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The Devil, the Virgin, and the Envoy

Symbols of Moral Struggle
in *Religion*, Part Two, Section Two

6.1 Overview

In Part One of *Religion within the Boundaries of Mere Reason*, Kant develops a complex account of the human condition, one that posits fundamentally good predispositions (*Anlagen*) in human nature, as well as a “contingent” but somehow still “innate” propensity (*Hang*) to evil. Though he concedes that the origin of the evil propensity and the means of its overcoming are “inexplicable,” he also insists that its possession is imputable: each individual is responsible for his or her own moral condition (21–22; 40–44). Earlier chapters in this volume (especially those by Ch. Horn and M. Forscher) explore the notorious puzzles surrounding these doctrines, and I will leave them aside here.

Part Two of *Religion* is concerned with the ongoing “moral and intellectual struggle” (*Kampf*) for dominion in the human heart between the evil principle and the good principle. In the introductory paragraphs of this Part, Kant again emphasizes that our natural predispositions and inclinations are not the source of evil: “considered in themselves, natural inclinations are good” (58). He also reiterates his claim about the surd origins of evil, and notes that the character of the Devil found in many religious traditions – though misleadingly pictured “as a being outside us” – can be helpful in “making intuitive, for practical use, the concept of something to us unfathomable” (60; cf. 37). The Devil is a “projection” of the “incomprehensibility to us” of the origin of moral evil: “For whence the evil in that spirit?” Kant rhetorically asks, and then wisely declines to offer an answer (44).

The first main section of Part Two deals with the “lawful claim (*Rechtsanspruch*) of the good principle to dominion over the human being” – i.e. the sense in which the idea of the “prototype” of rational, morally perfect humanity has a claim to being the law (*Recht*) that governs our hearts. Kant speculates in this section about the origin and character of the idea of this prototype, and about how an empirical human being’s transformation in response to its claim might best be conceived. Kant also makes it clear that there is no “practical need” from the point of view of pure reason to postulate the divinity of the prototype (63), and lays out a couple of models of justification that are supposed to be acceptable to pure reason (cf. 76) (see J. Bojanowski’s essay above for more discussion of this section, as well as Hare 1996, 53 ff.).

The second section of Part Two, which is the focus of the present commentary, takes up the opposing but still “rightful claim of the evil principle to dominion over the human being,” as well as the ongoing “struggle of the two principles with one another.” Here Kant continues his translation project of bringing the Hebrew and Christian scriptural traditions, to whatever extent possible, within the boundaries of mere reason. More specifically: Kant performs here what he calls the second “experiment” (*Versuch*) on the *Genesis* account of the fall into sin and on the New Testament narrative of the birth and life of Christ. The first experiment in rational theology involves simply determining what is within the bounds of pure reason and what outside it (where the two realms are conceived as concentric circles). The second experiment is hermeneutical: it requires us to start from “some alleged revelation or other and, abstracting from the pure religion of reason ..., to hold fragments of this revelation as an *historical system* up to moral concepts, and see whether it does not lead back to the same pure *rational system* of religion” which we identified in the first experiment (12–13). By showing that a plausible interpretation of a scriptural tradition articulates the tenets of his own rational religion, Kant thinks that both the tradition and those tenets receive a kind of mutual validation: they are shown to be not merely consistent but “harmonious” and “unified.”¹ In the next section, I sketch Kant’s symbolic analysis of the two biblical stories at issue while raising questions about the philosophical doctrines that result. In section 6.3 I bring out the tension between

1 See Desland 1973, 220 ff., Hare 1996, 39–41, and Firestone/Jacobs 2008, 114–199 for accounts of the role of the two experiments in *Religion*. Most commentators think Kant conducts the second experiment throughout the text; Firestone/Jacobs argue that the second experiment only begins in Part Four.

Kant’s assertions regarding the results of the experiment and his apparent openness to alternate analyses of the relevant texts. I conclude with some reflections in section 6.4 on the General Remark about miracles that is appended to Part Two. Kant claims there that we must be open to the “theoretical possibility” of events such as virgin birth and physical resurrection, yet staunchly denies that it is essential for salvation either *that* such events occurred or that we *believe* that they occurred. Although he stipulates in the preface that the *Religion* can be understood apart from the critical philosophy (14), it will turn out to be useful to consider Kant’s claims about revelation and miracles in light of his overall account of modality and its relation to his theory of belief/faith (*Glaube*).

6.2 Symbols of an “intellectual moral” struggle

6.2.1 Cosmic conflict

Kant characterizes the good principle as the one that requires us to “incorporate the moral law into our maxim” as our highest priority, over and above any self-interested considerations (23). Other incentives may influence us, but only in subordination to the demands of morality. The evil principle is in some sense equally unified: it recommends *not* incorporating the moral law into our maxim. But in another sense the evil principle is legion: in every situation, there are innumerable ways to deviate from duty or subordinate it to other ends. Even the occasional willingness to prioritize our natural dispositions to self-preservation, propagation of the species, or comparative advantage – not to mention the inclinations to sensual pleasure, fame, or worldly goods – is fully, “radically” evil in Kant’s rigoristic picture (23; 36–7).

These two overarching principles compete for allegiance in the human mind, and this struggle within us, says Kant, is fruitfully symbolized in the image of “two persons outside the human being” who “test their respective power” in an effort to “establish [their] dominion *over minds*” or “establish their claims through law (*Recht*), as it were before a supreme judge” (78–79, Kant’s emphasis). The appeal to symbols such as these is significant. In the late 1780’s, Kant had been criticized for, on the one hand, strictly limiting which sorts of concepts can have “sense” (*Sinn*) and “reference” (*Bedeutung*), and then, on the other hand, practically postulating the objects

of ideas to which these limits seem to apply.² In the terms of Kant's own modal theory, the criticism is that we have no reason to think that such supersensible objects are *really* as opposed to merely logically possible. Thus practical reason in its postulating role – just like theoretical reason in its speculating role – may for all we know be groping among concepts of mere “thought-things” (*Gedankendinge*), and practical faith (*Glaube*) may be as empty as theoretical speculation (cf. *KrV*, A 771/B 799).

In response to these concerns, Kant ultimately seeks to forge a much stronger connection between the ideas of reason and intuitional sources of content. One of his main efforts in this regard invokes the notion of “symbolism” or “schematism by analogy.” In the *Real Progress* essay that was written around 1790, for instance, he explicitly compares the “schematization” of a category – an operation that involves appeal to a kind of *a priori* intuition that provides content to a pure category – with the “symbolization of a concept” or idea of reason (XX, 279–890; cf. *KrV*, A 310/B 367). The latter operation provides “an emergency assistance [*Notbülfe*] for concepts of the supersensible which are as such not truly presented, and can be given in no possible experience.”

But what is this emergency assistance, and how exactly does it work? In *Real Progress*, Kant describes the process this way: “The symbol of an idea (or a concept of reason) is a representation by analogy, i.e., by the same relationship to certain consequences as that which is attributed to the object in respect of its own consequences, even though the objects themselves are of entirely different kinds” (XX, 280). The thought here is that symbolization may provide a kind of ersatz content when normal *a priori* or *a posteriori* intuitions aren't available: we can get a sense of what a supersensible object is like (and also of whether it is really possible) by drawing an analogy between its *relationship* to something we already cognize, and the *relationship* between two other things that we cognize.

Thus, for example, Kant goes on in this passage to say that we achieve a limited grasp of what a supersensible ground of organized nature would be like by conceiving the relation on analogy with a human clockmaker's relation to his products (XX, 280; cf. *Rel.*, 65n). Even if we can't exhibit or schematize such an idea in intuition, then, we may be able to symbolize it in order to see a “trace or a sign” – in the language of the third *Critique* – of what their objects would be like (*KU*, V 300). Elsewhere I have argued that

² See Wizenmann 1787, as well as Kant's response in the second *Critique* at V 144n. J.A. Eberhard's critique of Kant can be found in the first volume of *Philosophisches Magazin* from 1788–1789, and translated into English in Allison 1973.

this symbolizing role can be played by beautiful art and nature, and that their ability to play this role is involved in our aesthetic evaluation of some of them (Chignell 2007). I have also suggested that having a sense of the real possibility of the objects involved – even if only by appeal to symbols and analogies – becomes something close to a requirement on rational belief/faith (*Vernunftglaube*) by 1790 or so, just as being in a position to “prove” the real possibility of its objects is a requirement on knowledge (*KrV*, B xxvi, note; cf. Chignell 2010).³

In the *Religion* written in 1792–3, Kant varies his terminology slightly and speaks of the distinction between a “schematism of object-determination” and a “schematism of analogy.”⁴ But the central idea is the same as in *Real Progress* and the *Critique of Judgment*: “in the ascent from the sensible to the supersensible, we can indeed *schematize* (render a concept comprehensible through analogy with something of the senses).” Kant adds the warning here, however, that we can “in no way infer by analogy that what pertains to the sensible must also be attributed to the supersensible (thus *expanding* the concept of the latter)”: in other words, if we venture beyond the claim that the *relation* between the two sets of things is similar, we fall into “anthropomorphism, and from the moral point of view (in religion) that has most injurious consequences” (*Rel.*, 65n; cf. *KU*, V 351 and 464n on the two kinds of “hypotyposis”). With respect to the clockmaker example, which Kant also mentions in this passage, the symbolic *Notbülfe* allows us to conceive the supersensible ground of “the world in general” as bearing a relation to organized nature like that of the clockmaker to his clock. To go further and univocally ascribe intelligence, conceptual understanding, means-end reasoning, and volition to this being on the basis of this analogy, however, is to “make a formidable leap ... which leads straight into anthropomorphism” (*ibid.*)

The symbol with which Kant starts the second section of Part Two – that of a “test of power” between two persons – evokes one of the more ancient theological models of Christ's mission on earth. So-called “*Christus Victor*” models depict an agonistic struggle between the beloved envoy of a ruler, on the one hand, and a once-loyal vassal who has become a usurper, on

³ I have adapted a few of the paragraphs of that paper for use in this section. On symbolization generally, see Bielefeldt 2001 and Kang 1985. For a longer discussion of the various Christian symbols in *Religion*, see Ward 1972, 147 ff. and Palmquist 2000, ch.5.

⁴ Compare the notes Kant made for the *Real Progress* essay, where he says that in providing content to *a priori* concepts in general we can resort to “either the real schematism (transcendental), or the schematism by analogy (symbolic). The objective reality of the categories is theoretical, that of the idea is only practical” (XX, 332).

the other (or, alternatively, between the envoy and a mortal enemy who has been given dominion by a once-loyal vassal). After a long battle, the envoy triumphs – though not without great injury to himself, an injury that is sometimes construed as a kind of ransom – and thus brings the world back into the rightful dominion of the good ruler.⁵

Kant's oblique reference to *Christus Victor* imagery is complicated by his subsequent allusion to another Christological model. In the course of one long sentence he pictures Christ not just as battling for God's interests on earth but also as a kind of advocate for humanity in a legal case that will be decided, fairly, by an all-observant "supreme judge." The Devil also transforms – from a vile usurper into a kind of lawyerly prosecutor (Greek *diabolos* – "accuser" or "slanderer") who comes before the heavenly court and charges humanity with giving itself over to evil. Such courtroom imagery is drawn from an even older symbol of humanity's moral situation – one that goes back to ancient wisdom literatures such as the book of *Job*, where the Hebrew term "*ba-satan*" is not a proper name but a descriptive phrase that means "the adversary" or "the prosecutor."

Notably absent in this section are allusions to models on which Christ satisfies a sort of debt owed to God by sinful humans, or takes their punishments upon himself. Earlier in *Religion* Kant makes reference to such "satisfaction" or "penal substitution" models, but he typically downplays them as misleading, since it is unclear how the death of an innocent person could satisfy the debt of another, or how one person could take on the justified punishment of another (40, 72). In section two of Part Two, such models seem to fall away as inadequate to our moral situation.⁶

6.2.2 The Fall

Kant begins his account of humanity's fall into evil by citing the biblical claim (in *Genesis* 1,28) that God initially gave us a kind of "usufruct" (*Untereigentum*) over the world. The Hebrew word here is a conjugation of "*rada*" ("to tread, rule, have dominion, dominate" (Klein 1997)), but Kant cites the Latin "*dominium utile*" instead, perhaps because it connotes something more like "stewardship" or "right of use" than full-blown rule or

⁵ The *locus classicus* here is Aulén 1997 (first published in 1930).

⁶ Kant does subscribe to a kind of penal substitution model in Part One, but says it is the "new man" *in us* – rather than Christ – who pays for the sins of the "old man" (see 74–5 and note). Thus there is no genuine substitution here (though see Hare 1996, 57 ff. for a different account of this according to which Christ is also the "new man").

domination. God of course retains his right as the "supreme proprietor [*Obereigentümer*] (*dominus directus*)" throughout. Kant doesn't bother recounting the Eden story in detail, but at some point humans overween and succumb to the devil's temptation to "rebel against their overlord (*Oberherr*) and thus become dependent on [the Devil]."

By occasioning the fall of our first parents in this way, the Devil is able to "set himself up as the supreme proprietor of all the goods on earth, i.e., as the prince of this world." In other words, the Devil is pictured again, symbolically, as the usurper who seeks to be not a steward but rather *dominus directus* over the created universe. Kant relates in a footnote the humorous story of a certain Father Charlevoix who is at a loss for words when an Iroquois convert asks him, at this point in the Genesis story, why God (being almighty) didn't just strike the Devil dead (79n). Kant's own answer to the question is that God refused at that time to destroy free creatures that he created (including the Devil, apparently), and also chose to deal with "rational beings ... in accordance with the principle of their freedom." Thus he allowed both the Devil and those who followed him to suffer the significant consequences of their free decisions.

According to the biblical account under analysis here, not only our first parents but all of their descendents, too, were subjugated to the "Kingdom of Evil" that was set up in defiance of the good principle. Such a view could never be brought within the bounds of mere reason, however: the subjugation of the descendents must be a result of their autonomous "free consent, since the false show of this world's good diverted their gaze from the abyss of perdition in store for them" (79). This coheres with Kant's claim, in Part One, that it is "most inappropriate to imagine [moral evil] as having come to us by way of *inheritance* from our first parents" (40). It also raises the question of whether any human being *could* in principle succeed in resisting evil. Kant gives us very little help here, and many commentators locate a deep tension between the claims that the fall into evil is universal, and that it is a result of individual choice. In Part One he tries to sidestep the issue by providing a series of empirical "examples" of widespread human evil in order to "spare ourselves the formal proof that there must be such a corrupt propensity rooted in the human being" (33). But an empirical appeal hardly seems sufficient to establish that the propensity (which is itself already evil) is universal. It is thus preferable, especially in light of his deflationary Christology (see below), to regard Kant's theoretical claim about the "universal" depravity of humanity here as akin to Aristotle's account of natural necessity – viz., something that holds "always or for the most part

(*aiei outh' hōs epi to poly*)” rather than strictly or without exception (Aristotle, *Metaphysics* VI 2, 1027a15–26).

6.2.3 Interregnum: the “Jewish Theocracy”

Despite this interim victory on the part of evil, the good principle does retain a foothold in the world through the establishment of what Kant calls “the Jewish theocracy.” The ancient Israelites practiced the “public and exclusive veneration of [the good principle’s] name” (79), and Second Temple Judaism elaborated these traditions. Ultimately Kant thinks we should be unimpressed by such practices, since they are allegedly motivated by earthly incentives – “rewards and punishments in this life” – and adorned with “burdensome ceremonies and observances” that make the resulting behavior more “civil” than genuinely moral. As a result of this, the Jewish theocracy did no “substantial injury to the realm of darkness,” but it did keep a select group of people mindful of the original “imprescriptible right of the first proprietor” (79). Later in *Religion*, Kant will challenge the claim of Judaism to the title of a moral religion (cf. J. Brachtendorf’s contribution in this volume), but here he simply moves on to the explicitly Christian part of his narrative.

6.2.4 The Christmas story

The text is interrupted with a dash at this point, and what follows is suggestive of Luke’s Christmas story: “– Now suddenly there appeared among these very people ... a person whose wisdom, even purer than that of the previous philosophers, was as though descended from heaven (*wie vom Himmel herabgekommen war*)” (80). The historical moment at which this person appeared is not arbitrary, according to Kant; it is an important part of *Heilsgeschichte* that the Jewish people were suffering under “the evils of a hierarchical constitution” at that time (i.e. Rome, and perhaps Herod and the High Priests too), and that they were increasingly aware of “the Greek sages’ moral doctrines on freedom” which had “induced most of them to reflection – they were thus ripe for a revolution” (ibid.). Implausible as it is to think that the Galilean disciples were schooled in Greek philosophy, it is clear that it played an important role in Pauline Christianity (see e.g. the Mars Hill address in *Acts* 17,22–31) as well as the later Johannine gospel (“In the beginning was the *Logos*”).

Kant goes on to say that the newcomer in question announced himself as a “true human being” and yet also as “an envoy (*Gesandter*) of heavenly origin who was not implicated, at the time of original innocence, in the bargain with the evil principle into which the rest of the human race had entered through their representative (their first progenitor).” (80) Note that the claim to true humanity, heavenly origin, and exceptional moral character here is something that the envoy *himself* announces. Taken together with the hedging phrase “as though descended from heaven,” this indicates that Kant wants to avoid taking a substantive position on Christological issues while also not denying something that the biblical theologians would view as essential (cf. 63 ff.). Everyone can agree that Christ *declared* himself to be the Son of God (in e.g. *Luke* 22,70), but the theologians (and censors!) would have viewed this declaration as articulating metaphysical *truths*. The latter is clearly more than Kant wants to endorse, at least in the context of his attempt to hold these texts up to rational/moral scrutiny.

As a result of this metaphysical reticence, however, there is no real explanation offered for why the envoy – as a “true human being” – *doesn’t* participate in the radical evil that characterizes the rest of humanity. This is something that many commentators find perplexing, especially in light of the doctrine of the innateness and “universality” of the corrupt propensity to radical evil.⁷ But Kant’s views on autonomy generally suggest that we must allow that this is theoretically possible not just for Christ but for *anyone*. The traditional account of congenital guilt, on a Kantian picture, is incredible, impossible, immoral, or all of the above; as we have seen, it must be under the individual’s control whether she enters into the “bargain with the evil principle.” The story of our first progenitor must therefore be taken symbolically as a narrative depiction of something that inevitably *albeit contingently* happens to each of us in the realm of freedom. As Kant himself says, the Pauline claim that “in Adam we have all sinned” can be rationally rendered as the Horatian dictum “*Mutato nomine de te fibula narratur*” (42). The innate propensity to natural evil is neither necessary nor strictly universal. Rather, it is a *contingent* universal – and “universal” appa-

7 For some of controversies surrounding Kant’s model of sin, redemption, and atonement, see Michalson 1987 and 1990, Quinn 1984, 1986, 1990 and the essays in Rossi/Wreen 1991 (especially Wolterstorff 1991) and Ricken/Marty 1992. Allen Wood’s now-classic attempt to handle some of these difficulties (prior to any of these articulations of them!) can be found in chapter 6 of Wood 1970. More recent attempts include Mariña 1997 and Palmquist 2000. A different and more controversial defense of Kant against Michalson, Wolterstorff, and Quinn (among others) is found in Firestone/Jacobs 2008.

rently means “always or for the most part.” Christ, it turns out, is the one great exception to the rule.

At this stage Kant inserts a long footnote about a “person free from the innate propensity to evil” being symbolized as someone born of a virgin. He regards the traditional use of the symbol as understandable, since the “sensual pleasures” involved in reproductive sex “relate us to the mating of animals generally far too closely (for human dignity)”; thus we tend to look on sex as “something to *be ashamed of*.” But he goes on to note that there is an obvious biological or “theoretical” difficulty about whether a virgin birth is really possible. As will come out in greater detail below, this would be problematic if Kant thought that there was any practical point in postulating the truth of the virgin birth doctrine. But he doesn’t: all we need is to “hold the idea [of Christ] itself before us as model, as a symbol of humankind raising itself above temptation to evil (and withstanding it victoriously)” (80n). Again, the person in question is not innocent by dint of being a *metaphysical* or *biological* exception to the human rule; rather, he is a *volitional* exception – he chooses against the propensity to radical evil to which our innate predispositions make us susceptible but not fated.

6.2.5 A threat to the Devil’s dominion

The fact that there is one human being who is able to resist adopting the propensity to evil immediately puts the sovereignty of the usurper in jeopardy. But why? In keeping with Kant’s general approach here, we must not view the threat to the evil principle as metaphysical or forensic; rather, it is because other humans might “believe in him and adopt his moral disposition” – in other words, they might see that it is humanly possible to be fully moral in the way that he was, and then earnestly seek to follow his example. Of those who “believe in him” in this way, Kant says, “the prince of the world would lose just that many subjects and his kingdom would run the risk of being totally destroyed” (81). Aware of this threat to his dominion, the Devil tempts the envoy in multiple ways, and, failing in that effort, assails him with the “direst poverty” and “every persecution by which evil human beings could embitter him,” including “the slandering of his teachings.” Still, all of this achieves nothing against his “steadfastness and honesty in teaching, and example for the sake of the good,” right up until his “most ignominious death” (ibid.).

This part of the account raises an obvious epistemological question: how do others *know* that the envoy is perfect, in order to take his life and work

as an example? How does Christ’s life prove to them that human perfection is really possible? Perfection consists in having a good (or holy) will, but for Kant this is not something that an agent can know about *herself*, much less about another (see here the discussion in Ch. Horn’s essay of the asymmetric opacity of the good will). The response to this question is foreshadowed in section one of Part Two: “since he cannot make [his disposition] visible as an example to others in and of itself, he places it before their eyes externally through teachings and action” (66). In light of his “irreproachable” behavior and the absence of proof to the contrary, Kant says, it is only fitting that observers give him the benefit of the doubt and ascribe to him a perfect will (ibid.). But this hardly constitutes a *proof* of actuality or real possibility! Moreover, since Kant thinks the latter is required for any sort of knowledge (even probabilistic knowledge), the result is that the most that we *or even the contemporaneous witnesses at first hand* can have about Christ is “practical faith” (cf. 62; *KrV*, B xxvi note; and Chignell 2010).

6.2.6 Physical and legal results of the struggle

This concludes the story of the combat between the personifications of the good principle and the evil principle in Part Two. Kant now steps outside the narrative and looks to the “results” of this combat, providing translations of them on a “physical” as well as a “legal” (*rechtlicher*) level. Physically or empirically speaking, it looks as though Christ lost: he suffered and then died as a result of his teachings and actions. Kant is careful to say in a footnote that Christ did not *seek* death in some suicidal fashion, nor did he stake his life on a political revolution that was ultimately crushed by the Roman and Jewish authorities. Rather, Christ’s admonition to his followers to “do this in remembrance of me” at the Last Supper shows that he anticipated his death without seeking it, and yet *still* thought of his acts on earth as worth commemorating. It also suggests, says Kant, that his efforts were aimed not at political revolution but rather at religious reform – the “overthrowing [of] a morally repressive ceremonial faith and the authority of its priests.” The enterprise didn’t succeed immediately, since “the master” himself was killed, but the initial resistance to his teachings and religious efforts soon “gave way to a religious transformation that quietly spread everywhere, though in the midst of many sufferings” (81n).

So much for the physical results. Legally (*rechtlich*) speaking, the results of Christ’s work are located not in the realm of nature but of “freedom”; the latter is where “principles (be they good or evil) have power” (82). In

this realm, principles rule over not bodies but minds, and minds are only enslaved if they in some sense choose to be. The envoy's death in the physical realm is "the manifestation of the good principle... of humanity in its moral perfection, as example for everyone to follow." It also symbolizes, according to Kant, the "contrast between the freedom of the children of heaven and the bondage of a mere son of earth" (82).

This is the most explicitly Abelardian moment in Kant's interpretation of the Gospel narrative, though there are of course references to the *moral exemplar* model commonly associated with Peter Abelard throughout the *Religion* (see e.g. 62). We are explicitly told here that in the ultimate realm of freedom and principles, Christ's central work was to *exemplify* a genuinely free and genuinely good will for those of us who are also transcendently free and yet choose radical evil. Moreover, his death – giving up his life as an act of love and fidelity to his teachings – was the ultimate example of that freedom and that goodness, one which "ought to have... the greatest influence on human hearts" (*ibid.*). In this context, all talk of war with the Devil, ransom, satisfaction of debt, and penal substitution has disappeared.

Kant also emphasizes here that although the "descent" of the good principle into human form is represented as occurring at a particular, fortuitous moment in history, in fact the good principle has descended "from the very beginning of the human race, in some invisible way... and has precedence of domicile in humanity by right." Kant's idea is that the moral law is and always has been available to reason, at least in an "invisible" way. Indeed, the "invisible" descent of the good principle through reason is much more intelligible than any physical incarnation, given the "incomprehensibility of the union of this holiness with human sensible nature in the moral disposition" (82).

The advantages of privileging the invisible, intellectual descent of the good principle over historical events are three-fold. First, Kant can claim (as he does later on in *Religion*) that no one particular religious "vehicle" is required for grasping the moral law – it was already there, descended to humanity in the form of practical reason itself. Second, Kant can endorse a secular version of the Pauline doctrine that all rational beings, even those who lived well before Christ or on other parts of the earth, "are without excuse" before the law (*Romans* 1,20). Finally, Kant is able to say that if the good principle does descend in an actual envoy at one point in history, that person has "come unto his own" (in the biblical phrase) – not just his own race or biological species, but his fellow free rational beings to whom the good principle had already appeared in the form of the moral law.

Despite the fact that the law had already appeared, no one had succeeded in being righteous prior to this particular historical figure (a "contingent universal" truth for which Kant offers no adequate explanation, as noted earlier). And even after this example has been set, only a few people "receive him." Those who choose, following him, "to die to everything that holds them fettered to earthly life to the detriment of morality" are then "gathered ... under his dominion,," by contrast, Kant says, Christ "abandons to their fate all those who prefer moral servitude" to the evil principle. Their fate is presumably to live fragmented lives in allegiance to the legions of possible evil maxims – a condition whose distance from genuine righteousness is aptly symbolized by the "immeasurable gap" between heaven and hell (60n).

This explication of the legal results of Christ's work implies that – just as in the traditional story – the outcome of a particular person's birth, life, teaching, and passion is not a wholesale conquering of the evil principle: that is something that still has to wait. In the traditional story, it waits for the resurrection, second coming, judgment, and eschaton. In Kantian theology, it awaits the moment (does it happen at a *moment?*) when free and rational creatures perform the revolution of the will required to achieve the kingdom of ends towards which they then endlessly progress. Still, the mere intrusion into history of an example of a perfect will counts as a "breaking up" of the dominion of the evil principle's "controlling power in holding all these subjects against their will those who have so long been subject to it, now that another moral dominion (since the human being must be subject to some dominion or other) has been revealed to them as freedom and in it they can find protection for their morality if they want to forsake the old one" (82–3).

Kant suggests in this last passage that the evil principle holds people in its sway "against their will." But given that the principle is not a genuine power or force able to compel a free being one way or the other, this is hard to square with Kant's general commitment to freedom and the imputability of radical evil. The best way around this difficulty, I submit, is to interpret "holding all these subjects against their will" as referring to these subjects' *ideal* rational will and not their actual choices. The descendants of Adam would, *if they were fully rational*, choose to be free of the various things "that hold them fettered to earthly life to the detriment of morality," even though in fact they often fail to live up to that standard. The appearance of an envoy of the good – one who does have a perfectly rational will – exemplifies to them a life of true morality and (hence) true freedom, and this example helps to protect their new morality.

6.3 The moral meaning of these narratives

Having retold and then translated the biblical stories of fall, incarnation, and redemption, Kant now steps back and says that we can see in this “vivid mode of representing things” – which was “apparently the only one at the time suited to the common people” – a meaning that has been “valid and binding practically, for the whole world and at all times” such that anyone “can recognize his duty in it” (83, Kant’s emphasis). But what is this meaning? Kant continues: “Its meaning is that there is absolutely no salvation for human beings except in the innermost adoption of genuine moral principles in their disposition.” The story properly translated also tells us that what interferes with this adoption is not sensibility but rather “self-incurred wickedness,” “fraud,” “fausseté,” or “satanic guile” – corruption which “can only be overcome through [adhering to] the idea of the moral good in its absolute purity.” By contrast, superstition (ceremonies, expiations, public venerations, etc.) and enthusiasm (inner illuminations, mysticism, etc.) are mere distractions from the all-important task of becoming better moral beings; thus, Kant says, we must be sure not to describe the idea of the good as anything more than the idea of a “well-ordered conduct of life” (83–4). This is all pretty standard Kantian fare.

The section concludes, however, with an interesting second-order comment. The foregoing scriptural exegesis was an attempt, Kant tells us, to find a translation of the Holy Scripture that is “in harmony with the most holy teachings of reason.” Moreover, performing this sort of hermeneutical work on sacred texts “must be held not only as permissible but as duty” (*Pflicht*). But Kant doesn’t tell us why here: why couldn’t someone simply stay within the confines of pure moral religion and not bother with scriptural interpretation at all?

Presumably one motivation for this strong claim about duty is that Kant thinks we need to highlight the “unity ... between reason and Scripture” and thus resist the views of radical fideists like J.G. Hamann and others (13). But another and wider-reaching motivation is related to the discussion of symbolization at the beginning of the paper. As we saw there, in the 1790s Kant began to regard the task of finding symbolic/analogical content for rational ideas as essential if a belief/faith (*Glaube*) involving them is to be rational. Given the results of Kant’s interpretive efforts here in Part Two of *Religion*, it is clear that he thinks that scriptural texts – like art and literature more generally – can often provide such content. If this is right, then it places the results of Kant’s second experiment in a new light. Recall that the goal of this experiment was to bracket the doctrines of rational

religion, take some fragments of sacred text, hold them up to moral ideas, and see if we are led back to something like the religion of reason again. By holding doctrines about the fall, the Devil, incarnation, and redemption up to moral ideas, we have indeed returned to the doctrines of pure rational religion. But in the course of performing the experiment we have also encountered images and symbols in historical and scriptural narratives that provide a crucial kind of “sensible rendering” (*Versinnlichung*)⁸ of rational religion: they give its central ideas (God, freedom, evil, forgiveness, the afterlife) with an ersatz sort of intuitional (albeit symbolic) content – and thus an indication that such things are really possible. “We always need a certain analogy with natural being in order to make supersensible characteristics comprehensible to us,” Kant says, and “the Scriptures adapt themselves to this manner of representation, to make the extent of God’s love for the human race comprehensible to us, by attributing to God the highest sacrifice a living being can ever perform in order to make even the unworthy happy” (65n). Given that we need such symbols, it becomes clear why the study and interpretation of important, scriptural symbols becomes a kind of duty, even for the proponent of a pure moral religion.

That said, ending up with precisely the same interpretation of the scriptures that Kant does is apparently *not* a part of our duty. Regarding his own interpretation in this section, Kant says “it may be admitted that it is not the only one” (84n), thus echoing an earlier footnote where he remains agnostic about whether his interpretation is “the only meaning according to which we can derive something edifying from the text” (43n). He also alludes in this connection to the passage in Mark’s gospel in which “the wise teacher” is told by the disciples that there are others casting out demons and healing in his name, even though these others are not in their immediate circle (*Mark* 9,39–40). Our response to competing but still *morally sound* interpretations of a scriptural story, Kant says, should likewise be to say “forbid him not, for he who is not against us is for us” (84).

But this hermeneutical ecumenism is puzzling: how could an interpretation of the Christmas story be significantly different from Kant’s without either lapsing into speculative Christological metaphysics or some more literal variety of the *Christus Victor* model? How could an interpretation of the physical or legal results of these episodes differ from Kant’s and still be acceptable to pure practical reason? The procedure in the second experiment is designed (if all goes well) to get us back to the tenets of rational

⁸ This is a term Kant uses at the end of the first part of the *Critique of Judgment* to describe the function of (at least some) beautiful objects with respect to rational ideas (*KU*, V 356).

(Kantian) religion, after all, and thus provide a kind of support for them both. Thus it is not clear how there could be room to interpret the Judeo-Christian creation-fall-redemption narrative in such a way that the results are significantly different from Kant's own but also still harmonious with the "holy teachings of reason." If this is correct, then the duty to perform rational exegesis on scripture seems *ipso facto* be a duty to interpret it in Kant's way, his own protestations to the contrary notwithstanding.

6.4 On miracles generally

The General Remark that follows this section and concludes Part Two is devoted to one of the four "parerga to religion within the boundaries of pure reason" that Kant promises (at the end of Part One) to discuss in four General Remarks. These do not, he says there, belong precisely within the religion of pure reason, but "yet border on it" and are thus worthy of discussion in this context (52). The parergon to Part Two concerns the doctrine of miracles. Kant has just asserted that we don't theoretically or practically need to postulate the virgin birth, and has also conspicuously left out any mention of the central Christian miracle – the bodily resurrection of Christ – thus letting his readers infer that his view of the second miracle is similar to his view of the first.⁹ So the topic of miracles fits in quite well here.

Kant starts by claiming that a moral religion ("the heart's disposition to observe all human duties as divine commands") is such that any miracles connected with its inception makes faith in those very miracles (or any other) dispensable. Belief in miracles is the ladder that can be kicked away once we come to accept the authenticity of a moral/religious teaching on other grounds. Indeed, it is immoral "*unbelief*" (*Unglaube*) to fail to accept reason's dictates unless and until they are authenticated by miracles.

Kant is careful not to *rule out* belief in miracles as impossible, however. On the contrary, it is "entirely conformable to the ordinary human way of thinking" for a new religion – even one based rationally on "the spirit and

9 In Part Three he explicitly repudiates any attempts to include the "more esoteric story of [Christ's] *resurrection and ascension* ... within the boundaries of mere reason, whatever its historical standing." Kant does think that reason is committed to the immortality of the soul, but "reason cannot find an interest in dragging along through eternity a body which, however purified, must yet consist if personality rests on its identity) of the same material which constitutes the body's organic basis and which, in life, the body itself never quite grew fond of" (128–9). John Hare claims to find insufficient evidence in such polemics to conclude that Kant "did not believe in central doctrines of Christianity, like the historical resurrection of Christ" (1996, 51). But the passage does at least seem to rule out belief in a *bodily* resurrection.

the truth (on moral disposition)" to announce or "adorn" its introduction with some miracles. Indeed, it is quite possible that a prophet or founder's life was full of miracles (which would help to win adherents from the old religion), and that the historical testimony to these miracles itself was miraculously arranged and preserved. The claims about miracles that we must "dispute with all our might," Kant insists, is that they *authenticate* true religion, and that mere belief in them is pleasing to God (85).

Given all of this, the most reasonable approach for governments and churches is to teach that *theoretically* miracles may have occurred, especially in ancient times, but that *pragmatically* we simply can't count on them now, much less expect them to occur. The reason to follow this maxim is that whereas old stories about miracles won't cause any uproar, rumors of new miracle workers could lead to serious civil unrest.

Kant then turns to a puzzling discussion of what miracles are (86 ff.). Practically speaking, he says, they are "events in the world, the causes and effects of which are absolutely unknown to us and so must remain." By "practical" Kant must mean something like *as they would appear to us in an everyday practical context*; otherwise this would be an extremely lame definition. Even still, the claim about our ignorance of the effects of miracles is a bit baffling: don't eyewitnesses know that e.g. the Red Sea has parted and that Lazarus is walking out of the tomb? In the *Lectures on Philosophical Doctrine of Religion*, Kant provides a better account, saying simply that miracles are "individual occurrences" that do "not correspond to the order of nature" and are yet brought about directly by God "in order to carry out his plan" (XXVIII 1111–1112). Here Kant appears to side with those in the early modern tradition who view miracles as genuine *violations* of laws.

Even if such events are in some sense possible, however, we have no "positive criterion" for them – a criterion that would tell us when we could reasonably expect a miracle to occur – and thus reason (both theoretical and practical) is "paralyzed" by the thought of them. In order to avoid such paralysis, those seeking to proceed scientifically cannot think about miracles at all: even though they also have no cognition (*Kenntnis*) of "that which brings about effects according to [natural] laws, in itself (*an sich selbst*)" they still need as a general maxim to presuppose the causally closed structure of the empirical world (88). Likewise, we cannot count on miracles in everyday "practical affairs," and judges can't take them into account in courtroom situations (87).

In a purely ethical context, however, Kant says we may go a little further than this and *hope* that there are "heavenly influences" that "cooperate in [moral] improvement." But since we have no understanding of how this

works, we must still *act* as though everything “depended solely on the application of [our] own workmanship.” Moreover, before making firm assertions about any such miracles, we would have to “contest” (*anfechten*) their actuality or at least their possibility. This claim is significant in light of the fact that, as noted earlier, Kant establishes a very strict modal condition on knowledge claims. It requires that the subject be able to “prove” or demonstrate the real possibility of the objects involved – an ability that is not often available with respect to supersensibilia (again, see *KrV*, B xxvi, note). Here in *Religion* Kant seems to suggest that whereas “hope” for supernatural assistance is permissible without meeting any such modal condition, attitudes stronger than this (even practical belief/faith) require at the very least a good indication that such assistance is really possible. Given that it is not clear where such an indication could be found, rational hope seems to be the most we can justifiably have (or require of others) about miracles.

Kant concludes by claiming that there are two nonarbitrary maxims that we could appeal to regarding miracles: either they occur all the time “though hidden under the appearance of natural occurrences,” or they do not occur at all. The first is “in no way compatible with reason,” and thus we must accept the second. Of course, this is just a “maxim of judgment” and not a “theoretical assertion”: it may in fact be both actual and really possible that miracles do occur.¹⁰ But to claim to *know* that some event or feature in the world (here Kant refers to the apparent design of biological organisms) is miraculously produced will nearly always be presumptuous and, moreover, lead to the dejection of reason and the stoking of enthusiasm.

In the end, then, even if the miraculous events such as virgin birth, incarnation, and bodily resurrection (not to mention what Kant calls “diabolical miracles”) referred to in religious tradition are epistemically possible, they are not provably theoretically possible. In theoretical contexts we must follow the maxim of judgment according to which all events in the world are the result of general laws, and in religious-practical contexts the most we can rationally do is hope for the miracle that is divine assistance in the moral life.

¹⁰ The idea that our commitment to the unexceptionable character of natural laws is a mere maxim of judgment seems embarrassingly weak in light of the claims Kant makes about the universal and necessary status of the causal principle in the Second Analogy and elsewhere. This is clearly a topic for another time, but it is worth noting that in the “Analogies of Experience” chapter, Kant does (notoriously) say that the Analogies as well as the Postulates of Empirical Thinking “will not be valid of the objects (of the appearances) *constitutively* but merely *regulatively*” (*KrV*, A180/B222–3).

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Ethical Community, Church and Scripture

The First Part of *Religion Within the Boundaries of Mere Reason* presents the thesis that there is in human nature a radical propensity to evil, which each of us must counteract in ourselves through the exercise of our moral predisposition in the form of a moral conversion and the adoption of a morally good disposition. In effect, it is a Kantian rationalist interpretation of the Christian doctrine of original sin. The Second Part of the work raises, and attempts to solve, difficulties we may have in conceiving the possibility of wiping out the innate guilt that burdens us through the radical evil in our nature. It expounds, again in rationalist terms, Christian doctrines about the role of the Christ ideal in the moral life, and solutions to the traditional theological questions of justification and sanctification. Neither of the first two asks how the struggle against evil may be carried on effectively, or attempts to say either what human beings must do, or have in fact done, to struggle against evil.

7.1 Third Part: The social condition and the propensity to evil

Kant holds that each of us is individually responsible for the propensity to evil in our nature, and bears the entire responsibility and the guilt when we yield to it. But he holds equally that we would not be subject to evil except for the social condition – the presence around us of other human beings – which awakens in us the propensity to place the incentives of self-love and inclination ahead of those of the moral law. According to Kant in the First Part of the *Religion*, such a propensity is bound up with (or inevitably grafted