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## ON CHRIS L. FIRESTONE AND NATHAN JACOBS'S *IN DEFENSE OF KANT'S RELIGION*: A COMMENT

George di Giovanni

In this comment on Firestone and Jacobs's book, *In Defense of Kant's Religion*, I take issue with (1) the authors' strategy in demonstrating that it is possible to positively incorporate religion and theology into Kant's critical corpus, and (2) their intention to focus on the coherence of Kant's theory without necessarily recommending it for Christianity. Regarding (1), I argue that in pursuing their strategy the authors ignore the fact that Kant has transposed what appear to be traditional religious doctrines to a completely different level of reflection, in effect turning them into imaginary tropes intended to mask otherwise irreducible contradictions in his view of human agency. As for (2), I claim that the authors' intention runs the risk of being disingenuous, since Kant presented his religion as the *true* religion, opposing it to historical Christianity (unless the latter, of course, is re-interpreted according to his own precepts).

I first wish to congratulate and thank Chris and Nathan for their book.<sup>1</sup> It is a welcome addition to Kant scholarship; we are all the richer for it. I would hope with my comments to stimulate further reflection on their work. I must say from the start, however, that I am pessimistic about the possibility of initiating a genuine dialogue. My understanding of Kant's critique of reason, and the historical context in which I place that critique, are simply too far removed from theirs.<sup>2</sup> However, one can at least try.

The authors' clearly stated intention is to defend the thesis that "co-gent arguments exist for thinking [that] Kant's critical writings, taken as a whole, provide the grounds needed for positive incorporation of religion and theology into Kant's philosophical program,"<sup>3</sup> and to this end they parade a series of witnesses *pro* and *contra* the thesis, as if in a court of law in which the case of "people vs. *Religion*"<sup>4</sup> is being decided. To go straight to the heart of the matter, my main worry about the book is that, if I were

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<sup>1</sup>Chris L. Firestone and Nathan Jacobs, *In Defense of Kant's Religion* (Bloomington & Indianapolis: Indiana University Press, 2008).

<sup>2</sup>I have detailed my position, both conceptually and historically, in *Freedom and Religion in Kant and His Immediate Successors: The Vocation of Humankind, 1774–1800* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2005; paperback edition, 2007), xvi–376.

<sup>3</sup>Firestone and Jacobs, *In Defense of Kant's Religion*, 2.

<sup>4</sup>*Ibid.*, 1.



a member of the jury in the imagined trial, I would be unable at the end to render an informed verdict. If I were an advocate for either the prosecution or the defense, I would be planning an appeal from the beginning of the trial on the grounds that the bill of indictment had not been properly drawn up: no clear instructions could have been issued by the judge to the jury to inform their deliberations.

*Videtur quod*

i. The authors say: “The indictment against *Religion* . . . rests on showing that when its metaphysical motives and philosophical character are properly understood, the text becomes unstable and falls under the weight of internal and irreconcilable conundrums, while an adequate defense of *Religion* depends on showing that Kant’s metaphysical motivations and the philosophical character of *Religion* support an interpretation of the text that overcomes the so-called conundrums.”<sup>5</sup>

ii. They also say: “Defending the internal coherence of *Religion* from an expository vantage point and commending its desirability for Christianity are two entirely different matters, and we will, in this volume, focus exclusively on the former.”<sup>6</sup>

*Sed contra*

*Ad primum:* As so drawn up, the indictment does not cover the possibility that I consider most plausible, which is that *Religion* indeed falls in line with Kant’s overall critical system, that it is even required by the latter in order that it attain closure precisely as a system, but that this is so because the premises on which the system is based are deeply flawed, and hence give rise to practical absurdities which *Religion* is then called upon to attenuate, even mask, by means of suitably constructed “rational” myths. A juror aware of this possibility would be in the difficult situation of having to find in favor of the accused on the ground that Kant’s overall critical system, though obviously *wrong* from the juror’s point of view, would be nonetheless *coherently wrong*.

*Ad secundum:* The disclaimer cannot be maintained, at least not to the extent that by declining to recommend or not recommend Kant’s brand of religion to Christianity the defense can dispense with the need of measuring it, as religion, against Christianity. In fact Kant constantly measures his religion of duty against the practices of historical Christianity, declaring it to be superior to the latter—even to be the only legitimate form of religion. But the difference between the two is so great that one has reason to wonder whether, historically, Kant has the right to call his religion of duty a form of Christianity, or, for that matter, a form of religion at all. Let me be clear about this: I have no religious orthodox agenda to promote. I profess no religion, even though I confess that I would feel

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<sup>5</sup>Ibid., 12.

<sup>6</sup>Ibid., 6.

much more at home among those who celebrate the dawn of Easter day with the "*exultet iam angelica turba caelorum / exultent divina mysteria*" than in a community of duty-constrained Kantians. If pressed, I would declare myself a Christian atheist. My only point is that religion is a historical phenomenon: its manifestations are meaningful only when considered in their proper *Sitz im Leben*. If Kant's *Religion*, therefore, is more than just a conceptual game (as the authors surely do not believe it is); if its prescriptions for a true religion are serious, then this would-be true religion must be considered in its *Sitz im Leben*, and that means by measuring it against the historical Christianity that it claims it can replace. I am saying, in other words, that in the trial in which we are called to participate, witnesses as well as attorneys would be shadow-playing; worse, they would show disrespect for Kant if they thought that they could focus exclusively on the "internal coherence" of *Religion*. The issue at the heart of Kant's book is an existential one.

*Respondeo*

There were ample precedents in scholastic theology for Kant's theory of practical postulation, although the latter differed from these in a significant respect. It was understood that, when God was at issue, any representation, any name attributed to him, could be at best a token signification that fell infinitely short of the intended object. It did not follow, however, that the representation, or any God-language, lacked meaning or convincing power, because the evidence that the representation lacked on its objective side was made up for subjectively. It was claimed that the "love of God," or a human being's natural and habitual attunement *as individual* to things divine, provided the source of both meaning and convincing power.<sup>7</sup> The source was subjective, but not objectively irrelevant, for at the level of actual existence the individual was assumed to be constitutionally open to, even physically continuous with, an external world that everywhere intimated the presence of transcendent mysteries. The two—individual human body and actual world—were by nature attuned to exalt in unison in the *mysteria divina*. Religion, in other words, was essentially a celebratory activity of which the embodied individual was the centre.

The parallels between this kind of belief, based on subjective inclinations, and Kant's postulation, based on the subjective interests of reason, are obvious. Equally obvious, however, is the difference. In the former, the subjectivity at issue is that of a historical individual, the kind who alone can be an effective source of agency and therefore also the source of such existentially indisputable facts as moral evil. In the latter case, the subjectivity is that of reason in general, that is to say, of an abstract "I" whose agency, precisely because it is abstract and must so remain on the assumption of Kant's idea of "nature," is restricted to mere intentions.

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<sup>7</sup>For an illustrative text, see Thomas Aquinas, *Summa Theologiae*, II-II, qu. 45, art. 2.

Only the embodied individual is sufficiently positioned to be able to act. But neither Kant's idea of reason nor that of nature can capture the reality of this individual—the one because it is purely formal; the other because, *as actually experienced* in contrast to being idealized, it is purely mechanistic. Kant, perhaps unwittingly, admits this much when he acknowledges that neither can be the source of evil—evil being, of course, the ultimate test of true responsibility, hence guilt, hence agency. Reason is *per se* infallible; nature, innocent.<sup>8</sup> The need is therefore created to *save* the ordinary language of moral life by constructing such tropes as that of an individual who, affected by a radical evil that pervades the whole human species, is in need of God's grace in order to act rightly. These tropes are rationally controlled but remain the work of the imagination and are *ex hypothesi* ultimately unintelligible. Much of *Religion* is based on precisely such tropes. The doctrine that it expounds might indeed fall within the boundaries of reason (that is, of typically Kantian reason), and might indeed be needed by Kant's system in order to satisfy the interests of the reason behind it both in the theoretical domain, in order to complete the edifice of critical rationality, and in the practical one, in order to provide the language for, if not the explanation of, historical action.<sup>9</sup> The fact remains that the doctrine's subject matter, namely, the individual as such, is not on Kantian premises intelligible *per se* but must depend for its determination on the work of idealizing imagination.

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<sup>8</sup>Immanuel Kant, *Religion within the Boundaries of Mere Reason*, Academy Edition: *Kants gesammelte Schriften* (Berlin: Königliche Preussische Akademie der Wissenschaften, 1902–), 6:34–35. Cf. also di Giovanni, *Freedom and Religion*, 81–82.

<sup>9</sup>Cf. Kant, *Religion*, 6:121n: "No human being can say with certainty why this human being becomes good, that one evil (both comparatively), for we often seem to find the predisposition that makes for the distinction already at birth, and even contingencies of life over which nobody has any control are at times the decisive factor; and just as little can we say what will become of either. In this matter we must therefore entrust judgement to the All-seeing; and this is so expressed in the text as if he pronounces his decree upon them before they are born, thus prescribing to each the role that he will eventually play. For the world creator, if he is conceived in anthropopathic terms, *prevision* in the order of appearance is at the same time also *predestination*. But in the supersensible order of things in accordance with the laws of freedom, where time falls away, there is just one *all-seeing knowledge*, without the possibility of explaining why one human being behaves in this way, another according to opposite principles, and yet, at the same time, of reconciling the why with freedom of the will." If "in the supersensible order of things in accordance with the laws of freedom, where time falls away, there is just one *all-seeing knowledge*, without the possibility of explaining why one human being behaves in this way, another according to opposite principles, and yet, at the same time, of reconciling the why with freedom of the will," then it follows that all questions of guilt and responsibility, and with them morality itself, lose their meaning. It is not just that we cannot give metaphysical answers to questions about freedom *because of our ignorance*. It is rather that we are dealing here with an ultimately irrational matter. Cf. also Kant, *Religion*, 144n: "Hence in a practical context (whenever duty is at issue), we understand perfectly well what freedom is; for theoretical purposes, however, as regards the causality of freedom (and equally its nature) we cannot even formulate without contradiction the wish to understand it." Cf. also di Giovanni, *Freedom and Religion*, 151, 169; as well as footnote 52 of di Giovanni, "Faith without Religion, and Religion without Faith: Kant and Hegel on Religion," *Journal of the History of Philosophy* 41:3 (2003), 365–383, 378.

I trust that I am forgiven for remaining, as is only fitting in a "comment," at the level of mere statement.<sup>10</sup> I have argued for this inability of Kantian theory to deal with the individual at length elsewhere. Of course, I am not the first to say that Kant's *Religion* is required to resolve, but only subjectively, what otherwise would be an *absurdum practicum*. The early Wood said as much;<sup>11</sup> so do the authors of the present book, and, if I remember correctly, so did David Strauss. According to Strauss, what made Kant's treatment of religion different from that of the rationalist theologians of the German enlightenment was that, whereas the latter wanted to reduce Christian dogmas to rational truths, Kant kept the dogmas, but under the modality of rational myths for the sake of controlling the presence in experience of an irrational quantity. In this respect, although clearly a product of the Enlightenment, Kant already anticipated the nineteenth century. The point I am now making is that the *absurdum* in question, the irrational quantity, is not endemic to the human situation as such: theoretically, it is the product of Kant's faulty metaphysical assumptions; practically, it only affects those who in their actions conceive themselves as caught up in a world such as Kant postulates. Kant has a serious problem in maintaining in his system the possibility of genuine agency. This is a problem that has long been recognized in the tradition of Kant interpretation. Hegel, for one, already argued that there is no clearly recognizable "I" in Kant's system that could be capable of unequivocally initiating action—that the Kantian would-be human agent, therefore, is condemned to shifting back and forth between considering at one moment himself, and at the next God, as the author of a deed.<sup>12</sup>

In other words, the defense of *Religion* ignores the issue that most closely affects its doctrine—namely, whether the latter is more than just an essay in the language control of experiential data that are ultimately unexplainable. I find it ironic, therefore, to hear witnesses in the trial, for both the defense and the prosecution, rehearsing arguments reminiscent of those that were the staple of dogmatic theology, as if Kant had not pre-empted the possibility of ever finding a resolution for them. I seem to hear Molinists and Thomists, the Jesuits and the Dominicans, still engaged in their disputations regarding the role of divine intervention in human actions. Kant's critical philosophy is *in fact* being used in the same way as it was originally by the Jena theologians, and eventually by Reinhold who perfected their strategy, as if, once critical ignorance is admitted at the level of theory because of the subjective interests of

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<sup>10</sup>See note 2 above. But I have argued this point most extensively and incisively in my just-cited article, "Faith without Religion, and Religion without Faith," in footnote 9.

<sup>11</sup>This is at least the implication of Wood's interpretation of a "practical postulate" which he extends also to *Religion*. See Allen W. Wood, *Kant's Moral Religion* (Ithaca and London: Cornell University Press, 1970).

<sup>12</sup>The *locus classicus* of Hegel's criticism is to be found in section VI (subsection C.b: "Die Verstellung") of the *Phänomenologie des Geistes* (1807). *Gesammelte Werke*, Vol. 9 (Hamburg: Meiner, 1980), 332–340.

reason, all past dogmatic metaphysics can be re-incorporated, as if from the backdoor, under the rubric of "moral faith."<sup>13</sup> This is the situation that Schelling decried to Hegel with reference to the Tübingen seminary in his famous letter of 1795: "Before you can turn around the *deus ex machina* springs forth, the personal individual Being who sits in Heaven above!"<sup>14</sup> I grant that Kant himself gave in more than one place enough of an opening for this move by the theologians. But if one is truly to understand the spirit in which Kant was re-introducing into the critical system the tropes of a past theology, one must keep in mind a passage in the *Critique of Judgment* which is just as much ignored as this late work of Kant is quoted for allegedly serving to reconcile the theoretical and the practical side of his system: "If our understanding were intuitive, it would have no object except what is actual. . . . The proposition, therefore, that things can be possible without being actual, and thus that there can be no inference at all from mere possibility to actuality, quite rightly holds for the human understanding without that proving that this distinction lies in the things themselves."<sup>15</sup>

If the modal categories do not apply to things as they are in themselves and would be grasped by an intuitive intelligence, if all that there is *simply is*, it follows that the whole realm of morality, for which the distinction between the "possible" and the "actual" is essential if the "ought" is to have any meaning, turns out to be, for Kant no less than for Spinoza, a mere epiphenomenon that can indeed be handled rhetorically, with the aid of suitable myths, but never intelligibly. Rationality turns into a formalism of the concept that must rely on extra-conceptual means in order to connect with actual existence, the latter having been demoted by the formalism to mere appearance. What the theologians in Jena or Tübingen did not realize is that, when re-introduced within the framework of Kant's critical premises, their dogmas had lost, not just any ground of objective belief, but also the significance that they might previously have had as *symbola fidei*.

But my most serious objection against the defense in this trial, and the one on which I wish to conclude my brief, is that, if the defense were to succeed, it would follow that religion is an instrument of human action. Kant instrumentalized belief in God for the sake of resolving problems which were typically Kantian—more to the point, problems that can exist only for a humanity bound to the ideology of duty. If the defense were

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<sup>13</sup>I have especially in mind the dispute on the nature of free will that was raging at Jena between C. C. E. Schmid and Karl Leonhard Reinhold exactly at the time when Kant was turning his attention to the issue in the articles eventually leading to *Religion*. Kant was moving the discussion on a completely different level of reflection. On this, see my "Rehberg, Reinhold und C. C. E. Schmid über Kant und moralische Freiheit," in *Vernunftkritik und Aufklärung: Studien zur Philosophie Kants und seines Jahrhunderts*, ed. Michael Oberhausen (Stuttgart-Bad Canstatt: Frommann-Holzboog, 2001), 93–113.

<sup>14</sup>Schelling, "January 5, 1795," in *Hegel: The Letters*, trans. Clark Butler and Christiane Seiler (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1984), 29.

<sup>15</sup>Immanuel Kant, *Critique of Judgement*, 5:402; cf. 5:93, 99, 146–147.

to succeed and this move of Kant were canonized, then the way would already lie open to Marx's claim that religion is an opiate (the expression, incidentally, originates with Kant),<sup>16</sup> a set of illusionary beliefs introduced for the sake of obviating the very real pains caused by a dysfunctional human existence. I prefer to believe that religion has nothing to do with duty but is rather a celebration of the human individual, of the things which, whether in joy or suffering, in evil or repentance, make the individual precisely the irreducible being that he or she is. And this is something that even an atheist can understand.

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<sup>16</sup>Cf. Kant, *Religion*, 6:78n.