

Philosophy in Review



Allen W. Wood, "Kant and Religion."

Nicholas Anderson

Volume 41, Number 2, May 2021

URI: <https://id.erudit.org/iderudit/1078062ar>

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.7202/1078062ar>

[See table of contents](#)

Publisher(s)

University of Victoria

ISSN

1206-5269 (print)

1920-8936 (digital)

[Explore this journal](#)

Cite this review

Anderson, N. (2021). Review of [Allen W. Wood, "Kant and Religion."]. *Philosophy in Review*, 41(2), 98–100. <https://doi.org/10.7202/1078062ar>

Copyright © Nicholas Anderson, 2021



This document is protected by copyright law. Use of the services of Érudit (including reproduction) is subject to its terms and conditions, which can be viewed online.

<https://apropos.erudit.org/en/users/policy-on-use/>

érudit

This article is disseminated and preserved by Érudit.

Érudit is a non-profit inter-university consortium of the Université de Montréal, Université Laval, and the Université du Québec à Montréal. Its mission is to promote and disseminate research.

<https://www.erudit.org/en/>

Allen W. Wood. *Kant and Religion*. Cambridge University Press 2020. 270 pp. \$89.99 USD (Hardcover ISBN 9781108422345); \$29.99 USD (Paperback ISBN 9781108432054).

In the preface to *Kant and Religion*, Allen W. Wood frames his excellent study of Kant by expressing dissatisfaction with the state of contemporary religious thought. On the one hand, Wood criticizes forms of secularism that fail to acknowledge the importance of religion to moral life. On the other hand, Wood likens the enthusiasm of ‘white evangelical Christianity’ to the aged Inquisitor of Dostoevsky, claiming that political partisanship has distorted Christian values into something ‘sick, monstrous, and nihilistic’ (xvii). This cultural antithesis on matters of religion is mirrored in Wood’s understanding of Kantian scholarship, which divides broadly speaking into two camps: that of the ‘secularists’ who, like Goethe, see Kant as ‘staining’ his critical system with ersatz Christian notions, and that of the ‘traditional religious believers’ who claim Kant destroys Christian faith, introducing in its place a peculiar ‘Königsbergian nihilism’ (xiv, xv). Wood aims to chart a course between these extremes by expounding an interpretation of Kant’s *Religion within the Boundaries of Mere Reason* as laying the groundwork for a form of religion that is neither secular nor dogmatic but rational.

Wood thus begins the first chapter by disputing the claim that Kant’s philosophical project consists of a ‘retreat from religion’ and is thereby ‘part of the *secularization* of modern culture under the sway of Enlightenment reason’ (1). Instead, Wood argues that Kant does not reduce religion to morality but rather that for Kant ‘religion goes beyond morality, adding something to it that enriches the moral life’ (3). This something added is, above all else, the collective symbols contained in religion, whereby moral ideas are disseminated to the ethical community. Religious scripture must be understood *symbolically* and interpreted in light of the demands of practical reason. Through symbolism we have access to non-empirical concepts which would otherwise have ‘no meaning for our lives and no religious significance for us’ (6). Wood helpfully draws upon the terminology of the third *Critique* to clarify further the meaning of ‘symbol,’ arguing that presenting the ideas of morality symbolically constitutes ‘the essence of all true religion’ (121).

Reading scripture symbolically also addresses the problem of relating Kant’s doctrines of rational religion to historical revelation. Wood explores this problematic relation through a careful discussion of Kant’s two ‘experiments’ laid out at the beginning of *Religion*. With the first such experiment, Kant hopes to demonstrate that there is no conflict between the teachings of revealed faith and the religion of pure reason (15). In the second experiment, Kant considers whether the religious symbols of historical faith are necessary for the moral agent. Kant tests whether ‘revealed religion is a wider concentric circle surrounding the inner circle of rational religion;’ in such a case, Wood claims that the doctrines of historical faith would be permissible for the moral agent, if not a constitutive part of rational faith (19).

The second chapter examines the relationship between ‘moral belief’ and the highest good. Wood analyzes the ‘moral argument’ as it is found in the three *Critiques* to show the ‘practical grounds’ for rational faith (29). To distinguish Kant’s sense of rational faith from ‘what we ordinarily think of as belief,’ Wood employs Andrew Chignell’s typographical convention of capitalizing ‘Belief’ to designate a ‘special kind of rational assent on theoretical grounds’ (33). Further, to illustrate the asymptotic character of Kant’s practical philosophy, Wood makes use of Josiah Royce’s idea of ‘loyalty to a lost cause’ (36). Such a lost cause can be secular or theological, but in either case it entails a devotion to some ideal that transcends an individual’s lifespan. By introducing Chignell and Royce’s terminology, Wood seeks to clarify a profound insight of Kantian ethics, namely that the moral agent needs the support of faith to act for the sake of an end that will never be actualized.

As Kant observes regarding the motivation of his friend Moses Mendelssohn, it is natural to strive for a purpose that one will not live to enjoy.

Having examined the practical need for faith, Wood turns in chapters three through seven to the ‘fragments’ of Christianity—Original Sin, the Son of God, divine grace, and the church—by which Kant tests his hermeneutical hypothesis that the doctrines of revealed religion are compatible with practical faith (19). Chapters three and four offer an interpretation of the notions of ‘radical evil’ and ‘the change of heart,’ which together constitute Kant’s symbolic interpretation of Original Sin. While some scholars stress the ‘inextirpable’ or apparently noumenal character of radical evil, Wood argues that ‘the radical human propensity to evil has a social and historical origin,’ namely, in the mutual corruptibility that arises from ‘unsocial sociability’ (78). Regardless of its origin, the thesis of radical evil is the necessary starting-point for moral progress, since ‘we cannot begin our strivings for moral improvement with a presumption of our innocence’ (89). In contrast to traditional understandings of Original Sin, Kant’s thesis of radical evil preserves individual autonomy by allowing the possibility of a ‘moral revolution’ or ‘change of heart’ within the subject. This moral revolution is not literal but the symbolic representation of our ‘gradual, open-ended struggle for moral improvement’ (89). It is ‘something for which we must hope, but of which we can never claim certain possession’ (113). It thus reflects an epistemic opacity inherent in moral life, namely, the uncertainty regarding the goodness of one’s intentions.

Chapter five takes up the Christian concept of the Son of God, which symbolizes for Kant the ‘ideal of humanity’ that ‘serves as a standard of perfection for our moral striving’ (117). It is not an ideal we can emulate since ‘its purity of will is achieved innately and without effort’ (126). Rather, the Son of God symbolizes the pure moral *disposition* to which we can hope to aspire subsequent to the moral metanoia of a ‘change of heart.’ Most significantly, the symbol of the Son of God raises the question, ‘[m]ight we think of ourselves as capable, through the change of heart, of becoming human beings well-pleasing to God?’ (126). As with other religious notions, Kant gives a symbolic interpretation of the idea, arguing that we can hope to be ‘well-pleasing’ to, and thus forgiven by, God only if we first make the effort toward moral improvement. The question of forgiveness leads to an examination of grace and salvation, the topics of the sixth chapter. As with other facets of traditional religious practice, the question is how to interpret the possibility of God’s grace in such a way that it is compatible with autonomy. Wood summarizes Kant’s position regarding grace with ample use of the conditional: ‘If divine aid is necessary for us to accomplish [a change of heart], we can justifiably claim that this divine aid is available to us, if we do what lies in our power to make ourselves worthy of it’ (158). Metaphysical claims about the status of grace are, according to Wood, irrelevant for Kant’s practical purpose. Any religious symbolism in support of morality is permissible if it does not assert truths that surpass the bounds of reason.

Chapter seven analyzes part three of *Religion*, which deals with the ‘ethical community’ and the role of the church in promoting a universal rational culture. Consequent to the idea that radical evil is of social origin, Wood’s Kant expresses an optimistic confidence that radical evil can be overcome by institutional reform. The ethical community, like the Son of God, is an unattainable ideal, yet it can be worked toward ‘through the historical progress of existing churches’ (172). Religion is subjected to a ‘historical dynamic’ in which the inner circle of rational religion and the outer circle of historical faith are gradually reconciled (171). The progress the ecclesiastical church makes toward becoming the pure ethical community hinges on the symbolic interpretation of the scriptural tradition. Thus, Kant does not move society toward a ‘secular moralism,’ but uses inherited symbols to promote ‘the true end of religion: the self-making of better human beings’ (190, 178). Wood’s elegant account of the gradual convergence of the real and the ideal, however, raises the question of

how this optimistic progressive vision squares with Kant's account of the enduring moral difficulties inherent in our condition as finite rational beings.

After comparing Kant's thoughts on religion and conscience to that of Mendelssohn in chapter eight, Wood concludes the book noting that 'we have not lived up to Kant's hopes' (211). Wood defends Kant's legacy on religion by claiming that the failure is due primarily to the corruption of religious thought. Yet one wonders if prominent 19th and 20th century theologians, from Kierkegaard to Barth, would not contend the opposite, namely, that Kant failed to account for the possibility that what is deepest in religion may not be accessible by the light of reason. Understanding religion as ancillary but not necessary to moral life would not offer a persuasive account to the pious. This hesitation to consider traditional faith as a plausible guide for our lives is, perhaps, the most notable assumption of the book. Further, Wood's conclusion argues that if we are to find some way of resolving our current discontent 'we must understand Kant's religious vision better than we do' (215). While Wood's faith in the salutary effects of such understanding is admirable, he leaves us guessing what Kant's religious vision would look like if applied to our current state of affairs – a world where religious symbols have little purchase on much of society, especially our college educated elite. Although one would have liked to hear more on such points, Wood's reticence does not detract from this careful, meticulous study of Kant's *Religion*. Wood's insightful study will be a touchstone for future scholarship.

Nicholas Anderson, Boston College