" that is "of" or "in" the world.

The second coordinate may be termed Kant's anthropology of finite reason. He sees the human place in the cosmos delimited in terms of the task set before finite reason to effect the juncture of nature and freedom, the two mutually irreducible fields—of what is and of what ought to be—that present themselves to us for the engagement of our finite reason. This task, moreover, is one that is

consequent upon the profound defining difference that separates us as human from the divine. On this point, Kant's anthropology of finite reason and his theoretical apophaticism fully converge: effecting such a juncture is a task enjoined upon humanity inasmuch as we are not God, for whom there can be no bifurcation between "freedom" and "nature." Our human place—and our human task from that place—is delimited precisely to the extent that we recognize that *we are not* God and the consequences that recognition has for how we take up our moral task as humanity. As Susan Neiman observes:

Of the many distinctions Kant took wisdom and sanity to depend upon drawing, none was deeper than the difference between God and all the rest of us. Kant reminds us as often as possible of all that God can do and we cannot. Nobody in the history of philosophy was more aware of the number of ways we can forget it. He was equally conscious of the temptation to idolatry, the alternative route to confusing God with other beings. Kant's relentless determination to trace ways we forget our finitude was matched only by his awareness that such forgetting is natural.¹⁷

One consequence of delimiting our humanity so that we appropriately attend to this all-important difference is that it mutually implicates how we speak of God with how we speak of ourselves as human. The principle of apophaticism, which restrains what we may say that God is in view of attending first to what we must say that God is not, may very well also apply to what we say of ourselves in making claims about our humanity. The affirmation that we are not God, that we are not divine, carries with it the consequence that even those few claims that theoretical apophaticism licenses as proper to us to say of the concept of God in terms of "transcendental predicates"¹⁸ may even more surely *not* be said of humanity, be it collectively or individually. We may not structure what we say of ourselves as human in accord with a grammar of the divine—which would be a grammar of idolatry—even as our "forgetting" of the difference between the human and the divine impels us to encompass the divine within a grammar of the human—which would be a grammar of anthropomorphism and ontotheology. Apophaticism serves as finite reason's mode of discipline upon anthropomorphism in speaking of the divine and idolatry in naming the non-divine as divine, both deeply rooted human impulses that blur the difference between the human and the divine.

Kant's anthropology of finite reason thus marks off the difference and the distance between the human and the divine with respect to the concepts and the theoretical claims located within the ambit of a "transcendental theology" aspiring to speak of God in metaphysical terms. Along this anthropological trajectory of the critical project, moreover, there also lies a moral difference between the human and the divine that has significant bearing upon the scope of proper speech and proper silence regarding God, humanity, and the relation between them that forms the space of religion. In positive terms, this difference is signaled by the distinction Kant makes between God's "holy" will, before which there is no gap between what is and what ought to be, and our human wills, which we each must strive to form as a "good" will by efforts to shape the world as it is into the world as it ought to be. In negative terms, this difference is signaled by the presence of the "radical evil" that confronts human moral efforts, both individual and social, to bridge the difference between what is and what ought to be. Radical evil, articulated in Kant's technical terminology as a reversal in the order of one's (supreme) maxim for governing conduct, can be characterized as the moral obduracy of self-preference, a systemic program of self-exception from the demand moral reason places on all by virtue of their shared humanity.¹⁹ Over against such radical evil stands the social hope that marks the third coordinate from which we may mark out the shape of the language with which we may speak of God and of the human relation to God in a manner proper to the limits of our finite reason.

The difference and distance between the human and the divine that radical evil marks off is not identical with that marked off by the conceptual and metaphysical dimensions of the finitude that human reason encounters at the limit of its theoretical use. That we are not infinite, eternal, or omnipresent—none of these differences that mark humanity as not divinity—does not constitute the radical evil in which Kant takes humanity to stand; neither our "metaphysical distance" from the divine, nor our contingency count as radical evil. For Kant, finitude is not evil. Even so, radical evil issues, on Kant's account, from our finitude and stands as the most potent marker of the profound divide we encounter between nature and freedom in the uses of our

finite reason. In face of this divide, human finite reason is put in question in ways that test the horizon of its hope that its exercise will not thereby come to naught: does our finite reason provide us with a capacity to overcome this divide so vividly marked by radical evil and, if so, how are we to exercise that capacity in order to accomplish this successfully? Both questions, as we shall see below, have an important bearing for articulating a grammar of social hope that provides structure for what we may say of God and of our human relation to God.

Articulating and engaging Kant's answer to these questions is complicated by the conflicting ways he seems to deal with the important prior question of whether it is inevitable that the divide that our reason encounters between nature and freedom gives rise to the distinctively moral fissure of "radical evil." This question may be framed in terms that bear upon the "grammar of hope" that Kant's account constructs in response to the "grammar of radical evil": does Kant's account of finite reason *require* that we say evil is necessary so that good may result? Conversely, to what extent does the hope that his account presents as authorized by the practical use of human finite reason provide a basis for saying evil is unnecessary?

On one side, his discussion in "A Conjectural Beginning of Human History" (1786) recasts the Genesis account of the first human sin into a narrative of the awakening and maturing of human reason over against nature and of reason's overcoming of the tutelage of natural instinct in order to make its own autonomous way through the world.²⁰ In that account Kant seems to affirm that evil—or at least the human struggle with evil—functions as an engine of the development of human culture.²¹ There seems to be at least a historical and cultural inevitability to evil. In contrast, in part 3 of *Religion* (1793), evil enters the world in consequence of human engagement in a dynamics of emulation occasioned by social relations: it is a corruption of our finitude that we freely self-incur.²² In this later account Kant seems more hesitant to affirm evil as an inevitable outcome of the workings of finite human reason, as a necessary condition for a human moral progress conceived as an overcoming of nature. *Religion* affirms that, on the contrary, this self-incurred corruption is not an unavoidable conflict between nature and freedom as they intersect in the human. It

is, rather, an inner disordering within human reason that, even though occasioned by the circumstances of our human placement within nature, still has its fundamental root in and arises from an exercise of human finite reason that reorients an agent's freedom toward the obduracy of self-preference.

On Kant's account, the radical evil that disorients and corrupts the human freedom that is governed by the practical use of human finite reason can be appropriately countered only by a reorientation brought about by the same finite reason that incurred the corruption. Yet the corruption finite reason has incurred places it so firmly in the grip of the obduracy of self-preference that it licenses us to speak of evil as a "natural propensity" so "woven" into human nature that it seems "inextirpable."²³ Within this condition of self-incurred corruption, breaking the grip of radical evil turns upon the possibility of reorienting human finite reason. For Kant such reorientation must be reason's own doing, not an outcome brought about by an external agency: what freedom brought upon itself may only be undone in freedom. Envisioning the possibilities for exercising our finite reason as the agency that frees us from the grip of our obdurate self-preference thus constitutes the first horizon for human moral hope. Such hope thereby provides a "moral grammar" with which to articulate the possibility for reorientation from evil back to good. What it enables us to say is that radical evil is neither necessary nor inextirpable, even after it has been self-incurred. This provides the space of possibility within which we can then envision human finite reason having the power to turn away in freedom from the radical evil of obdurate self-preference.

There is more that this grammar of hope allows us to say with respect to the self-preferential obduracy that forms the fundamental dynamism of radical evil. The grammar of moral hope also provides the structure for a syntax of moral recognition that places constraint upon both explicit and implicit claims of self-preference; such syntax can be found in the "universal law" formulation of the categorical imperative, which places a veto on the self-preferential obduracy of individual moral agents.²⁴ It is also operative in the discourse of mutual respect appropriate to membership and shared responsibility in what Kant terms "a kingdom of ends." In this context, a syntax of

mortal recognition functions to clear a social space within which agents address not only questions of individual human interaction but also those dealing with the social governance of human life.²⁵ On Kant's account, a grammar of hope functions to break the grip of self-preferential obduracy with respect both to the moral life of individual moral agents and to the structure and dynamics by which human agents mutually govern their social, political, and cultural interaction.

In functioning to counter the grammar of self-preference licensed by radical evil, a Kantian grammar of hope thus creates a space of social possibility for full mutual respect for the exercise of human finite freedom, a space that Kant names "an ethical commonwealth." The grammar of hope, moreover, not only structures a discourse of mutual respect for agents to engage one another in "the ethical commonwealth," it also opens the possibility for speaking of God in ways that are morally appropriate to an anthropology of finite reason in which the vocation of humanity is completed in a social attainment of "the highest good." This connection between a social space for mutual respect and a discourse about God is signaled by Kant's placement of an explicit treatment of proper ways to speak of God morally at the conclusion of his account, in part 3 of *Religion*, of the establishment and the moral dynamics of the ethical commonwealth. This suggests that it is within the moral space of an ethical commonwealth that a grammar of hope most appropriately authorizes speaking of God as "moral ruler of the world." Kant takes this expression to mark the primary mode of human religious/theological discourse, within which various aspects of such moral rule—*holy* lawgiver, *benevolent* ruler and moral guardian, *just* judge—may also be aptly spoken as morally true of God.²⁶

Two aspects of this discussion in *Religion* of the proper moral grammar for speaking of God are of particular note. The first is that this discourse continues to function under apophatic strictures that remind us that even this moral grammar speaks first of what God is not. What is said of God in such a moral grammar is *not* about the "nature" of God, which is cognitively inaccessible to finite reason; it bears, instead, primarily on the *relation* in which we, as moral beings, stand to God. It is not about "God as God" but about "God for us" morally.²⁷ The second is that Kant views this relation as one in which

the primary operative dynamic, like that of the ethical commonwealth, is the moral one of mutual respect for freedom: a divine respect for human freedom that holds humanity morally accountable and a human respect for divine freedom that acknowledges that human finitude cannot comprehend the mode of that divine freedom's enactment, save in terms of its steadfast respect for the exercise of human freedom. Kant seems well aware of Christian theology's long-standing vocabulary and grammar of grace for speaking of this relationship, and part of his discussion includes his proposals for restructuring the grammar of terms such as "call," "satisfaction," and "election" along lines that both pay close attention to apophatic strictures and acknowledge the centrality of a mutually engaged respect for freedom.²⁸ Even though we cannot know positively how that action of the divine that Christian theology speaks of as grace concretely works, we can affirm that it will *not* work in ways counter to the inmost dynamics of human finite freedom.

This discussion in *Religion* provides a concrete instance of the working out of Kant's famous claim cited earlier: "Thus I had to deny knowledge in order to make room for faith."²⁹ A denial of knowledge with respect to the workings of grace is for Kant crucial to the *mutual* respect for freedom that is central to Kant's construal of the moral relation of the human to the divine. The hiddenness of God with respect to finite reason's cognitive grasp of the moral working of the world is fundamental for the integrity of the finite freedom that constitutes the human.³⁰ A proper human acknowledgment of God is one that issues from—and is most properly spoken by—a *human freedom that is itself attentive to the respect for the moral order of human freedom with which the divine acts*.³¹ In accord with this principle, Kant recognizes that the centerpiece of the Book of Job is not the vindication found in the restoration of Job's prior prosperity, but in the divine commendation that Job had spoken rightly—that is, both with correct insight and with integrity—about the integrity of his own human finitude and about the inscrutable integrity of the workings of the divine.³²

In addition to structuring what we may say of "God for us" morally as a discourse of a mutual divine and human respect for freedom, a Kantian grammar of hope may also function to license a

form of speaking religiously with respect to human mutual interaction, that is, for articulating how human responsibility for the social shape and dynamics of their moral interaction bears upon humanity's moral relation to God.³³ Although Kant does not explicitly move his account in this direction, there are parallels between his discussions of the ethical commonwealth and of perpetual peace that suggest this possibility. These possibilities turn upon, first, Kant's affirmation of both the ethical commonwealth and perpetual peace as socially formative for humanity's attainment of its highest good, a task enjoined upon humanity as a categorical imperative; and, second, upon Kant's further affirmation that attaining a full social unity and harmony of the concrete conditions that are needed to bring about the highest good seems beyond the capacity of human efforts alone.³⁴ From the perspective of our finite reason, the full attainment of either perpetual peace or an ethical commonwealth does not present itself to us as a matter of the theoretical certainty that comes with knowledge, but as a matter of the moral assurance that comes with hope. Kant sees such hope arising from our doing all that we must and can to bring about these moral ends—though we must do so in an apophatic mode that, even as it allows us to speak of that which finally brings such good about as “nature” or as “providence,” leaves in darkness both the “when” and the “how” of that final outcome. When we speak of that larger ordering principle as providence, it creates a space that enables us to speak of what we do for the attainment of this outcome as precisely a social good in terms that appropriately place it with respect to humanity's relation to the divine. As I will suggest below, it allows us to speak of what we as humans do with one another to bring about peace as genuinely “godly” action.

Kant's clearest and most eloquent presentations of this dynamic of hope may well be on the concluding pages of the *Rechtslehre*, part 1 of *The Metaphysics of Morals*:

What is incumbent on us as a duty is rather to act in conformity with the idea of that end, even if there is not the slightest theoretical likelihood that it can be realized, as long as its impossibility cannot be demonstrated either.

Now morally practical reason pronounces in us its irresistible veto: *there is to be no war*, neither war between you and me in the state of nature nor war between us as states . . .

for war is not the way in which everyone should seek his rights. So the question is no longer whether perpetual peace is something real or a fiction, and whether we are not deceiving ourselves in our theoretical judgments when we assume that it is real. Instead, we must act as if it is something real, though perhaps it is not; we must work toward establishing perpetual peace and the kind of constitution that seems to us most conducive to it (say, a republicanism of all states, together and separately) in order to bring about perpetual peace . . . And even if the complete realization of this objective always remains a pious wish, still we are certainly not deceiving ourselves in adopting the maxim of working incessantly toward it.³⁵

Kant does not expect humanity to wait around for nature or providence to bring about the peace that, in the absence of hope, we think we cannot. He rather takes it to be a human responsibility to move forward toward peace in view of that hope: hope licenses saying, in consequence of the imperative “there is to be no war,” that humans can and must find ways of social governance that will bring an end to war, even though it appears an impossible goal.³⁶ A grammar of hope provides the moral discourse of human mutual respect with a syntax for envisioning possibilities—for saying “we can”—for the establishment of structures and conditions of social governance that benefit our human condition of finite rationality. Hope expands the horizon of moral possibility for actions effecting peace. Within this space, the grammar of hope enables us, first, to speak of what ought to be done to make possible a state of enduring peace among peoples and, second, to affirm that such a state can only come about only to the extent that humanity acts on the hope that its efforts both are necessary and will be effective for bringing it about.

How then does the hope that Kant thinks makes it possible for efforts to engage one another in effective cooperation for the securing of lasting peace also make it possible to speak of these efforts in terms that bear upon humanity's relation to the divine? One answer to this may be found if we attend to the connection that Kant's discussion of the ethical commonwealth in part 3 of *Religion* has to the social and political images that he uses in part 2 in his philosophical reconstruction of Christian teaching about how God effects human redemption in the person of “the Son of God.” Kant's reconstruction

casts that teaching as a conflict between radical evil and the good principle which has rightful claim to moral dominion over human beings. Even though he voices significant objections to the language of vicarious satisfaction that an important stream of Christian theology uses to describe how the good principle triumphs, Kant affirms the language of freedom that theology has also used to present the redemptive activity of "the Son of God" as a liberation with social as well as personal effects:

by exemplifying this principle (in the moral idea) that human being [Jesus] opened the doors of freedom to all who, like him, choose to die to everything that holds them fettered to earthly life to the detriment of morality; and among these he gathers unto himself "a people for his possession, zealous of good works" under his dominion, while he abandons to their fate all who prefer moral servitude.³⁷

While throughout his discussion Kant clearly avoids affirming the divinity of Jesus as it has been construed in Christian orthodoxy, he still uses the term "Son of God" in ways that indicate that he takes the gospel narratives of Jesus (whose name Kant does not employ) to offer a robust description of what it is for a human be "godly"—that is, to act morally as God acts morally. To the extent that Kant views the activity of redemption as socially ordered—i.e., that it serves the moral freedom not only of individual human agents, but also of humanity as a species—Jesus's most "godly" activity was to make it possible for human beings to have the moral freedom to establish a social order in which they live with each other in ways that manifest full respect for one another's freedom. In traditional theological terms, this most godly activity is exhibited in work humanity does in the establishment of "the Kingdom of God."

The close connection that Kant makes between the ethical commonwealth and the establishment of an international order for enduring peace—particularly in view of the intensity with which he proclaims the latter as a categorical imperative—suggests that human efforts to engage one another in effective cooperation for the securing of lasting peace constitute for Kant the way in which a finite humanity comes closest to being "godly" by doing what God does. A Kantian grammar of hope thus provides a way of speaking of the human moral

relation to God as one in which human beings can envision themselves as called and empowered to do as God does, as they work with one another for securing an order of enduring peace for humankind. In this way, Kant construes *religious language* to offer a grammar of hope that exhibits the articles of faith as meaningful for the lasting establishment of a community of mutual respect predicated upon the self-legislative (i.e., free) pursuit of the welfare of all.

Notes

¹Immanuel Kant, *Religion Innerhalb der Grenzen der Bloßen Vernunft* (hereafter, *RGV*), AA 6:5.

²See, however, Kant's claim, in the preface to the second edition of *Religion*, that "only common morality is needed to understand the essentials of this text, without venturing into the critique of practical reason, still less into that of theoretical reason" (*RGV* 6:14). He makes this claim in response to criticism published in *Neueste Kritische Nachrichten*, a journal edited by J. G. P. Möller. While Kant may be correct in claiming that one need not have read the texts of the first two *Critiques* in order to grasp the main points that *Religion* makes about the presence and the overcoming of "radical evil" in our human moral makeup, his account does presuppose a human reason functioning in accord with the self-imposed limits on the speculative use of reason that those two works had argued for as necessary in view of the primacy of the practical use of reason.

³See James Collins, *The Emergence of Philosophy of Religion* (New Haven, Conn.: Yale University Press, 1967), who argues that the work of Hume, Kant, and Hegel was crucial for delimiting "religion," understood as human phenomenon, as a distinctive field of philosophical inquiry.

⁴See also *KrV* A804–5/B 832–33 for his articulation of the questions—"What can I know? What should I do? What may I hope?" as those in which "all interest of my reason . . . is united." He expands the third to "If I should do what I should, what then may I hope?" and then describes it as "simultaneously practical and theoretical, so that the practical leads like a clue to the reply to the theoretical question and, in its highest form, the speculative question." The expanded form he gives the question, it should be noted, is echoed in the one he poses as central to his inquiry in *Religion Within the Bounds of Mere Reason*, "What is then the result of this right conduct of ours?" *RGV* 6:5.

⁵See Charles Taylor, "The Importance of Herder," in *Philosophical Arguments* (Cambridge, Mass: Harvard University Press, 1995), 79–99.

- ⁶Jaroslav Pelikan, *Christianity and Classical Culture* (New Haven, Conn.: Yale University Press, 1993) notes how the apophatic theology of Cappadocians—Gregory of Nazianzus, Basil of Caesarea, Gregory of Nyssa, and Macrina—in the fourth century C.E. recognized the important connections linking language, metaphysics, and grammar; see especially chap. 3, “The Language of Negation,” and chap. 13, “The Lexicon of Transcendence.”
- ⁷Allen Wood, *Kant's Rational Theology* (Ithaca, N.Y.: Cornell University Press, 1978) observes that “the idea of God is a necessary idea of reason, and Kant has only respect for our natural interest in the content of this idea and our theoretical curiosity about the existence or nonexistence of the object corresponding to it. As can be seen from his Lectures on Philosophical Theology, he enters quite sympathetically into the traditional inquiries of rational theology” (19).
- ⁸Immanuel Kant, *Prolegomena to Any Future Metaphysics*, AA 4:365.
- ⁹Kant, *KrV* Bxxx.
- ¹⁰Kant, *KrV* A829/B857. Kant advances these claims as part of a discussion of “moral belief” that articulates part of his account of the primacy of the practical use of reason.
- ¹¹This is central to what Kant affirms as the primacy of the practical use of reason; see *KrV*, “The Canon of Pure Reason,” Second Section, A804–19/B832–47; *KpV* 5:119–21/236–38.
- ¹²He articulates this in detail in *KrV* A631–42/B 659–70, observing “even though reason in its merely speculative use is far from adequate for such a great aim as this—namely attaining to the existence of a supreme being—it still has a very great utility, that of *correcting* the cognition of this being by making it agree with itself and with every intelligible aim, and by purifying it of everything that might be incompatible with the concept of an original being, and of all admixture of empirical limitations” (A640–41/B667–68).
- ¹³Kant, *KrV* A642/B669.
- ¹⁴See also Kant, *KrV* A578–79/B606–7, A631/B659.
- ¹⁵For the human use of theoretical reason, the very constitution of “things” so that they may function as “objects” for knowledge—and thus for claims about their theoretical truth—is that we render them intelligible in terms of the spatiotemporal form of sensible intuition. In the absence of the possibility of a presentation to us under the form of sensible intuition—that is, as “appearing” to us as a “thing” under spatiotemporal determinations—our efforts to render a concept of God theoretically intelligible lead to positing it as the [unknown] “x” that Kant speaks of as “noumenon” (*KrV* A250–51; see also *KrV* B209–11, A576/B604). In this case, as well as with the concepts of “soul/self”

and “world,” neither strategy yields what Kant considers as “knowledge.”

- ¹⁶Kant is both aware of and names the “ontotheology” which, even as it offers protestation in favor of God’s transcendence, still implicitly locates God as a being “of” the world (*KrV* A632/B660, A636–38/B664–66). The charge of “ontotheology” has been a staple of the criticism that has been leveled from many philosophical and theological quarters against “classical [or modern] theism.” See Elizabeth A. Johnson, *Quest for the Living God* (New York: Continuum, 2007), 14–17, for a succinct summary of the characteristics of such theism.
- ¹⁷Susan Neiman, *Evil in Modern Thought: An Alternative History of Philosophy* (Princeton, New Jersey: Princeton University Press 2002), 75.
- ¹⁸Kant, *KrV* A641–42/B 669–70 contains one such list of “transcendental predicates” that may properly be said of the concept of God: “Necessity, infinity, unity, existence outside the world (not as the soul of the world), eternity without all conditions of time, omnipresence without all conditions of space, omnipotence, etc.”
- ¹⁹The language of a reversal in the order of one’s maxims can be found in Kant, *RGV* 6:36–37; for a discussion of the obduracy of self-preference and its social consequences see Philip J. Rossi, S.J., “Cosmopolitanism: Kant’s Social Anthropology of Hope,” *Kant und die Philosophie in weltbürgerlicher Absicht: Akten des XI. Kant-Kongresses 2010*, ed. Stefano Bacin, Alfredo Ferrarin, Claudio La Rocca, Margit Ruffing (Berlin: Walter de Gruyter, 2013, Bd. 4) 827–37.
- ²⁰ “[Humankind’s] exit from that paradise that reason represents as the first dwelling place of its species was nothing but the transition from the raw state of a merely animal creature to humanity, from the harness of the instincts to the guidance of reason—in a word, from the guardianship of nature to the state of freedom” (*MAM* 8:115).
- ²¹Further down the trajectory along which this answer moves can be found those Hegelian, Marxist, and Nietzschean accounts that affirm evil as condition for good that is at least historically—and perhaps even metaphysically—inevitable, a view vividly captured in Hegel’s image of history as a “slaughter bench.”
- ²²Kant, *RGV* 6:93–95.
- ²³Kant, *RGV* 6:29 (“natural propensity”), 30 (“woven into human nature”), 37 (“not to be extirpated by human forces”).
- ²⁴Placing this formulation in the context of the self-preferential obduracy of radical evil suggests that its focus is more on the veto it imposes on self-preference and self-exemption as stratagems that issue from “the dear self” than on a formal claim of “universalizability” that generations of Kant’s critics have castigated as a moral version of “one size fits all.”

²⁵John Rawls's device in *A Theory of Justice* of "the original position" in which (ideal) agents deliberate about the terms of their social governance captures an important dimension of the social space that is a function of a syntax of mutual recognition.

²⁶See Kant, *RGV* 6:139–42.

²⁷Kant, *RGV* 6:139: "This idea of a moral ruler of the work is a task for our practical reason. Our concern is not so much to know what he is in himself (his nature) but what he is for us as moral beings."

²⁸Kant, *RGV* 6:142–43.

²⁹Kant, *KrV* Bxxx.

³⁰See also Neiman, *Evil in Modern Thought*, 327, "instead of knowledge of the future, God gave us hope. Kant turned this thought into one of his greater arguments: if we knew that God existed, freedom and virtue would disappear. It's an act of Providence that the nature of Providence will forever remain uncertain."

³¹Neiman (*Evil in Modern Thought*, 77) observes that for Kant "God operates according to the same moral law as we do; He just never neglects to obey them."

³²Immanuel Kant, *MpVT* 8:265–67.

³³There are ways in which Kant explicitly recognizes the bearing of moral action on this relation, for example, in his discussions of speaking of the moral law as "divine commands" in a way that recognizes that their moral force issues from the rightness of what they prescribe, not from their being commanded by God, and his distinction between considering actions in terms of how they make us worthy to be happy in contrast to how they produce happiness. These discussions, however, focus on the discourse of individual moral agency, rather than on the social discourse of hope that shapes Kant's concern in texts such as *Religion* and "Perpetual Peace."

³⁴Kant, *RGV* 6:97–98.

³⁵Immanuel Kant, *MdS* 6:354–55/490–91.

³⁶Kant presupposes that individual monarchs with sovereign power will be the agents for bringing about the form of international social governance he terms a "federation of free states" (*Zum ewige Frieden* 8:354). Transposing Kant's account into terms pertinent to workings of political authority in representative democracies thus requires supplementing his account with one that attends to ways of engaging the agency of citizens in the establishment of these international forms of social governance.

³⁷Kant, *RVG* 6:82.