

LECTURE II: INTERPRETATION WITHIN THE LIMITS OF REASON

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Kant pursued his inquiry into the links between reason and religion into his final years. His last major complete work is his extraordinary, and in many ways disconcerting, Religion within the Limits of Reason Alone. At first encounter there seems to be a great distance between this convoluted work, with its numerous discussions of Scripture and of Christian dogma, of ancient authors and of anthropology, of comparative religion and of Church governance, its speculations on etymology and on ethical associations, and the abstract arguments that lie behind the Postulates of Practical Reason of the Critique of Practical Reason.

The publication of Religion within the Limits of Reason Alone got Kant into wearisome troubles with the anxious Prussian censors. At first consideration this is a surprising response to a work that seems more respectful of established faith than his numerous earlier writings on religion, which had brought him no trouble. ¹ Christian concerns and Christian Scriptures are in evidence throughout the book. It consists of four long linked essays, the first published in 1792 and the others in 1793. Each takes up an ancient and resonant thematisation of good and evil. The first discusses the common root of good and evil in human freedom; the second the conflict between good and evil; the third the victory of good over evil and the last the life lived in service of the good. This sequence follows a traditional Christian articulation of human origins and destiny: original sin, temptation, conversion and ministry are moments of the encounter of the pilgrim soul with good and evil. This Christian tenor is sustained by numerous discussions of Christian scripture.

Yet Kant's underlying line of thought appears to question rather than to endorse much of Christian faith and tradition. His task, he asserts, is that of the philosophical theologian, who approaches religion within the limits of reason. This task, he insists, is quite different from that of the biblical theologian, who defends ecclesiastical faith by appealing to Church authority to guide his reading of Scripture, and whose defence of faith does not appeal to reason. ² The discussions of Christian Scripture in Religion within the Limits of Reason Alone, however, are to be reasoned. Indeed, in the preface to the second edition Kant asserts that "reason can be found not only to be compatible

¹ The explanation is usually said to lie in the more conservative regime in Berlin, where Frederick William II had appointed J.C.Wöllner as Minister of Justice, who introduced a more restrictive Censorship Edict in 1788, which permitted religious freedom provided that dissidents kept unorthodox opinions to themselves. Yet it is surely relevant that Kant confronted the censors with an entirely new and unsettling tone and approach in his late writing about religion. In the event publication was permitted, but Kant was required to publish nothing further on religion.

² The distinctions between philosophical and biblical theology are a major theme also of Kant's Conflict of the Faculties, published a year later. There (as also in What is Enlightenment, also in Kant: Political Writings) he cites obedience to the state as the ultimate reason why biblical theologians may not appeal to reason: "the biblical theologian ...draws his teaching not from reason but from the Bible; ...As soon as one of these faculties presumes to mix with its teachings something it treats as derived from reason, it offends against the authority of the government that issues orders through it" (CF, 23).

with Scripture but also at one with it” (R 11) How can religion within the limits of reason conceivably be “at one with” the Scriptures of a particular religious tradition?

Much here will depend on one’s understanding of Kant’s conception of reason. This evening I shall try to show how the minimalist account of reason which Kant presents in the Doctrine of Method of the Critique of Pure Reason can be used to unravel his interpretations to Christian Scripture, and to make sense of his claim to approach religion within the limits of reason alone by way of interpretation of the sacred texts of one tradition.

1 RELATION TO SECOND CRITIQUE

Unsurprisingly there are many continuities between Kant’s earlier and his later writing on religion. Like the Second Critique, Religion within the Limits of Reason Alone argues to religious claims from moral claims. The book begins with the claim that “morality leads ineluctably to religion” (R Preface 1, 5) and ends with the thought that “the right course is not to go from grace to virtue but rather to progress from virtue to pardoning grace” (R 190). Morality once again appears as the parent rather than as the child of religion; charity once again does not build on but precedes faith. Once again we are presented with a reversal of tradition which old Lampe might not have found consoling.

Moreover, like the Critique of Practical Reason, Religion within the Limits of Reason Alone takes up the question ‘What may I hope?’. Here too Kant insists that hope forms the bridge that renders our dual commitment to knowledge and to moral action coherent. Our moral ambitions, indeed our moral intentions and our very plans of action, cannot be fully grounded in knowledge: we lack not only the relevant knowledge that the world is open to the possibility of moral or other intervention, but even the self-knowledge that would assure us that we are committed to moral action:

Man cannot attain naturally to assurance concerning such a [moral] revolution.. for the deeps of the heart (the subjective first grounds of his maxim) are inscrutable to him. Yet he must be able to hope through his own efforts to reach the road which leads hither... because he ought to become a good man (R 46)

Yet at many points Religion within the Limits of Reason Alone is less definite than the Critique of Practical Reason about the form that hope, even hopes for the highest good, must take. Often the text does not make it clear whether the hope that makes sense of our aspirations to morality is this worldly, or other-worldly; sometimes it is not obvious whether the hope is religious or historical. Near the end of the work Kant claims that

Reason...says that whoever, with a disposition genuinely devoted to duty, does as much as lies in his power to satisfy his obligation...may hope that what is not in his power will be supplied by the supreme Wisdom in some way or other (R 159; cf 130)

The same very abstract structure of hope is the appropriate corollary to intentions to seek the highest good:

The idea of the highest good, inseparably bound up with the purely moral disposition, cannot be realized in man himself...yet he discovers within himself the duty to work for this end. Hence he finds himself impelled to believe in the cooperation or management of a moral Ruler of the world, by means of which this goal can be reached. And now there opens up before him the abyss of a mystery regarding what God may do..., whether indeed anything in general, and if so, what in particular should be ascribed to God. (R 130)

Whether we not merely may but have good reasons, indeed ought, to hope that supreme Wisdom will act in this life or the next, in history or in the hereafter, or in both, whether indeed anything in particular should be ascribed to God is often left quite obscure.

2 SCRIPTURE AS SYMBOL OF MORALITY

There are also many ways in which the discussion of religion in Religion within the Limits of Reason Alone differs from and is far more specific than that in the Critique of Practical Reason. The most obvious puzzle is to understand how anything we would call philosophical theology can appeal to Scripture—or for that matter can be advanced by commenting on Roman and tribal religion, on superstition and clericalism. What part can discussion of the Fall of Man, or the Virgin Birth or the Second Coming have in an account of religion within the limits of reason? Surely a work on the religion of reason should invoke particular tales and traditions only as examples of lack of reason.

In the Preface to the first edition Kant remarks (rather unhelpfully) that it would be a good idea to have a

...special course of lectures on the purely philosophical theory of religion (which avails itself of everything including the Bible), with such a book as this, perhaps, as the text (or any other if a better can be found). (R 10) ³

He is quite right that the text avails itself, if not quite of everything, still of too much; but this seemingly will make it harder rather than easier for us to read it as an account of religion within the limits of reason.

The reasons that Kant offers for thinking that his discussion of Scripture is appropriate to his task lie scattered in comments on narrative and interpretation at various stages of the book. The initial discussion of interpretation is interspersed with comments on the Adamic myths in Book One. Here Kant suggests that Scripture may be understood as a group of narratives which offer a temporal model or symbol of a rational (hence atemporal) structure. For example, his reading of the story of

³ The censors reacted rather promptly to this thought, if in the wrong way. In 1795, a year after the second preface, they issued an order to the academic senate at Königsberg expressly forbidding any professor to lecture on Religion within the Limits of Reason Alone. Cf Translator's Introduction to The Conflict of the Faculties.

Adam's sin and of the expulsion from Eden sees it as symbolizing the subordination of moral principles to natural inclinations.

Holy Scripture (the Christian portion) sets forth this intelligible moral relationship in the form of a narrative, in which two principles in man, as opposed to one another as heaven is to hell, are represented as persons outside him; who not only pit their strength against each other but also seek (the one as man's accuser and the other as his advocate) to establish their claims legally as before a supreme judge (R 73) ⁴

The drama of temptation and salvation may be read as symbolizing a conflict between the moral principle and the principle of subordinating morality to desire. Although, Kant writes, the "natural inclinations, considered in themselves, are good" ⁵ (R 51 cf 31), the subordination of morality to inclination would be freely chosen evil. This is appropriately symbolized in the story of the Fall, where an originally innocent being comes to moral awareness, is reminded by a good spirit of the demands of morality, is tempted by a spirit who personifies the principle of evil, freely chooses to subordinate morality to desire, and yet leaves open the possibility of a return to the good (R 37). Since the details of the Adamic myths can be read as symbols of the interrelationship between freedom, knowledge and morality in our lives, we can understand the story as told of ourselves, but symbolically. Kant quotes a line from Horace, who admonishes us not to scoff even at ludicrous tales about the gods, reminding us that: 'mutato nomine de te fabula narratur' (R 37) ⁶. A story does not have to literally true, nor even (as Kant suggests by quoting a pagan author) taken from the Bible, in order to be read in the interests of morality. The myth of the Fall can be rehabilitated rather than repudiated if it is read as a narrative that symbolically represents our understanding of evil as freely chosen and yet rejectable:

For man, therefore, who despite a corrupted heart possesses a good will, there remains a hope of a return to the good from which he has strayed. (R 39).

Nobody will be surprised that the Adamic myths can be read in this way, or more generally that Scripture can be given an interpretation that makes it an appropriate symbol of Kant's views of the relation between knowledge and morality, and so of hope; but it is surprising that Kant makes this move. Why should Religion within the Limits of Reason Alone discuss Scripture at all? In making sympathetic use of the myths and symbols of Biblical traditions Kant is very distant from the spirit of reasoned religion as generally understood. Deism, for example, aspired to a quite limited salvage job on the most abstract propositions of Christian faith—and was content to jettison the

⁴ The restriction of this claim to the Christian portion of Scripture is immediately disregarded; later in the book it is clear that a restriction to the Bible is also to be set aside.

⁵ This point is notoriously missed in reading Kant's ethics. Yet it is an unavoidable corollary both of his view that happiness, which is the satisfaction of natural inclinations, is a component of the *summum bonum* and of his theory of action, which demands that maxims be freely adopted.

⁶ 'Under another name the tale is told of you'. Horace, Satires in Q. Horati Flacci Opera, ed. E.C. Wickham, revised H.W. Garrod, Oxford Classical Texts, Oxford University Press, 1984, Book I, i, line 69, p 135.

rest, and to deride bits of it as superstition. Kant can be as scathing as any Deist in his denunciation of popular superstition, which he castigates as religious illusion (R 156ff), and of clericalism, which he denounces as fetishism “which borders very closely on paganism” (R 168): yet he does not denounce or renounce Scripture. Rather he regards it as important to show that Scripture can or may be read in a certain way.

3 IN THE INTERESTS OF MORALITY

The second element of Kant's account of the role of interpretation of Scripture within religion within the limit of reason is summarized by the thought that sacred texts not merely can be read as symbols of morality, but that they ought to be read in this way:

this narrative must at all times be taught and expounded in the interests of morality (R 123)

It would be easy to think that what Kant means is simply that we ought to seek a morally edifying meaning in the stories of Scripture, that it is a matter, as we say, of bringing out the moral of the story. This is a common enough view of how Scripture can or even of how it ought to be interpreted ‘in the interests of morality’, which has provided the basis for countless sermons and homilies. However, it will not serve Kant's purposes, since the idea of ‘bringing out the moral’ presupposes that a text of Scripture has an intrinsic, if sometimes obscure, moral meaning (which other secular or pagan texts may lack) and that this meaning is to be brought out.

Kant, however, does not attribute either special standing or moral wisdom to Christian Scripture. The Bible is no more than a book which has “fallen into men's hands” (R 98); traditional faith may be no more than something which “chance.. has tossed into our hands” (R 100). There is no reason to suppose that such contingent cultural documents and traditions are morally admirable or even sound. Nevertheless Kant insists not only that we can, but that we ought to read them ‘in the interests of morality’. Doing so is not a matter of looking for their true meaning. The relevant interpretation may, in the light of the text...

appear forced—it may often really be forced; and yet if the text can possibly support it, it must be preferred to a literal interpretation which either contains nothing at all [helpful] to morality or else actually works counter to moral incentive (R 101)

This conception of proper interpretation can get going on the sacred texts of any tradition. Christian texts are neither unique nor indispensable. This can be illustrated by the fact that the philosophers of classical antiquity managed to interpret the crudest of polytheistic stories in ways that approximate a moral doctrine intelligible to all men (R 101-2), and by equivalent moves in Judaism, Islam and Hinduism. (R 102)

The issue behind these interpretive moves is highlighted by posing the question:

whether morality should be expounded according to the Bible or whether the Bible should not rather be expounded according to morality (R 101 n)

Kant's firm answer is that morality rather than Scripture comes first:

since.. the moral improvement of men constitutes the real end of all religion of reason, it will comprise the highest principle of all Scriptural exegesis (R 102) ⁷

4 REASONED INTERPRETATION AND AUTHORITY

These moves show why Kant speaks of his work as defending moral religion; they do not make it entirely clear why he should speak of himself as defending religion within the limits of reason. It is, of course, true that Kant sees morality as based on practical reason, but it does not follow that all interpretation of Scripture "in the interest of morality" must itself lie within the limits of reason. Even if morality is based on reason, the readings of texts which support or express moral principles might, as Kant notes, be forced rather than reasoned.

However, interpretations that are forced by the standards of literal or fundamentalist interpretation may conform to Kant's minimalist account of reason. Kant depicts reason as way of disciplining thinking and acting, which is negative, in that it lacks all specific content, non-derivative, in that it does not invoke authorities other than reason, and law-like, in that it uses principles that all can adopt. If there are reasoned ways of interpreting, they will have to meet these three standards, and in doing so will also meet the criteria that are combined in the Categorical Imperative, so will constitute guide-lines for moral as well as for reasoned interpretation.

The first two standards are readily apparent in Kant's account of the sorts of interpretation which would be appropriate for the philosophical theologian. The philosophical theologian lacks any substantive standards of interpretation, and may not invoke any authority other than that of reason to guide interpretation. Scriptural exegesis 'within the limits of reason' may not appeal to revelation, state or ecclesiastical authority, historical scholarship, let alone authorial intentions (cf R 39 n, cf 101ff), on which traditions of biblical theology may build. ⁸ Equally scriptural exegesis within the limits of reason does not appeal to the no less suspect 'authority' of individual religious experience, conscience or feeling—a mode of interpretation which Kant thinks leads to enthusiasm or fanaticism (R 104-5; cf WOT 246ff).

However, none of this explains why religion within the limits of reason should refer to Scripture, except for polemical purposes, let alone why it should seek interpretations that rehabilitate rather than repudiate. Does not the activity of interpreting particular texts suggest some covert, if very

⁷ In The Conflict of the Faculties Kant also identifies reason as "the highest interpreter of Scripture", (CF 41).

⁸ Kant acknowledges that as things are, the philosophical theologians, who interpret Scripture by reference to the principles of morality and hence of reason, are far outnumbered by Scriptural scholars or biblical theologians, who are usually expositors of one or another historically specific ecclesiastical faith, and who rely on the authoritative tenets of a particular church or tradition to guide their doctrinal interpretation. (R 103-5; CF 23-4; 36ff, 61ff)

indeterminate, assumption that they have some authority? If so, should not their interpretation be firmly excluded from religion within the limits of reason?

5 REASONED INTERPRETATION AND POPULAR RELIGION

Kant's central comments on interpretation deal mainly with issues of authority, and do not show why religion within the limits of reason should engage with Scripture. At most they show that if (for some still obscure reason) reasoned religion did interpret Scripture, it would do so without assuming substantive starting points and in particular without taking any other authority for granted. However, the third aspect of Kant's account of reason—that it is law-like—can, I believe, explain why Kant thinks that an engagement with accepted traditions and texts is an indispensable part of reasoned religion.

Kant puts his reason for thinking that the philosophical theologian needs to engage with Scripture as follows:

the authority of Scripture . . .as... at present the only instrument in the most enlightened portion of the world for the union of all men into one church, constitutes the ecclesiastical faith, which, as the popular faith, cannot be neglected, because no doctrine based on reason alone seems to the people qualified to serve as an unchangeable norm (R 103; my italics)

These reasons for interpreting Christian Scripture refer to a time and a place: they are reasons for eighteenth century Europe. Somehow, at some juncture, the philosophical theologian has to reason in ways that engage with actual religious conceptions as they are held and cherished by the people. Otherwise an 'appeal to pure reason as the expositor' could have nothing to say to the many millions who held to the time-honoured religion which sustained old Lampe and countless others, or to adherents of the other religions of mankind.

Kant accepts that such reasoning must take account of its audience:

It is also possible that the union of men into one religion cannot feasibly be brought about or made abiding without a holy book and an ecclesiastical faith based on it (R 123)

Reasoned religion must be law-like, not just in the sense that it can be followed by any rational being, but also in taking account of the fact that rational beings, as things are, are adherents of particular religious traditions. So reasoned religion too must engage with the sacred texts and traditions of popular religion, it must start on familiar ground and show how the familiar sayings of Scripture can be interpreted without appeal to groundless authorities: otherwise it will be accessible only to a few philosophical theologians.

It follows that the philosophical theologian must interpret whichever sacred texts are actually widely understood and respected. Without this move, religious teaching cannot fully meet the requirements of reason. Surprising as it may seem, religion within the limits of reason not merely may but must interpret accepted texts, and their ordinary reception. Only this focus and strategy of

interpretation can secure a conception of religion that is guided by principles which are negative (formal), underivative and also law-like, so support religion within the limits of reason. Law-likeness is, however, a slender constraint. Kant is not appealing to any conception of lawfulness, which would invoke some further, separate authority to guide the interpretation of Scripture. That is the unreasoned strategy of biblical theologians, whose problem is that the separate authority to which they appeal stands in need of but does not receive justification. So it is to be expected that the interpretations which the philosophical theologian reaches, although they lie within the limits of reason, may not be unique or even highly determinate reasoned interpretations. Reason will not fully fix the reading of Scripture, any more than it fully fixes the content of permissible hope.

6 REASONED INTERPRETATION AND POLYMORPHOUS HOPE

This account of Kant's conception of reasoned interpretation is corroborated by the fact that he repeatedly states simply that we may or that we can read a passage of Scripture in a certain way, rather than that we must do so. For example, in speaking of the incarnation he writes

.. just because we are not the authors of this idea [of moral perfection], and because it has established itself in man without our comprehending how human nature could have been capable of receiving it, it is more appropriate to say (kann man hier besser sagen) that this archetype has come down to us from heaven and has assumed our humanity... Such union with us may therefore be regarded (kann ...angesehen werden) as a state of humiliation of the Son of God (R, 54-5; my italicization of modal terms)

and in speaking of the temptation of Christ he writes

So it is not surprising [literally: it may not be taken amiss: "es darf also nicht befremden"] that an Apostle represents this invisible enemy, who is known only through his operations upon us and who destroys basic principles, as being outside us and, indeed, as an evil spirit. (R, 52; my italicization of modal terms)

And in speaking of the end of the world he writes

The appearance of the Antichrist, the millenium, and the news of the proximity of the end of the world—all these can take on, before reason, their right [gute] symbolic meaning (R 126 my italicization of modal terms)

The reason Kant takes this tentative approach should now be clear. He himself puts it this way:

Nor can we charge such interpretations with dishonesty, provided we are not disposed to assert that the meaning which we ascribe to the symbols of the popular faith, even to the holy books, is exactly as intended by them, but rather allow this question to be left undecided and merely admit the possibility that their authors may be so understood. (R, 102)

When Kant speaks of his approach as to religion as lying within the limits of reason he does not mean that he identifies a unique set of reasoned beliefs or hopes, but only that he identifies a range of beliefs, or hopes whose structure places them within the limits of reason. The sense in which reason is “not only ... compatible with Scripture but also at one with it” (R 11) is therefore weaker than it may initially have seemed: reasoned faith and hope are polymorphous.

7 HOPE WITHOUT DOCTRINE

If Kant's minimalist account of reason and of reasoned interpretation allows for a plurality of interpretations of the Scriptures on which popular faith rests, it is not surprising that he thinks that his account of faith and of hope will be undogmatic and undoctinal, even when it engages with the texts and tenets of received religion. Reasoned religion is, after all, to answer the third question that interests human reason, the question of human destiny, which asks not ‘What must I hope?’ but more openly ‘What may I hope?’. In asking this question Kant leaves open not only various ways in which identifiably religious hopes for human destiny may be articulated, but also the possibility that hopes for human destiny be articulated in social, political and historical, this-worldly terms rather than in other-worldly terms.

The pure religious faith for which philosophical theology is to provide reasons lies within the limits of reason, but it is not the only articulation of hope that lies within those limits. Every articulation of hope and belief that lies within the limit of reason must incorporate the canon of reasoned faith, that is to say an answer to the question ‘What must we hope?’. Each ecclesiastical faith also proposes one organon of religious faith, that is to say a specific answer to the question ‘What may I hope?’. Another ecclesiastical faith might use quite another vocabulary to support a different account of what we may hope.

In Religion within the Limits of Reason Alone, as one might expect, the accent is on religious articulations of the hopes we may have. And yet even here, in a work that constantly comments on Christian Scripture, and that refers repeatedly to Christian and more broadly to religious articulations of hope, the traditional, other-worldly formulations of Christian hope are constantly put in question.

The first and evidently the most basic way in which Christian hope is put into question is by the shift of religious concern from the first to the third question of human reason, from a question about knowledge to a question about hope. Although Kant views the language of Scripture as an appropriate articulation of the hopes we may have, nothing that he claims restores a realist interpretation of God or immortality. Hope is not backed by knowledge. Human destiny remains a matter not of knowledge but of hope.

The second way in which Christian hope, as traditionally understood, is put into question in Religion within the Limits of Reason Alone is by the fact that the essential core of Kant's answer to the question ‘What may I hope?’ establishes so little about what I must hope. All that Kant argues is that we must postulate, assume, hope for the possibility that our moral commitments are

not futile: we must hope for the possibility of inserting the moral intention into the world. This bare structure of hope—the canon of hope—can be expressed in a range of vocabularies whose permissible articulations of hope will be accessible to different people, who may hope for varying conceptions of grace or of progress that might bridge the gap between moral intention and empirical outcomes.⁹ Religious articulations of hope are not to be rejected, but other forms of hope are also permissible. We may hope for grace, for progress, or for both, and for each in many forms.

8 ECCLESIASTICAL FAITH AND THE ETHICAL COMMONWEALTH

Behind these varied hopes lies a common commitment to action, which does not vary. Both in his accounts of religious and in his accounts of historical hope, Kant depicts the action to which we are committed as social as well as individual, and as this-worldly. In Religion within the Limits of Reason Alone he puts it in the following terms at the beginning of his account of the victory of good over evil:

As far as we can see, therefore, the sovereignty of the good principle is attainable, so far as men can work towards it, only through the establishment and spread of a society in accordance with, and for the sake of, the laws of virtue, a society whose task and duty it is to rationally impress these laws in all their scope upon the entire human race. For only thus can we hope for a victory of the good over the evil principle. (R 86 and cf the following pages) ¹⁰

The fully achieved version of such a society would be what Kant terms an ethical commonwealth (*ethisches gemein Wesen*). An ethical commonwealth is a “union of men under merely moral (as opposed to juridical) laws; it can exist in the midst of a political commonwealth; it may even include all the members of a political commonwealth. (R 86) However, in human hands this ethical ideal “dwindles markedly” (R 91), although it can be approximated, more or less well, by the visible Church. (R 91ff). ¹¹

⁹ See Friedo Ricken, ‘Kanon und Organon im Streit der Fakultäten’ in Kant Über Religion, ed. François Marty and Friedo Ricken, Kohlhammer Verlag, Stuttgart, 1992, pp 181-194.

¹⁰ Consider Kant’s central claims about service to God at the beginning of Book 4 of the Religion. He starts from the thought that “Religion is the recognition of all duties as divine commands”, which on the surface appears to require that God exists. But in the note to the text he immediately rebuts this reading by claiming that “no assertorial knowledge is required (even of God’s existence)” and that “the minimum of knowledge (it is possible that there may be a God) must suffice” (R 142).

¹¹ Kant does not think that we have any special duties to God (R 142n). However viewing our duties as divine commands takes us beyond individual duty. One important passage is the following: “Now here we have a duty which is *sui generis*, not of men toward men, but of the human race towards itself. For the species of rational beings is objectively, in the idea of reason, destined for a social goal, namely, the promotion of the highest as a social good. ...the highest moral good cannot be achieved merely by the exertions of a single individual towards his own

Both in Religion within the Limits of Reason Alone and in Conflict of the Faculties Kant depicts the visible Church as a vehicle, which will finally be superseded as a purer, more fully reasoned faith supplants mere ecclesiastical faith: In the end all religion will gradually be freed from all empirical determining grounds and from all statutes which rest on history and which through the agency of ecclesiastical faith provisionally unite all men for the requirements of the good; and thus at last the pure religion of reason will rule over all, “so that God may be all in all” .

...The leading-string of holy traditions with its appendages of statutes and observances, which in its time did good service, becomes bit by bit dispensable, yea, finally when man enters upon his adolescence it becomes a fetter (R 112)

If all of the outward and visible elements of Church life and liturgy could be shed, we would be left with the abstract demands of purely moral religion. What we are left with is not however a mere hope, for whose realization we must wait, whether patiently or impatiently. We are also left with the moral commitment that underlies hope. This commitment sets a task which we may not sit back and leave either to Providence or to others:

man [must] proceed as though everything depended on him; only on this condition dare he hope that higher wisdom will grant the completion of his well-intentioned endeavours (R 92; cf 149ff)

The only thing that matters in religion is deeds (Alles kommt in der Religion aufs Tun an) (CF 41)

The context of action may but need not be framed by the life of a Church. Kant's account of reasoned religion allows at least a transitional role to ecclesiastical faith and to the visible Church, but it is not clear whether it allows more. Can the empirical realities and institutional structures of a Church (or of another social but secular 'vehicle') be wholly superseded? If so, what is to bind the members of the ethical commonwealth together? If there are shared duties 'of the human race', will their enactment not require shared public practices and institutions? If so will not our hopes, including our shared hopes, have to be connected to shared activities and institutional structures, whether religious or this-worldly? Even if we hope for God and immortality it does not follow that a time will come at which joint action in this life can dispense with all specific institutions and practices: the religious may always need to take the structures of a visible Church seriously on this earth.

...by reason of a peculiar weakness in human nature, pure faith can never be relied on as much as it deserves, that is a church cannot be established on it alone. (R 94)

Equally, if the future for which we may hope is conceived of in this-worldly terms, it seems clear that we could not dispense with all social structures in building towards an ethical commonwealth. The history of would-be purely intentional communities is discouraging, despite the fact that they

moral perfection but requires rather the union of such individuals into a whole towards such a goal—into a system of well-disposed men.” (R 89)

have in fact built on many shared social structures. It seems that the only point at which joint action without shared structures might be possible is in the after-life—of which we know nothing.

So a third way in which at least some forms of Christian hope are put into question is by the fact that, in the end, in this world, religious and social and political hopes must be closely connected. All types of hope are expressed in action, indeed in collective action, that aims towards an ethical commonwealth; all are a matter of taking it that the moral intention can be expressed in the world. However, different genres of hope answer the question ‘What may I hope?’ using different vocabularies and images, which can be woven into differing this-worldly practices and institutions. The religion of reason, on Kant’s account, shows us that many religious and historical articulations of hope are permissible, that some articulations are congruent and compatible with others, but does not show that one type of hope is required to the exclusion of all others.¹²

The censors of Prussia are long dead, but they were, I think right to be worried. Although the surface of Religion within the Limits of Reason Alone presents a view of reasoned religion which seemingly takes Christian faith and scriptures seriously, Kant’s philosophical theology does not endorse religion in any straightforward way. Slightly below the surface of the work is a view of reason and of reasoned interpretation which assigns no unique status to religious hopes, to Christian hope, to Christian Scriptures, to the Christian Church or to all that old Lampe held sacred.¹³ The only moves Kant makes towards the specificities of the faith that Lampe knew and loved are that he gives general reasons for taking existing popular religion seriously in reading texts, and existing ecclesiastical faith seriously in moving towards an ethical commonwealth. The outcome allows that traditional faith and hopes may be retained, but Kant’s own hope is that both popular and ecclesiastical faith will be interim measures, and serve as vehicles to a purer faith and more abstract hopes that need no institutions and lack all specificity. The guardians of established religion could hardly be expected to endorse—even if they did not need to censor—a vision of religion which

¹² Compare this account to the secular, political and historical account of the maturing of reason which Kant offers in *What is Enlightenment*, where he describes the gradual emergence of human beings from immaturity to rationality, from a private, other-directed use of their incomplete capacities to reason to a public, autonomous use of their more developed capacities to reason. For a fuller discussion see Onora O’Neill ‘Reason and Politics in the Kantian Enterprise’ in *Constructions of Reason*.

¹³ Kant himself seems to hesitate on the dispensability of institutional structures in this life. In some passages both in Religion within the Limits of Reason Alone and in The Conflict of the Faculties he relegates all institutional forms to the status of a vehicle by which a transition from ecclesiastical faith to pure religious faith, shorn of observances and liturgy, of tradition and history, can be achieved (cf R 106). At other times he suggests that the vehicle is indispensable, at least in this life (cf R 126n). See Hans Michael Baumgartner ‘Das “Ethische gemeine Wesen” und die Kirche in Kant’s ‘Religionsschrift’ in Kant Über Religion, ed. François Marty and Friedo Ricken, Kohlhammer Verlag, Stuttgart, 1992, pp 156-167 and Allen Wood ‘Rational theology, moral faith, and religion’ in The Cambridge Companion to Kant, ed. Paul Guyer, Cambridge University Press, 1992, pp 394-416 for thoughtful discussion of this problem.

demotes the particular inflection of faith and hope which was in their care to the status of one among many permissible variants.