

Response to Douglas McGaughey's Paper

Thank you for your gracious response to my commentary on Paul's Letter to the Romans and especially for the constructive juxtaposition of Paul the Apostle and Immanuel Kant in an effort to establish the resemblances and differences between them. The latter is extremely beneficial in determining to what extent they concur in their thought, though the one is theological and the other is philosophical.

I want to concentrate on the quotation you cite from Kant's *Religion Within the Boundaries of Mere Reason* on page 9. You introduce it with the sentence: "Kant formulates the issue of religion with the question: What can I hope?¹" He answers in *Religion*:

... if a human being is corrupt ..., how can he possibly bring about this revolution by his own forces ...? Yet duty commands that he be good, and duty commands nothing but what we can do. The only way to reconcile this is by saying that *a revolution is necessary in the mode of thought but a gradual reformation in the mode of sense* ... That is: If by a single and unalterable decision a human being reverses the supreme ground of his maxims ... (and thereby puts on a 'new man'), he is to this extent ... a subject receptive to the good; but he is a good human being only in incessant laboring and becoming; i.e., *he can hope* ... to find himself upon the good ... path of constant *progress* from bad to better. For him who penetrates to the intelligible [supersensible] ground of the heart ..., i.e., for God, this is the same as actually being a good human being (pleasing to him); and to this extent the change can be considered a revolution. For the judgment of human beings, however, who can assess ... only by the upper hand they gain over the senses in time, the change is to be regarded only as an ever-continuing striving for the better ...² (emphasis added)

You comment on this quotation by saying, "Kant's notion of "pure" religion, then, is a faith in what distinguishes us at least in degree if not in kind from all other species that is also the basis of our hope that we can be moral beings. Yet Kant by no means leaves the individual isolated and alone with his moral efforts. He speaks of the need for a culture not of "skill" but of "promoting the will."

The locus of that culture would be, as he states elsewhere in *Religion*, the church. Not the invisible church, but the visible church, a differentiation he also makes in *Religion*. And that, it seems to me is a significant differentiation, and it relates to other differentiations that he makes. The difference between "the Christian religion" and "the Christian faith," or "Pure Religion" and "Learned Religion." Or simply, Reason and Revelation." But to what extent is the church, the visible church, the appropriate locus

1 . See the first critique B 833 and *Logik*, vol. III of *Immanuel Kant. Werke in sechs Bänden*, ed. Wilhelm Weischedel (Darmstadt: Wissenschaftliche Buchgesellschaft, 1998), 448.

2 . Kant, *Religion Within the Boundaries of Mere Reason*, 68.

of this needed culture to “promote the will.” How is the church different that society's culture? Kant differentiates between a juridical community in which people are their own law-giver, and an ethical community in which individuals determine their ethical conduct on the basis of the categorical imperative. But the juridical community in which people are their own legislators cannot be that realm that would “promote the will,” because a juridical community legislates legal exceptions to its system of laws that subvert the universalism of law. And it is precisely those legal exceptions to law that generate the realities of injustice, poverty, racism, sexism, etc.

It would appear, therefore, that the church would promote its own distinctive culture that in turn would promote the individual will to morality. But what is that church like, at least in contrast to the “invisible church”? For Kant it might be the church that apparently prevailed in Königsberg and perhaps the whole province of Prussia, namely the Lutheran Church.

But to what extent would the Lutheran Church or any church promote the will to morality, if, under Kant's differentiation between “the invisible church” and “the visible church,” the priority is given to the invisible church that sanctions the universalism of natural or pure religion, the religion of pure practical reason. Kant does not hesitate to call this pure religion “the Christian Religion,” and he does not hesitate to identify it with the kingdom of God. Pure religion, the Christian Religion, is universal and it is directed toward universal law, and each human being is able to recognize by his or her reason the will of God that lies at the basis of natural or pure religion. God is the supreme lawgiver, but the reality of God emerges naturally from the laws or maxims that arise within human consciousness; and these laws in turn establish the metaphysical truth of human freedom because they infer that human beings can hear the call to duty and obey its laws. However, since I need more than a lifetime to achieve moral fulfillment, I am metaphysically directed to the truth of immortality and therefore ultimately to the truth of Deity.

At the same time Kant also does not hesitate to acknowledge the validity of the “Christian faith,” but it is the faith that is determined by historical revelation; and faith, determined by revelation, may be subjected to intellectual assent to doctrines and dogmas that the universality of pure reason cannot acknowledge. Historical revelation discloses Jesus the Christ interpreted in terms of eschatological and christological conceptualities, but, according to Kant, they must be interpreted by biblical scholars in order to determine to what extent they cohere with pure practical reason. Kant regards Jesus to be the founder of the universal religion of reason. He cites Matthew 5:20-48 as an example of pure religion and maintains that pure reason and not scholarship must be the interpreter of such texts. Jesus sums up all duties into one **universal** rule “love God.” Alongside of this one universal rule there is also a **particular** rule, “love everyone as yourself.” The former is elicited by reason; the latter is derived from revelation.

Accordingly, both reason and revelation are interdependent; one cannot do without the other, but pure practical reason ultimately determines what is truly universal

in the will to morality. So the Christian Religion is both a religious faith determined by reason and a learned faith that requires erudition. Consequently scriptural scholars are needed to establish what aspects of historical revelation correspond to the religion of reason and its universality of laws. Scholars are the interpreters and preservers of revelation, but Kant requires that they also engage in profane learning in order to preserve a healthy balance between revelation and the world in which it originated.

It is here that my problem with Kant begins to emerge. To return to the quotation on page 9. Human beings are corrupt, in as far as they have a natural propensity to evil, and Kant differentiates three different grades of this natural propensity: (1) the frailty of human nature; (2) the impurity of the human heart, that is, the propensity to adulterate moral incentives with immoral ones; (3) the propensity to adopt evil maxims. Kant, therefore, like Paul, acknowledges the reality of *hamartia*. However, in contrast to Luther and Calvin, he rejects Augustine's doctrine of original sin. *Hamartia* does not fate humanity. Human beings, as the quotation states, can put on a "new man" by reversing the supreme ground of his maxims and "become a subject receptive to the good." But as Kant qualifies, "... he is a good human being only in incessant laboring and becoming; i.e., *he can hope*."

Doug, as you follow up on this Kantian "becoming," you engage the aporetic reality that I enunciate in two different contexts in the commentary: "Be what you have become!" and "Become what you already are!" You correctly relate "Be what you have become" to the rite of baptism, a death and resurrection experience from which a new human being emerges. I claim that Paul considers this new human being to be free of *hamartia*; that is, healed. Accordingly, the mandate is, be the new human being that you have become. If my understanding of Kant is correct, I think that Kant would acknowledge this as "the new man." Kant, however, recognizes the need to place this new human being in the context of a culture that will reinforce the will to morality. But what is the orientation of that culture? Or what is the character of that church community? It is at this juncture that the corresponding aphorism plays a vital role, "Become what you already are." The baptized human being has become a new human being, but how can that newness be maintained in a world that is dominated by the old moral order and the power of *hamartia*? It is not merely a horizon of possibilities. To put it in terms of Plato's allegory of the cave, it is the process of becoming adjusted to the light of the form of the Good after one has emerged from the cave of non-being. It is the process of maintaining that newness of being by entering into a life-style that is committed to justice, healing, and, perhaps above all, delivering the creation from its bondage to corruption. Neither the culture or the church can reinforce this commitment to a new humanity without the power of God's Spirit, the gift that the Creator imparts to each new human being in order "to become what he or she already is." It is the gift of incarnation. And that gift is implied in Paul's christological phrase, "Christ Jesus," the community of the One and the Many (1 Cor 12:12) that incorporates Jesus as the Christ (and Christ is to be construed as the transcendent reality of Wisdom of Solomon's Sophia) to designate that ethical community of incarnation that participates in God's

transcendence and immanence at the same time.

This is a new universalism, a universalism that Kant cannot claim. Reason's capacity to will the laws of duty can set in motion a cause and effect relationship that generates change in society and in the world. But the completion of that transformation requires immortality, for Kant's process of becoming to be actualized. Kant's universalism is essentially a transcendent universalism. God is the supreme lawgiver, but God offers humanity nothing more than the creation of transcendent selves who, on the basis of the metaphysical realities of freedom and the will to morality are limited to "incessant laboring and becoming." There is no participation in God's own transcendence through incarnation.

Kant's universalism is directed toward the One, the transcendent reason of self, who has the transcendent capacity to love God. Paul, I think, would validate that. But this transcendent self is still dependent on Revelation that stipulates the particular to love others as one loves oneself. But Revelation adds that to love others as one loves oneself requires the incarnation of God's Spirit. It is in Romans 5:5 that Paul says, "Hope is not humiliated because the love of God is being poured out through the holy Spirit given to us."

Kant made a space in life for religion, and for him the Christian Religion is the absolute religion; and to that extent at least I am happy to be a Kantian. But I find that Paul the Apostle offers me a more complete universalism that offers the possibility of the transformation of the world even before I enter into immortality.

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