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KANT ON PRAYER

Submitted by: George M. Fricke

Abstract

After establishing an ethical religion of his own, Kant explores the functions of different aspects of traditional or “historical” religions. Since the moral religion takes priority over any other historical religion, dogmatic beliefs and practices could possibly undermine Kant’s true ethical aim of religion. Prayer and other similar rituals, not a part of “true religion”, represent mankind’s feebleness in seeking out moral conceptions. Although Kant claims prayer can serve as a useful element in his greater theology, I argue that his analysis offers little to pure religion and only accounts for the prevalence of prayer historically. The psychological phenomenon Kant deems a weakness in man requires some worldly manifestation in order to actualize moral duty. Ritualistic practices fulfill this requirement yet also have the ability to mislead one away from their true moral obligations. One must tread lightly when performing such rituals and not lose focus on moral growth. So, all of the traditional practices of religion such as scriptural interpretation and intercessory prayer must only act as a means toward the actualization of moral imperatives. I conduct an analysis of these means to conclude that they are unnecessary in Kant’s pure, self-evident, religion. Further, I critique Stephen R. Palmquist’s argument for the apparent usefulness of prayer as a way of becoming worthy of God’s goodness.

The foundation of Kant’s second Critique, practical reason, gave him the necessary tools to construct a moral religion. As the religion was further developed throughout his work, Kant was able to establish, as practically necessary, an immutable divine being. The aseity of the divine judge in

conjunction with the certainty and autonomy of the moral law made all ritualistic practices that claimed to serve God seem futile. For most, prayer is a way of pleading to God and/or evading responsibilities. Under Kant’s depiction of an immutable God, it is easy to see why prayer would seem not to have a function at all. Indeed, Kant is hypercritical of prayer used in the popular notion and even goes so far as to condemn it as a detrimental practice opposing “true religion”. However, prayer is not completely dismissed from Kant’s theology. He develops a philosophy of prayer which makes use of ritualistic practices within the constraints of his “true religion”. Although Kant’s views on the usefulness of prayer offer no greater understanding of his religious framework, they are sound within the bounds of that framework nonetheless. I intend to argue this by first expositing the way in which Kant incorporates prayer into his theology and then illuminating the apparent reasons behind prayer’s usefulness. Stephen R. Palmquist gives an argument in favor of the role of prayer in Kant’s philosophy to which I will offer a critique.

To understand prayers’ place in Kant’s theology, we must first briefly examine his religion in transcendental terms. Just as in Kant’s epistemology, religion is seen through a “transcendental perspective.” As subjects, we actively interpret passive objects of the world. This alone, Kant believes, provides us with justification behind our perceptions. In theological terms, “pure rational religion” stems from our actively determining passive objects of religion. These objects are presented to us as categorical imperatives. From this formulation

arise the necessary conditions for the possibility of an empirical religion but also, as Kant points out, the possibility for an opposition to that religion. Kant expresses that it is the “pure religion” alone that holds priority with the empirical (historical) religion subservient to it. There exists a “grey area” where each religion overlaps; historical religion incorporates doctrines of pure religion (Palmquist, 586). There is an area, however, where historical religion does not incorporate or promote pure religion yet is still held as a religious doctrine by followers. Thus, in transcendental terms, the empirical element diverts attention away from pure religion i.e., away from morality.

Hence prayer, an element of historical religion, potentially poses a problem to pure religion. Furthermore, prayer, as stated above, seems impossible, given that it aims to manipulate an unchangeable God. Kant gives a simple proof to show that “God acts in no way but freely. Nothing has any influence on him, so as to be able to move him to act in any particular way and not otherwise” (Kant, 426). This way, traditional prayer would seem to have no place in Kant’s philosophy.

Pure religion takes priority over empirical religion, because it is presented to us as certain where other “services of God” are not: “It is self-evident that the moral service of God pleases him directly” (Kant: “Religion Within the Boundaries of Mere Reason”, 196). We have no sound basis to assert that other rituals or practices would do the same since they are not presented to us as an imperative. However, this does not mean that historical religion is completely useless. Kant claims that historical religion can actually act in service of the true religion but only because of human frailty:

...because of the natural need of all human beings to demand for even the highest concepts and grounds of reason something that the senses can hold on to, some confirmation from experience or the like, some historical ecclesiastical faith or other, usually already at hand, must be used (Kant: “Religion Within the Boundaries of Mere Reason”, 142).

It is clear that the empirical element which all humans need to grasp the concept of morality is not specified. This is because all empirical elements are themselves not universal and therefore are arbitrary. According to this classification, prayer is then a useful mechanism which fulfills this need.

Since the empirical element satisfies our natural need to seek out the concept of morality in the world there must exist a particular relationship between the two. Kant claims that not just any experience can fulfill this need. One must use “great reserve and caution” when attempting to draw the correct moral principle out of an experience. Otherwise, one could misconstrue God’s end or aim. When analyzing prayer as an experience in this light, Kant creates a dichotomy between formal prayer (letter) and the spirit of prayer:

Praying, conceived as an inner ritual service to God and hence as a means of grace, is a superstitious delusion (a fetish-making); for it only is the declaring of a wish to a being who has no need of any declaration regarding the inner disposition of the wisher, through which nothing is therefore accomplished nor is any of the duties incumbent on us as commands of God discharged; hence God is not really served. A sincere wish to please God in all our doings and nondoings, i.e. the disposition, accompanying all our actions, to pursue these as though they occurred in the service of God, is the spirit of prayer, and this can and ought to be in us “without ceasing” (Kant: “Religion Within the Boundaries of Mere Reason”, 210).

The first sentence is a clear condemnation of prayer. But notice that Kant draws the distinction between the two types of prayer by calling to mind their purpose. Prayer treated as though it, in itself, were pleasing to God accomplishes nothing. However, prayer as a means to enhance our disposition toward God ought to be instilled in us. So, Kant is not simply condemning all prayer, but only the false

interpretation of prayer by treating it as an ends in itself. Prayer in the service of the moral imperative is actually something that we should all adopt. The spirit of prayer, however, is not understood in the traditional sense of prayer (e.g. reciting “The Our Father” or other prayers) since, according to Kant, this would be a false interpretation. Instead it is an internal disposition to want to please God through duty (action). Thus prayer is only bad when it infringes on one’s moral growth. Everything must be interpreted as being inferior to the moral element. So, because of our natural need to seek an empirical element in the pure religion, the spirit of prayer becomes a useful element in helping us reach God’s end.

Despite prayers’ usefulness, Kant makes clear that prayer and other forms of ritual are often harmful to pure religion. Historical faiths work against the true aim of God, because they claim to be the object of His end (Kant, 142). As evidence, these faiths provide revelation and scripture for which they offer their own interpretation. Obviously this is false, Kant claims, because these revelations and scripture are not presented as certain and universal as the categorical imperatives are. Thus the faiths are doing a disservice to humans by misrepresenting God’s aim.

In Kant’s view, the only way of incorporating revelation and scripture into the service of God is to interpret them such that they act as means towards the fulfillment of moral duty just as in the spirit of prayer. Revelation and scripture, then, would need to be reinterpreted since they clearly don’t all agree with Kant’s view on religion. Kant acknowledges that “this interpretation may often appear to us as forced” (Kant, 142). It is often forced because one must take a piece of work or experience and be sure to only extract moral principles from it where there may seem to be no moral principles in it at all. Interpreting a piece of scripture or a revelation is usually for the purpose of reaching a *greater* understanding of what is at hand. If what is being interpreted is already known, what is the point in interpreting it? It certainly won’t enrich my understanding since I am imposing my understanding on it. Nothing can be *extracted*.

The same applies to prayer. If one interprets prayer in terms of the moral imperative to arrive at the spirit of prayer which urges that I obey divine command, it’s already understood that one recognizes his or her duty to obey. Now, it could be noted here that the moral imperative is translated into divine command through interpretation of prayer. Here, prayer is serving to reassure one of God’s presence. However, I believe that since the interpretation of divine command was derived from my *preconceived* notion of morality, the interpretation offers no fruitful understanding of pure religion which I did not already know. At best, interpreting religious text only in terms of ethical duty or, as Kant calls, forced interpretation, changes the aesthetic of the moral law that we may hold in our heads. However, as Kant makes very clear, we must be very cautious not to deface the imperative too much such that God’s end becomes skewed. With this in mind, it would seem one would rather tread lightly by not shifting his understanding of the moral law at all.

Kant’s treatment of our natural need to manifest higher concepts empirically could make prayer or other rituals seem necessary, as if they were a formal requirement in actualizing ethical duty. Palmquist interprets Kant in this way:

Before God’s assistance can do any good, ‘man must first make himself worthy to receive it’ – and this worthiness refers not to ‘doing good deeds’ (a view often wrongly imputed to Kant) but to fostering a receptivity for goodness in one’s disposition. A person who prays to become worthy of God’s goodness is (or ought to be) conforming to this principle (Palmquist, 595).

I think this is a misreading of Kant. Palmquist is suggesting that prayer suffices to satisfy the requirement that we must first be worthy of God’s power before we are able fulfill his commands. Kant, though, does not think of our natural need as a necessity in the bounds of pure religion. Instead, he is only accounting for

historical faith having a consistent presence in all human history. So the natural need should be treated more as a psychological phenomenon than a necessity. Kant acknowledges that there are those who choose to concern themselves with higher concepts (such as philosophers) and do not need prayer as a means to manifest the imperative. Although prayer may satisfy some individuals' needs to experience the moral "ought", Palmquist is mistaken in thinking that this need extends to all as a prerequisite to being worthy of God's power.

Although Kant endorses the usefulness of prayer in his theology where it might seem inconsistent, he never asserts it in a truly positive sense: prayer alone is not pleasing to God. With this in mind, the two uses of prayer that Kant adumbrates, reassurance of God and an "extra" incentive towards fulfilling moral duties, are both valid and sound within his theology. However, Kant's formal construction of true religion certainly doesn't seem to need prayer. The forced interpretation that Kant calls for is problematic in that it may fulfill a need in the individual but it also brings that individual closer to misconstruing the moral law. Furthermore, the moral interpretation presupposes that the individual already knows the imperative well. Limiting oneself to only one type of interpretation of scripture seems fruitless. I think Kant preferred that all persons should try to resist this need, if they felt it, and simply adhere to the moral law that they discovered *a priori*. Perhaps he was simply trying to appease some authority breathing down his neck. It is also possible that Kant was bothered by the fact that history is so saturated by these religious doctrines. He may have felt compelled to account for it some way in his philosophy so he deemed it a frailty of mankind. But it would seem that after reading Kant's theology and recognizing that our need to manifest God's aim was a fault, we would change our ways and pull away from any natural need. Regardless, I think Kant acknowledges that ritualistic practices are an overall detriment to his moral religion but only chose to include them insofar as they have been such a common instrument throughout the course of history in all cultures.

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