

**ON THE POSSIBILITY OF A UNIVERSAL RELIGION OF REASON:****FROM KANT TO DERRIDA****Mourad Laabdi**

A key element in Immanuel Kant's metaphysics of morals is the concept of universality. Without the factor of universality no moral law and no religion of reason can see the light. Today, as pluralistic societies grow more hyphenated, complex and fragile, the need for a universal religion of reason grows more exigent. In order to avoid, or minimize at least, the intensity of the religious sensitivity in multi-cultural communities—i.e. to protect the ideal of plurality itself—religion must put the commandment of humanity before all other ends, especially if God is that end. Today, as religious hostility continues to fully or partially fuel new massacres and genocides, as recently happened in Gaza, one wonders: Could a universal faith of reason make part of the solution to religious violence? The issue is highly complicated and many skeptics would ask: Is it even possible to espouse the principle practices of faith (religion) with those of knowledge (reason)? For the purpose of this discussion, I suggest an analytical reading of two philosophical works: Kant's *Religion within the Limits of Mere Reason* and Jacques Derrida's "Faith and Knowledge." In Kant's work, I discuss the theoretical background of the possibility of a universal moral law which can be founded only through a universal religion. In Derrida's text, I aim to go beyond the Kantian thesis and situate this debate in our modern time. I argue that what we need today is not a universal religion which aspires to unite all human beings under rational thought. Instead, we need a universalizable form of rational

religiosity which emphasises as its highest end humanity itself; a universal religion of social singularities.

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My methodological engagement with the question of universal religion in this essay takes the form of a response to some common criticisms that are often made against Kant's philosophy of religion. In particular: that Kant declares the death of God in order to announce the birth of rational (universal) morality and that he praises Christianity over other religions and considers it the only possible moral religion. By investigating the concept of Christianity in *Religion within the Boundaries of Mere Reason*, this paper argues that Kant by no means flatters the Christian faith over others. Instead, he introduces them all together under the category of ecclesiastical faith (historical faiths that have been formed discursively within history). The pure Christianity of reason which he proposes is an abstract relation that never *reveals* itself in Scripture, revelation or in any other discursive form of divine and/or prophetic narration. It uses reason, and nothing more than reason, to come to the concept of God and morality. Its members never blandish God to make them better beings. Instead, through reason, they unify themselves under unconditional laws and try to recognize duty on their own. The concept of duty in pure rational faith is a matter that strictly concerns human beings and is not the affair of God. By duty, the concept of humanity must precede that of God, i.e. everything we do or plan to do must be done from duty and for the sake of humanity (humanity as *end in itself*), not for the sake of God.

I divide this paper into three chapters and a conclusion. The first chapter focuses on Kant's discussion of religion, morality and the concept of God. My aim is to clarify how Kant does not deny the possibility of a God, but insists that a rational understanding of the concept of God is attainable only through religion (in the form of an *invisible church*). The second chapter analyses Kant's precept of Christianity. In order to further clarify Kant's position, I refer to Derrida's reading of Kant's *Religion* in "Faith and Knowledge." In the third chapter, I shed light on Kant's concept of 'duty' with regard to the ideals of salvation and "service of God." I elaborate on the relationship between obedience and authority with reference to Stanley Millgram's experiment on behavioral obedience. Finally, in the conclusion, I indicate that a historical faith can perhaps play an important role in guiding people to acquire moral principles. I argue, in line with Derrida, that the world today is in urgent need of a universalizable religion of reason, but one which bases itself on the particularities (histories) of all religions.

#### Moral Religion, the Road to God

In 1781, Kant declared "I had to deny knowledge in order to make room for faith."<sup>1</sup> This is one of Kant's most cited lines, which has been largely employed to criticize his philosophy of religion. In fact, with a careful reading of Kant's *Religion*, one may surmise that the issue is far more complicated than a simple disapproval of religion on the part of Kant. The above quote appears in the following specific circumstances: Kant disavows the proposition of a *phenomenal* God when practicing pure practical reason. For him, any attempt to presume God would be an effort to de-immunize pure reason and

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<sup>1</sup> Immanuel Kant, *Critique of Pure Reason* (1<sup>st</sup> ed., 1781; 2<sup>nd</sup> ed., 1787). Trans., Paul Guyer and Allen Wood. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998. P. 117. German pagination: B XXX.

strip it of its core principles. Since God is not a phenomenon or an appearance, Kant explains that in order to apply reason to it, we would have to turn God into an object of experience, with which the practice of pure reason will be impossible (since it is not grounded in empirical praxis).

Twelve years later, in 1793, Kant prefaced *Religion*, with a reassertion of a similar proposition: human beings do not necessarily need God, a phenomenal one at least, in order to realize their moral duties. The opening sentence of his book affirms that,

So far as morality is based on the conception of the human being as one who is free but who also, just because of that, binds himself through his reason to unconditional laws, it is neither of the idea of another being above him in order that he recognize his duty, nor that he observe it, of an incentive other than the law itself (*Religion*: 33).<sup>2</sup>

Thus, if there is a demand for religion to carry moral perfection among human beings, it is because of the weak nature of human beings. In other words, Kant argues that it is because people are weak (by nature) and incline to evil conduct that leads to a need for religion. Merely, because morality “in no way needs religion but is rather self-sufficient by virtue of pure practical reason” (ibid). In the pursuit of good conduct, the highest and unconditional good, our maxims must not be determined by any material causal factors other than reason itself. Our principles of action should not be founded on synthetic commandments (which are derived from subjective inclinations and tend to condition our

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<sup>2</sup> Immanuel Kant, *Religion within the Boundaries of Mere Reason* (1793-4). Trans., Allen Wood and George di Giovanni. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998.

duty), but must be established on rational and universalizable moral laws, through which we will seek the *ultimate end*: the highest good.<sup>3</sup>

However, it is important to recall here that Kant does not utterly reject the possibility of a relationship between morality and religion. On the contrary, Kant repeatedly maintains that morality “inevitably leads to religion” (*Religion*: 35). Morality, inescapably and without doubt, carries itself through religion—due to the intimate relationship between the concept of a “moral lawgiver” (God) for all humanity and the rational construct of duty. What Kant clearly declines is the thought which associates the highest good with, and attributes it to, God, and thus to religion. For him, such an approach is “a synthetic *a priori* proposition... and cannot be analytically evolved from morality” (ibid). More specifically, while Kant supports and defends a *moral religion*, he renounces a *religion of rogation*. The religion through which we would ‘flatter’ (praise dishonestly) God to make us happy and better human beings with no need on our part to ‘do’ something to obtain it, “more than to *ask* [God] for it ... more than *wishing*” (p. 71).<sup>4</sup>

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<sup>3</sup> See, for Kant’s distinction between *an end* and *the ultimate end*, his extended footnote on pages 35-6.

<sup>4</sup> I agree with Kant that all religions (of rogation), including the three main monotheisms (Judaism, Christianity and Islam), accentuate, in one way or another, this idea of *wishing* and *asking* (God, saints or other intermediaries) for betterment. However, in some religions, if not in all of them, the issue is not simply an unproblematic matter of mere ‘hope’ and ‘trust’ in God. From the (*sunni* orthodox) Islamic perspective, for example, the word *ittikaal* (dependency, trust, reliance) entails two different and conflicting connotations: *tawakkul* (the second ‘a’ is shortened and the ‘k’ is stressed) and *tawaakul* (the second ‘a’ is pronounced with a slight extension and the ‘k’ is not stressed). Theologically, they both denote entire submission to and dependence on God. However, the former (*tawakkul*) means to count on God only after and through one’s own endeavor and exertion—i.e., according to Kant’s principle of moral religion: “to become a better human being, everyone must do as much as it is in his powers to do” (p. 71). One of the many prophetic hadiths which emphasize this principle says: “*if you trust Allah with the right kind of tawakkul, He will provide you sustenance as He provides for the birds – they go out in the morning with empty stomachs and come back in the evening with full stomachs*” (narrated by Tirmidhi). Evidently, birds do not sit in their nests waiting to be nurtured by a superior power, but fly and strive to find food. A Quranic verse quotes in the same realm that “Allah changeth not the condition of a folk until they (first) change that which is in their hearts” (13: 11). In other words, God will not change a people’s condition (from bad to good or vice versa) as long as they have not challenged what is in their hearts (intentions, motives, inclinations, etc). Does this not correspond to Kant’s argument (p. 72)

Kant's *Religion* has led to agnosticism among many of, not only Kant's contemporaries, but also several of today's philosophers and theologians. In response to their scepticism, Kant reemphasizes the ineluctable relationship between a religion of reason and one of 'historical' form. He explicates in his Preface to the second edition of *Religion* that both types function in two circles which are not "external to one another but concentric circles," with a joint centre (p. 40). A religion of *historical system* can contain (and should lead to) a religion of *pure reason*, but not the other way around. "Between reason and Scripture," Kant insists (*ibid*), "there is not only compatibility but also unity." Orientated by moral concepts, members of a religion should be able to reach and discover pure rational morality: a morality which is independent and sufficient on its own and in no need of miracles and revelation to institute its principles. Kant confirms the conceivability of such a proposition. In fact, as he later explained in Part Three of the book (p. 111), "the true (visible) church is one that displays the (moral) kingdom of God on earth inasmuch as the latter can be realized through human beings."

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that it is not requisite to cognize what God does for our salvation, but of greater importance is what we ourselves have to do "in order to become worthy of this assistance"? In some way, this seems to give a closer meaning from the Quranic verse. So, in order that God assists in changing our status, we have to show that we are worthy of his assistance—and this comes through changing what is in our heart; i.e. to move into action and start doing it ourselves. In situations of distress, God's interference is chiefly psychotherapeutic. People are urged to 'struggle' to make themselves better human beings, but are also asked to put trust in God (i.e., to *wish* and *ask* for his help) when they cannot change their perturbing reality. In other words, we should put 'hope' at a supersensible power (God) only and especially if we have already exhausted every possible sensible means. Antonymous to the precept of *tawakkul* is *tawaakul*. It is what Kant discusses as the human being's mere wish for improvement (by asking God to remit one's sins, for example) without being part of its occurrence. Islam utterly denounces the second type of reliance (*tawaakul*), although the latter marks today the life of the majority of Muslims' behaviors. Kant successfully argues the necessity of a rational principle by which we would endeavor to improve ourselves in order to fulfill the "highest good." This should be the basis on which every religion is to found its moral commandments. More significantly, he brings our attention to an essential point in this regard: that the struggle to improve ourselves is not ephemeral but an unremitting battle against evil, thus requiring constant attentiveness and engagement. (For further elaboration of the concept of *tawakkul*, see, for example, Scheindlin 2008: 22-3; Koslowski 2001: 38-46 and 126-9).

However, although rational and historical religions share the same centre, they remain fundamentally different from one another. According to Kant, the precept of *universality* is what mainly demarcates the two kinds of faith from each other.<sup>5</sup> To clearly understand this distinction, we should pause at Kant's hypothesis of a "universal church," within the general framework of his discussion of the "ethical community." The "ethical state of nature" is an *ethico-civil* state (ethical community) and belongs to the same category as the *juridico-civil* state (political community). In the first, human beings are brought together under enforced public juridical laws, whereas in the second, people are consociated under non-coercive *laws of virtue*. "Since the duties of virtue concern the entire human race," Kant reveals (p. 107), "the concept of an ethical community always refers to the ideal of a totality of human beings, and in this it distinguishes itself from a political community." It is the principle of universality which makes a community ethical. It takes the human being beyond their individual good will and unites them under one common goal of goodness: freedom from the dominance of evil.

Kant advances a tenable interpretation of the way the concept of God is related to morality. He calls our attention to two main points. On the one hand, in a political community, the stated laws are concerned with the *legality* of actions. Hence, every member of this group is expected to be a lawgiver—since the issue here is one of externality and visible-ness (juridical legality). On the other hand, in an ethical community, the laws are meant to forge *morality* of actions; thus individuals cannot be

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<sup>5</sup> Kant favours the use of the word 'faith' instead of 'religion'. He asserts that there is only one *pure* religion, but various kinds of faith. For him, It is more proper to suppose, for instance, that a person is of this (Christian, Jewish, Muslim, Buddhist, etc.) faith than of that religion. Erroneously, people enunciate the word religion but actually mean their "ecclesiastical faith." Religion, for Kant, "hides inside [them] and depends on moral dispositions" in order to emerge (p. 117).

legislators. Since it bears on invisibleness and internality, morality cannot be susceptible to human laws. Consequently, someone (or something) other than the human being is needed to define their moral actions—someone (or something) who dwells beyond all possible phenomenal descriptions that are already known to us. This one, the one and only, is God. “[With] the concept of God as moral ruler of the world,” Kant explains (p. 110), “an ethical community is conceivable only as under divine commands, i.e. as a *people of God*, and indeed *in accordance with the laws of virtue*.” God is the only possible superior lawgiver of an ethical community (because ‘he’ is the only one who knows what is in our hearts and that no one else but ‘him’ can reveal: our moral dispositions).<sup>6</sup>

In this respect, the idea of establishing a moral “people of God” cannot therefore be the oeuvre of the human being. God, as a *noumenal* internal force (who knows the heart), is the only one who can organise people under divine moral principles—no one is able to establish the *kingdom of God* other than God himself. However, this does not mean that the journey of the search and establishment of morality has come to its final halt and cannot be grounded in reality. For Kant (p. 111), “an ethical community under divine moral legislation is a church.” The church is the *only* form through which God’s

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<sup>6</sup> In order to demystify the proposition “God is the only superior lawgiver,” Kant footnotes on page 110 a brilliant comment on the meaning of God’s obedience. To the statement “we ought to obey God rather than men,” Kant responds that we should not be obedient to human beings only and especially when the latter dictate something that will oppose the moral law, something evil and will cause harm to people. Likewise, we also ought not to obey God’s command if it is not based on ethical principles, if it contradicts with morality. Kant’s seriousness about this issue clearly arises in the fourth and last part of *Religion*; specifically in his reflection on the concept of ‘inquisition’ in chapter four: “Concerning the guiding thread of conscience in matters of faith.” He expressed firm objection to the principle of inquisition and described it as an “awful will” which is “a matter of historical documentation,” not of divine command (pp. 179-80). Kant, who lived during a time when ecclesiastical tribunals were still at work in most of Europe (given that inquisitorial practices continued until mid 1800’s), affirms that inquisition is the outcome of an ‘error’ in the Christian faith and a “violation of conscience.”

moral commandments can be practiced by people; a bridge between heaven and earth, perhaps between the noumenal and the phenomenal. Here, I would like to draw attention to a widespread misreading of the relation of Christianity and morality. In particular, what seems to be understood as Kant's assertion that Christianity is the only possible moral religion. Several thinkers, including Derrida, have brought up this particular point. But what exactly lies behind this statement? Does Kant really profess that Christianity is the only source of morality?

Christianity: Pure Rational Faith or Ecclesiastic Faith?

Jacques Derrida summarizes the "*Kantian thesis*" in the fifteenth Italic of "Faith and Knowledge" in these terms:

*The Christian religion would be the only truly "moral" religion; a mission would thus be reserved exclusively for it alone, that of liberating a "reflecting faith." It necessarily follows therefore that pure morality and Christianity are indissociable in their essence and in their concept. If there is no Christianity without pure morality, it is because Christian revelation teaches us something essential about the very idea of morality...The unconditional universality of the categorical imperative is evangelical. The moral inscribes itself at the bottom of our hearts like a memory of the Passion. When it addresses us, it either speaks the idiom of the Christian—or is silent (p. 50).<sup>7</sup>*

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<sup>7</sup> Jacques Derrida, "Faith and Knowledge: the two Sources of "Religion" at the Limits of Reason Alone." Trans., Samuel Weber. Jacques Derrida, *Acts of Religion*. London and New York: Routledge, 2002, (pp. 42-101)

Derrida calls this thesis a “strange proposition” and reveals two major paradoxes about it.<sup>8</sup> First, is the assertion that morality and moral conduct is profoundly based on a total renunciation of (a historical) God. For one to be moral, he has to act as if God does not exist or is “no longer concerned with our salvation” (p. 52). Accordingly, the only way Christianity will be able to declare morality—thus to emphasise the universality of its faith—is when it mourns the death of God. Christianity means the death of God. Second, as a consequence of the first contradiction, the Kantian thesis is based on and leads to the *christianization* of the concept of religion and all its derivative constructs (e.g. revelation, cult, faith, sacred, holy, sacrifice, grace, radical evil, etc). It is another contribution to the *globalatinization*, to use Derrida’s word, of the word (and world of) religion, of which “hyper-imperialist appropriation has been underway now for centuries” (p. 66). But what does Kant himself has to say about this? How would he defend his thesis against such claims?

Concerning Derrida's first remark, the principle which Kant appears to support is the following: ““It is not essential, and hence not necessary, that every human being know what God does, or has done, for this salvation”; but it is essential to know *what a human being has to do himself* in order to become worthy of this assistance” (p. 72). This is also related to our earlier discussion of Kant’s distinction of *moral religion* vs. *religion of rogation*—on the ground that the latter drives its members to ‘empty’ dependency on God (by merely wishing and asking ‘him’ to make them better people), while the former leads them to self-reliance in order to alter their desperate situation. In fact, Kant’s

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<sup>8</sup> However, although he calls it a “*strange proposition*,” Derrida (p.49) also insists that the Kantian thesis “*must be taken as seriously as possible in each of its premises.*” Derrida’s critique raises some ‘serious’ questions about the dualism of faith and reason as I will discuss toward the end of this paper.

critique of religion (esp. Christianity) does not harbour (rational) absolutistic principles, but shakes the totalistic principles in religious doctrine. Kant does not write with the imperative tone: “what I say is the truth; you must take it without a question.” He does not postulate an *end* or *death* of God, but challenges the historical construction of a phenomenal God. He stresses the intimate liaison between God and reason, on the basis that a true belief in God should and must lead to reason. (I will come back to this particular point in my discussion of the possibility of a *kingdom of God* on earth).

Moreover, Kant shakes the stable foundations of belief and obedience; the divine and ‘sacred’ foundations which no one can question—and whoever does, pays a high price. The price that Kant had to pay after publishing *Religion* was to be forbidden from writing on religion again—although five years later, after the death of Frederick William II, he was able to publish *The Conflict of the Faculties* (1797). In the name of “freedom of thought,” Kant defends the right to *think*, and so to *believe* (as, for example, is clearly perceived from his strong objection to and rejection of the inquisition). Towards the end of his book (p. 181), Kant explicitly states that his work “does at least no harm and might even perhaps help.” He clearly admits the possibility that his discussion about God and religion might be truthful or mistaken. If he is right, then he wins; but if he is wrong, he only burdens himself with “an inconvenience which is no crime” (ibid).

With regard to Derrida's second comment, Kant's own words in this matter read as follow: “According to moral religion, however (and, of all the public religions so far known, the Christian alone is of this type) ...” (p. 71). This perhaps—according to my reading— is the only extract where Kant explicitly announces Christianity's inheritance of pure morality. However, does not the fact that the statement appears between

parentheses indicate, both grammatically and stylistically, its optional and elective nature (that it is possible but not necessary)? How appropriate then is it to build an entire critique on a one-line parenthetical remark, which could perhaps be optional to the author? Not to mention that Derrida, speaking of a “Kantian thesis” in its entirety, cites from the first part of *Religion* alone, while the book contains four parts.

In light of Derrida’s illustrations, and in order to see if Kant’s discussion of religion, purposely or unintentionally, Christianizes the concept of religion, one should legitimately ask: what does Christianity mean for Kant? A thorough understanding of Kant’s specific conceptualization of ‘Christianity’, as is developed throughout *Religion*, should perhaps elucidate the lexical polysemies and the intellectual ambiguities which are largely associated with his employment of this term. Christianity—one which Kant embraces and nominates to carry pure morality—is the only religion which is able and has the necessary (moral) infrastructure to establish an ethical community under divine law. It is a religion which is able to concretise the idea of a kingdom of God on earth. Christianity can realise this only through a church though, again, not the visible church with which we are acquainted. Kant is concerned only with a *true church* (p. 112). Four essentials mark and can make the true church: universality, purity, freedom and the inalterability of its constitution. Firstly, a true church must be established on rationales that will inevitably lead it to universal unity in one single church (where there will be no room for sectarian schisms). Secondly, in terms of quality, this universal union must be motivated by pure principles: nothing but moral incentives, (superstition and dogmatism are not allowed). Thirdly, the inner and outer relations between the members of this church must conform to the precept of freedom, (hierarchies and illuminatism are not

accepted). Fourthly, regarding its modality, the constitution that will manage this church must be determinate and unchangeable, (except for certain rules that will regulate its administration).

A major and decisive differentiation needs to be made between a faith which is historical (ecclesiastical faith) and a faith which is rational (pure religious faith)—on the ground that only the latter is valid to Kant’s thesis of a *universal church*.

The only faith that can found a universal church is pure religious faith, for it is a plain rational faith which can be convincingly communicated to everyone, whereas a historical faith, merely based on facts, can extend its influence no further than the tidings relevant to judgment on its credibility can reach (pp. 112-3).

“Universal” and “everyone” are key words in this quote. Here, Kant reemphasises his earlier argument of universalizability from the *Groundwork to the Metaphysics of Morals*. Essentially, Kant (p. 57) punctuates the principle that “*I ought never to act except in such a way that I could also will that my maxim should become universal.*” The act of universalizability is the most pivotal requisite in Kant’s project of morality. It is what makes the possibility of a moral law, and therefore the attainability of a moral religion. Without the ability to give universal laws, no moral religion can be founded.<sup>9</sup> Kant was even clearer about this point when stated in *Religion* (p. 122) that: “the distinguishing

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<sup>9</sup> Kant insists that our maxims must have a universal form. In other words, our principles of action must be expressed as if they are universal laws of nature applicable to all human beings (pp. 85-6). Every rational being must be able to use his maxims only to give laws that can be universalized, and to which he himself will subject. Morality for Kant (p. 88) is “the relation of actions to the autonomy of the will, that is, to a possible giving of universal law through its maxims.” Only actions which comply with the autonomy of free will—as a supreme principle of morality—are allowed. Kant, “Groundwork to the Metaphysics of Morals (1785),” in Immanuel Kant, *Practical Philosophy*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2006. 9<sup>th</sup> Ed.

mark of a true church is its *universality*.” Universality is revealed to us if a church bases itself on a religion of reason instead of a faith of revelation—for the latter, because of its empirical propensities, is incapable of conforming to universal, thus moral, principles. Duty as a subjective command is an important constituent at this level. Our universalizable maxims must be derived from a duty that bases itself on free will; one that takes orders only from the individual himself. However, instead of being based on people’s own subjective commands, duty has become God’s concern. This, for Kant, leads to a religion of *divine service*. “The human being,” Kant elucidates (p. 115), “will never regard any public institution for the promotion of the moral [content] of religion, as necessary in themselves but only for the purpose, as they say, serving their God.”<sup>10</sup>

The only religion that is needed is one that founds itself on principles of reason; one that is universalizable and is based on autonomy and good will. This type of religion alone is “*authentic* and valid for the whole world” (p. 121). Hence, all other kinds of faith, based on historical narration, are rejected and can never be accepted. Contrary to religion of reason, ecclesiastic faith draws on “statutory laws” of which recognition is possible not through reason but only through revelation. As it may be “propagated among human beings through tradition or scripture,” Kant affirms (p. 114), “this revelation would be a historical and not a purely rational faith.” A historical faith is *doctrinal* (as opposed to authentic) and empirical (as opposed to universal). However, for Kant (p. 127), it is an essential effect that “in the end religion will gradually be freed of all empirical grounds of

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<sup>10</sup> This thesis has background in Kant’s discussion of the *kingdom of ends* (humanity as *end in itself*) in the *Groundwork*. Kant strongly asserts that humanity must not be taken as means to convey our individual tendencies, but must be conceived as the highest end (higher than the end of God). Our moral acts must be conducted in the name or for the sake of nothing (including God’s service) other than for the sake of humanity itself, humanity as an end in itself. For an extended discussion of this precept, see especially (*Groundwork*: 80-7).

determination, of all statutes that rest on history and unite human beings provisionally for the promotion of the good through the intermediary of an ecclesiastical faith.” It is only through the mediation of a historical faith, that the practice a rational faith (through a *visible* church) is made possible.

In the fourth and last part of *Religion*, Kant’s position on Christianity becomes less ambiguous and more definite, as clearly appears from this excerpt:

[The] Christian doctrine is built upon facts and not upon mere concepts of reason, it is no longer called simply the Christian *religion*, but the Christian *faith*, which has been made the foundation of the church... The Christian faith, as *learned* faith, rests on history, and, to the extent that erudition (objectively) is at its base, it is not itself a *free* faith or one derived from insight into theoretically sufficient grounds of demonstration (p. 161).

This is the kind of Christianity that Kant reveals to us (although his conclusions are also applicable to all other religions). Christianity, one that is practiced today, is a historically constructed faith. It is not *acquired* individually through reason, but *learned* through profound knowledge (starting by the Scriptures). Accordingly, saying that Kant’s thesis Christianizes the concept of morality, that Kant limits morality to the Christian religion alone, is a false and delusive claim—because Christianity itself is not a moral religion on practical grounds. The concept of Christianity which Kant advances as a pure religion of reason is an abstraction that does not actually exist in reality and is not practiced by any of the faiths known to us. Kant insists, though, that Christianity and every other (revealed) religion comprise some values of pure reason; i.e. a revealed religion is also a rational

one. Thus, “we shall test it and be able to sort out what, and how much, it is entitled to from the one source or the other” (p. 155). Kant, at this stage, introduces “maxims of action” as a principle which alone can lead us, through ecclesiastical faith, to pure rational faith.

#### Moral Duty vs. Immoral Obedience

*Maxims of action* is one of Kant’s most intriguing concepts with regard to the question of religion today. It successfully copes (although not directly) with a very sensitive issue in the relationship between the three monotheistic faiths: namely, the idea of who is God’s *chosen* one. While Jews claim themselves the “chosen people” of God, Christians declare themselves the sons of God and Muslims believe they are the best people evolved for man kind. In Quran, for example, verse 110 from *Al-Imran* reads as follow:

Ye are the best of peoples evolved for mankind, enjoining what is right, forbidding what is wrong, and believing in Allah. If only the People of the Book had faith it were best for them; among them are some who have faith, but most of them are perverted transgressors (3: 110).

A large group of Muslims today obliviously read this verse in the sense that Islam is the only religion which will be recognized by God in the Last Day. As if one needs nothing other than being Muslim to be delivered from sin and saved from evil. The verse itself, however, reveals a more complicated precept. On the one hand, the first sentence in the verse is grammatically divided into two phrases: adverbial and conditional. The former functions as an adverb of the action of the second and describes it; the second conditions that description. In other words, if we rephrase the first sentence we should have something like this: “you are the best people who are raised up for humankind, but *only*

*because* (and if) you command good conduct and forbid evil, and believe in God. Now, on the other hand, the act of belief (in God) is mentioned here after that of enjoining the good and forbidding indecency. Why after? Why does the (abstract) act of belief in the Quranic verse follow after the other (practical) acts? Is belief not supposed to precede all actions, as is professed by all religions? Part of the answer has already been tackled in my discussion of *tawakkul*. I found Kant's principle of duty—not to rely on what God can do for our sake, but seek what we ought to do to become worthy of it—very useful. Before asking God to become morally good, we have to prove it ourselves; to show to God that we are worthy of his assistance, thus of redemption.

In his critical reflections on salvation (vicarious satisfaction), Kant reveals that it is impossible to make the ideal of redemption (removal of sin) comprehensible. While its attainability is possible only theoretically, salvation does not make any sense practically. Kant (p. 123) utterly rejects the notion that a “satisfaction has occurred for the sins of mankind”—in reference to the belief that Jesus died for the sins of humanity—thus, challenging the presumption that only being Christian and confessing one's sins suffice to receive divine pardon and become *God's chosen* one. Kant calls actions at the theoretical level maxims of *knowledge*, as opposed to maxims of *action*. The former, however, do not make us morally good in practice. For Kant (p. 124), “we cannot hope to partake in the appropriation of a foreign satisfying merit, and thus in salvation, except by qualifying for it through our zeal in the compliance with every human duty.” The only way to win salvation and be morally good should come from our own effort and self-reliance, not from ‘empty’ dependence on God. This is not a choice, as Kant insists, but an imperative, a categorical imperative. Indisputably, we have to cognize the commands of duty by

ourselves and activate our maxims of actions, because it is the latter that provide the real foundation of a saving faith and constitute its practical condition. Founded on free will, duty must be both *universal* and *particular*. It is ‘universal’ because it concerns all human beings in their internal as well as external interactions. The principle here should be: “Do your duty from no other incentive except the unmediated appreciation of duty itself” (p. 158). And this is how one can show that he loves God above everything else. It is ‘particular’ because it mainly focuses on people’s interaction with other people. The rule here is (in a way similar to the Golden Rule): “Love everyone as yourself” (ibid). People’s goodwill must be unconditional and unmediated by any individualistic and egocentric inclinations.

With this principle, Kant proposes *good life-conduct* as the ultimate priority in the human being’s relationship with God and with their selves. “*Apart from a good life-conduct,*” he explains (p. 166), “*anything which the human being supposes that he can do to become well-pleasing to God is mere delusion and counterfeit service of God.*” Any service of God with which it is aimed to please a certain historical God is “*mere fetishism*” (p. 173). People must be heedful and cautious not to transform the service of God into ‘fetishism’ and counterfeit service; “a fetish faith through which the masses are ruled and robbed of their moral freedom through obedience to a church (not religion)” (p. 174). For Kant,

The true (moral) service of God, which the faithful must render as subjects belonging to his kingdom but no less also as its citizens (under laws of freedom), is itself just as invisible as the kingdom, i.e. it is a *service of the heart* (in spirit and truth), and can consist only in the disposition of

obedience to all true duties as divine commands, not in actions determined exclusively for God. (p. 184)

What Kant seems to denounce here is not the service of God itself, but the practice which bases itself on blind obedience. His discussion of this concept is well-grounded and very timely. Irrational and delusory obedience to an authoritative centre has often been behind all religious conflicts which have violently shaken the world and drenched it with blood. Today, it continues to generate the same degree of hostility between people, all in the name of this or that faith, and all for the sake of God. Published on 19 December 2008 on the BBC News web-page,<sup>11</sup> an article entitled “People still willing to torture” reveals that US researchers have recently repeated the *Milgram test* and had similar results to those Milgram obtained forty eight years ago (see footnote 12). This time, 70% of the volunteers appeared ready to increase the voltage after pre-recorded screams of pain from the learner. An earlier replication of the same experiment was executed by ABC at Santa

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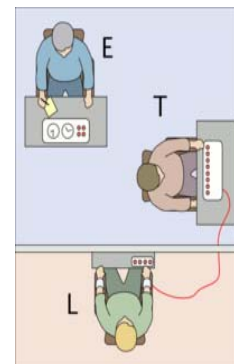
<sup>11</sup> See article at: <http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/health/7791278.stm>

Clara University in 2007<sup>12</sup> and it also showed that the participants kept generating electrical shocks just because they were asked to continue doing it. Here, while 65% of men were obedient, 73% of women gave way to the orders of the experimenter. When a participant from the ABC experiment was asked why he did not stop dispensing the shocks, he responded, “I was doing what I was supposed to do, and I’m there to help conduct an experiment, so I’m just doing my part.” Milgram asserts that in moments of pressure, people lose conscience and just follow orders, even if they do not agree with them.

Kant has paid much attention to this particular issue by focusing in the last chapter of his book on the relationship between conscience and faith. The question for him is not “how conscience is to be guided, but how conscience itself can serve as guiding thread in the most perplexing moral decisions” (p. 178). It is a duty and moral obligation that we

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<sup>12</sup> In 1961, Yale University professor of psychology Stanley Milgram conducted an experiment on 40 participants (all males between the age of 20 and 50) who were told that it concerns a study on the relationship between learning, memory and punishment. Each participant assumed the role of ‘the teacher’; was put in the same room with the experimenter (a biology professor); was given a list of questions; and was told to send a higher electric shock to the ‘learner’ (played by a trained actor) every time the latter gives a wrong answer. In reality there were no electric shocks. The learner (victim) set up a tape recorder which played pre-recorded sounds for each shock level. The participants did not know that they were the subject of that experiment, and the true aim of the experience, however, was to investigate the level of obedience which the subjects (teacher) will show when they are told by the authority figure (experimenter) to dispense, or continue to dispense if they wanted to stop, electric shocks to the learner. At the end, 65% of the participants obeyed to give shocks up to 450 volts while 35% refused to continue to 450 volts. Milgram explains that most participants were not comfortable with the situation and wanted to stop at many occasions, but continued to give shocks just because they were told so by the experimenter. Stanley Milgram, “Behavioral Study of Obedience,” *Journal of Abnormal and Social Psychology*, Vol. 67, N° 4, 1963, pp. 371-8. The ABC experiment under the title “Basic Instincts: The Science of Evil” posted at: <http://abcnews.go.com/Primetime/Story?id=2765416&page=1>



The experimenter (E) orders the teacher (T), the subject of the experiment, to give what the latter believes are painful electric shocks to a learner (L), who is actually an actor and confederate. [www.wikipedia.org](http://www.wikipedia.org)

should not conduct evil acts. Our conscience leads us naturally to this end, but it is us (human beings) who corrupt each other's conscience. "It suffices that they are there," Kant reaffirms (p. 105), "that they surround him, and that they are human beings, and they will mutually corrupt each other's moral disposition and make one another evil." A good example can be found in the Milgram test, where the latter reveals that the participants showed less responsiveness and hesitated to send electrical shocks when the experimenter (authority figure) was not in the room with them. The human being, as Kant frequently insists, does not incline to conduct evil from his own will, or "raw nature," but because of the others with whom he mingles. Given the circumstances of this highly complicated situation, the battle against evil will remain perpetual as long as we live among humans. It is a long-term struggle to attain the "highest prize" that one can win: to free ourselves from the ascendance of evil. And because our freedom and moral disposition are under ceaseless attack, we "must henceforth remain armed for battle" (ibid).

Conclusion: Can 'Faith' be the Future of Religion Today?

Kant claims that religious acts (praying, fasting, pilgrimage, priest-craft, even alms giving in the case of Islam (*Religion*: 185), etc.) are mere religious *superstition*, whereas believing that these acts will bridge a contact between their performers and God is mere religious *enthusiasm* (p. 170). It is a superstitious and enthusiastic delusion because anyone can perform these actions "without even needing to be good human being" (ibid). However, even if we suppose it is true that "any human being" can do these actions, I do not think everyone can understand and decode their meanings, just as, for example, only an elitist group understands the content and objective of Kant's writing on religion.

Seemingly, Kant's logic here is: in order to institute a universal religion, one that is capable to contain all human beings, it must be detached from all empirical forms (which will make it good only for certain people than for others). On this basis, Kant rejects the possible legitimacy of these religious actions in a *universal* church. Although his idea sounds comprehensibly logical, it will not be easy to execute it in reality. Religious rituals had always played decisive role in defining the role of people in their religious environments. The idea of having a religion without revelation, Scripture or miracles (i.e. without history) is an ideal that is not easy, if impossible, to attain in reality. Given this circumstantial fact, my question is: How can these religious acts be employed in order to make people think rationally? Can we use them in some way to emphasize the cruciality of reason in the conduct of faith? Can we even talk about the possibility of reconciling faith and reason? Doubtless is the urgent need of a redefinition of the conceptual relationship between empirical faith and universal religion.

What we need today, as Derrida has successfully pointed out, is a “universalizable culture of singularities” (p. 56). We need a religion of reason which does not deny faith in its total practicality; one that strongly disdains dogmatism, but also uses certain religious actions to lead people, through their historical faiths, to reason.<sup>13</sup> I raise here the same question that Derrida asked in 1994 in the “Religion from Capri Conference”: “how then to think—within the limits of reason alone—a religion which, without becoming “natural religion,” would today be effectively universal? (p. 53)” For the purpose of discussing this question, Derrida proposes two concepts, *messianicity* and *chora*, of which only the

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<sup>13</sup> Like *tawakkul*, the concept of *praying* in Islam, for example, can also be utilized for this purpose; especially if its rational reinterpretation—as developed by several Muslim philosophers including Ibn Arabi—is introduced.

former is of importance to us. Messianicity is a ‘historical’ construct, but within which the concept of history itself becomes incongruous and unfitting. In response to Kant’s dichotomy of historical faith vs. religion of reason, the messianic is a concept that inhabits history and comes from it, but which rejects it entirely. The messianic, although is founded within history, remains an (ahistorical) opening for the future without a prophetic or messiah anticipation. Contrary to monotheism’s understanding of a messiah, messianicity does not belong to any Abrahamic religion, and does not conform to any classical revelation—a *messianicity without messianism*. The concept of messianicity, however, is rooted in the experience of faith and other religious experiences that may be irreducible to reason. It takes the form of a promise (something to come, yet not to be expected) and it is contingent on the human act of faith. We can benefit immensely from Kant’s work to form the necessary laws by which we will be able to determine the borderline between a dogmatic faith, and a messianic faith, which briefly introduced above. This proposition needs further investigation and study of course and this can possibly be the project of another paper.

Parenthetically, I would finally like to mention that Kant’s *Religion* showed that his philosophy of religion is based on in-depth analyses and would contribute greatly to any discussion of religion today. However, I still cannot conceive of why some scholars dismiss his complete work because he misjudged and released certain wrong claims about some non-Christian religions. It is difficult for me to understand how any rational scholar would reject a theory in its entirety for being erroneous in part.<sup>14</sup> Admittedly, Kant has

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<sup>14</sup> See, to name a few, Robert B. Louden, *Kant's Impure Ethics: From Rational Beings to Human Beings*. Oxford: Oxford University Press US, 2000; and Michael Mack, *German Idealism and the Jew: The*

occasionally revealed superficial and shallow knowledge of non-Christian religions upon which he had to draw. On Islam, for example, he says (p. 177), “Mohammedanism is distinguished by its *pride*, because it founds confirmation of its faith in victories and in the subjugation of many people rather than in miracles, and because its devotional practices are all of a fierce kind.” On the one hand, Kant seems to erroneously confuse ‘Mohammedanism’ and ‘Islam’—today, almost everyone is well aware that the two labels connote entirely different meanings. Muslims do not worship Prophet Mohammed, but *surrender* (which is the translation of the word *Islam*) their selves to the command of God. On the other hand, his statement obeys and echoes a common stereotypical thought: that Islam has violently spread with the sword only and is controlling people with an iron fist. Kant’s ignorance of even the basics of Islam emerges especially when he claims ‘washing’ to be the first pillar in Islam (p. 185). The first commandment, the cornerstone without which one cannot even talk about *Islam*, is the *shahada*: to testify that there is only one God and that Mohammed is his messenger. However, would these limitations be a good reason for us to resist, once for all, Kant’s entire work? The answer is no, we should not. To reject someone’s work as a whole because it contains such parochial instances will be preposterous and intellectually irresponsible. These limitations, I think, are minor and secondary thoughts in Kant’s work. Indeed, they play an important role in balancing Kant’s arguments within the text, but one cannot focus on them as if they are Kant’s major thesis. As readers, we should concentrate more on how Kant’s philosophy (in part) is relevant to the question of religion today, instead of digging for errors in

footnotes and parenthetical statements in order to denounce his work. However, this does not mean that we should accept his work blindly and uncritically. Critique is essential, of course, but it has to be contributively constructive.

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